

For Study Abroad Professionals, Supporting Resilience in Transition
A Guide for Conversations with Students about Emotional Health

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Introduction: Why it's important to discuss emotional health with all students.

An essential and holistic best practice for study abroad and Gap Year programming includes staff training about the life stage of Emerging Adulthood. Understanding the gifts and challenges of 18-25 year olds is key. Knowing who our students are broadens professional skill sets for preparing students and staffs for successful learning experiences in new and different contexts. Characteristics of Emerging Adulthood (J. Arnett. 2004) include a long period for exploring a wide range of possibilities for career choices and relationships. Of particular note is that Emerging Adulthood is a stage of optimism and possibilities.

The desire to “head out” and explore provides positive energy for students seeking abroad experiences. At the same time, when commitments are few, the age is normative for instability and high-risk behaviors. For many, the transitional period into adulthood is prolonged, often allowing years for sorting out future choices, quite different from the more conscribed expectations experienced by their parents’ generation.

In addition, neuroscience tells us that the developmental time period of Emerging Adulthood includes significant brain changes, a time when the capacity to plan and reflect is strengthening, but when the emotional charge to take risks and “head out” continues to lead.

This guide focuses on building skills for study abroad professionals to support the emotional health of all our students during this life stage. These skills are part of what this writer calls the “Emotional Passport”, an overarching and collaborative mind set and skill set in which each of us learns to recognize rising anxiety or shifting moods which come with significant transitions into and out of cultures. When intensities are high, we develop ways to shift away from stressors towards calmer moods so that, when we feel re-balanced, we have more energy to attend to our focus, be it studies, projects, or relationships.

What is emotional health? Some people think that emotional health means being in a good mood most of the time, regardless of the situation. Many assume that everyone is OK, unless they have “a mental health problem”. This negative attitude is normalized in many cultures and keeps staff from developing helping skills and students from seeking help. The reality is that

emotional health reflects a strong capacity for resilience, the capacity to bounce back from life's disappointments and challenges, emerging stronger than before. Shifting into new cultures, in the US or abroad, taps into our emotional skills. Just transitioning to a place where everything is new puts us on alert to our emotional responses and behaviors.

Here is a list of skills that describe emotional resiliency: each should be considered in the context of a holistic or "big picture" model that integrates wellness practices, intercultural learning, and safety.

1. flexible thinking and behaviors
2. capacity to pause, consider, reflect
3. considered care of self and community
4. capacity to lean in with curiosity, with perspective
5. feeling safe asking for guidance and help
6. self-care to regulate shifting moods – normal when everything is new

Emotions drive learning – a key concept. When you feel well, you are likely to learn well and engage positively with new experiences. Being resilient is based on emotional capacities -- to notice a challenge and then take steps to seek support for creating next best steps.

As study abroad professionals, we have a particular responsibility to attend to supporting and guiding the emotional health of all of our students. Crisis and safety preparations are essential, yet, often overlooked by staff are preparations for connecting with all students about ways to develop and sustain emotional health. Remember, Emerging Adulthood is a life stage of opportunities and vulnerabilities, a critical dynamic of our students' lives.

Positive emotions energize communities. So, as leaders, it's essential for us to stay mindful of our own emotional health. Our own self-care contributes to our ability to encourage healthy connections with our students and host cultures. Integrating wellness strategies into programming, staffs can contribute to quieting the normal insecurities and varied moods that students bring to arrivals, departures, and daily life abroad.

From the outset, we can describe to students the role emotions play in living and learning in places that are new. Co-regulation – the calm and knowing guidance of staff -- builds the students' capacities for self-regulation.

Students and staff together create learning communities where emotions are shared – when staff welcome with positive language and understanding the arrival of excited *and* likely overwhelmed students (all normal), then it's likely that students will be more open to reaching out for support.

Arriving in a place where everything is new requires checking in with one's strengths, leaning in with curiosity, and having capacities to shift into an

emotional framework where difference is interesting and where support is expected and reliable. No one is an expert at shifting cultures – preparing for and engaging in experiences where everything is new involve a large emotional investment for everyone.

Most students are surprised about how intense they feel as they transition into programs abroad. It's normal for moods to shift when cultures shift. And it's normal for everyone to experience the shifts in his or her own way. It's important that staff stay open to a wide corral of student responses.

Engaging students in conversations about emotional health:

Here are 12 questions to consider in conversations with students about the importance of sustaining emotional health during “away” programs. Consider using one or more of these on program applications, as part of pre-departure or onsite orientations, and/or as part of the transition “home”.

1. Describe skills you already have that might make it easier to settle into your program? (or, to settle back “home”, or into your home campus)
2. Reflect on an experience where everything was new, and you figured out/had help with ways to get comfortable. (camp, a new school, a family move, parents’ divorce or re-marriage, etc.) What was the challenge? How did you approach the situation? What worked? Who helped you? What was especially hard? Something learned?
3. Describe a time you asked for help. Whom did you approach? What happened?
4. Describe an experience when you relied on others. What was it like?
5. How do you know when you feel overloaded or stressed? What strategies work for you to facilitate shifting into a calmer place?
6. Describe what in your daily routine helps you get things done and stay focused. What would help you maintain your best self abroad – what do you need in your routine?
7. Describe a time when others disagreed with you. How did you respond?
8. Who and what will be particularly hard to leave? How will you prepare?
9. What skills do you have/know about in yourself that help when you feel confused, when others seem hurtful, when you want to be alone?
10. Describe ways that you take care of yourself when you run out of energy? What ideas do you have that could expand your list? What do you know about your program/site that could support self-care?
11. What do you imagine it would be like be without access to social media for a day, a week? What would you do with your energy and time? Have you ever experienced this situation before?
12. If you are in counseling now (pre-departure), what plans do you have for continuing this support? Have you asked about available counseling resources abroad?