



Anxiety and Stress Go Abroad: Handout to complement poster presentation at NEFDC 2019

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Introduction

Studying abroad is an exciting opportunity, but it also presents many potential sources of stress – any student might worry about language, money, food, travel, coursework, new friends, and a host of other unknowns. For students with anxiety, these fears may become overwhelming and unmanageable. The following is a summary of best practices for working with students with anxiety on faculty-led international programs. This information was drawn from existing research, as well as results of surveys and discussions with Landmark College program leaders and counselors.

Pre-departure

Before a program begins, some students' anxiety may focus on unknowns on campus, such as the application process or pre-departure orientation meetings. Other students might worry about the many unknowns ahead of them once they leave campus. In response, students might focus on details – some which may or may not seem important to program leaders. An example is a student who asks several questions about the location of ATMs at the arrival airport. They may ask many questions in an attempt to assuage uncertainty.

There are many steps that **institutions and administrators** can take to help prevent students' anxiety:

- Include information and useful links for students with mental health concerns, including anxiety, on study abroad office websites
- Ensure online information about the application process and acceptance criteria is transparent.
- Include as much detail as possible about lodging, transportation, and other details on program web pages and accepted-student materials.
- Collect information about student mental health. Include questions about mental health history, as well as students' coping mechanisms, in confirmation paperwork (post-acceptance!) If possible, and with student permission, consult campus counseling centers to identify vulnerable students. Provide this information to program leaders as early as possible to encourage follow-up.
- Provide training for faculty leaders in mental health issues, including recognizing signs of anxiety (among other issues) and possible means of response.
- Ensure that program insurance includes mental health coverage.
- Assess mental health resources at program sites, and provide alternatives, such as phone access to counselors in case of emergency.

Along with ensuring that their program information is complete and informative, **program leaders** can review the full program itinerary in the pre-departure program session. Outside of group meetings, they can work with individual students to respond to anxieties as they arise. They can answer questions as needed. They can also use the opportunity to encourage students to think about their own responses should they experience acute anxiety during the program. Both leaders and administrators can encourage students to speak with their counselors or therapists about their upcoming travel plans.

During programs

Students' anxiety may be triggered for any number of reasons. Time changes, jetlag, new environments, and struggles to balance classwork and exploration can cause stress. A full itinerary of class time and site visits, as well as transitions between cities, can be very challenging. No matter the cause, student responses can vary. Some students withdraw from the group, seeking solace in games, music, videos, or books. Others become moody and lash out at peers. Others seek

out program leaders for reassurance and support. Severe anxiety may cause panic attacks, which can include physical symptoms such as shortness of breath or chest pain. This can compound anxiety, if a student thinks he/she is having a heart attack or other physical illness.

In efforts to prevent students' anxieties from flaring up, previewing is key. Landmark program leaders encourage communicating upcoming activities frequently and in different ways, both verbally and in writing – such as an itinerary posted on a wall in a central location. Reviewing plans, especially transitions, with the full group is essential, but allowing time to check in with individual students can also be beneficial. It can be helpful to review in detail any parts of the day(s) ahead that might produce stress, such as long journeys, crowded or loud locations, or instances when students will need to undertake activities on their own.

If a student appears to be withdrawn, or otherwise exhibits signs of anxiety, program leaders can reach out. Responses depend on the severity of the anxiety, but useful means of support may include:

- Reminding a student of previously-identified coping mechanisms, or guiding the student to think about ways to calm their thoughts or distract themselves.
- Discussing their concerns may be helpful for some students, while for others this may reinforce their anxiety.
- In these cases, changing the topic or drawing the student's attention away can be beneficial.
- Encouraging deep breathing or suggesting mindfulness exercises (such as "name three sounds you can hear right now") can be useful for students struggling to overcome serious anxiety attacks.
- Several Landmark program leaders suggested getting outdoors with the student for a walk – physical movement and time in nature has been successful in changing some students' focus.
- In all cases, leaders are encouraged to listen actively, respond with empathy, and validate students' experiences.

Summary

While working with students with anxiety can pose certain challenges for study abroad program leaders, international experiences can be especially valuable to these students. For any study abroad participant, travel provides the opportunity to develop independence and test one's tolerance for ambiguity. In students with anxiety, for whom uncertainty may be perceived as threatening, this can be extra challenging. However, these experiences can also be perceived as an opportunity: a chance for students to nurture their own ability to respond to anxiety. Program leaders, who may already be attuned to their role in helping all students navigate many other kinds of experiential learning, can play a role in helping anxious students learn and grow as well.

Landmark College Resources

The Landmark College study abroad website (www.landmark.edu/academics/study-abroad) contains resources for students and leaders on mental health abroad under "Health, Safety, and Security." Landmark's student health disclosure form can be found under "Forms, Fees, & Deadlines."

Sources

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