

# Depression and Mood Changes



**Canada** 67 Mowat Avenue, Suite 036 Toronto, Ontario M6K 3E3 (416) 652-0137  
**USA** 1623 Military Road, #279 Niagara Falls, New York 14304-1745 (716) 754-4883  
**New Zealand** 206 Papanui Road Christchurch 5  
[www.iamat.org](http://www.iamat.org) | [info@iamat.org](mailto:info@iamat.org)

## No prior history?

Your travel plans may be disrupted if you develop depressive or manic symptoms during your trip. Lack of motivation or excessively high energy levels can lead to isolation, substance use, or negative social interactions, and may force you to abandon original plans and activities.

## Signs of depression:

- feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness
- guilt, sadness, crying
- irritability, lack of concentration
- insomnia, fatigue, lethargy, oversleeping
- changes in appetite
- withdrawal from friends and family
- loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities

Everyone has mood changes. However, a very low emotional state (depression) and extremely elevated mood swings (as occurs in bipolar disorder) affect how you think, behave, and function. Depression and sudden mood changes can disrupt travel or cause a relapse in persons with mood disorders. Managing travel stress, recognizing the warning signs of depression and mood changes, and knowing where to get help are key to a safe trip.

## Depression

Depression is characterized by a sad, despairing mood that typically lasts full days for more than two weeks. It affects your relationships, emotions, daily functioning, and physical health. Depression is a serious medical condition that requires treatment and support.

In severe cases, depression with psychosis (hallucinations, delusions) or thoughts of suicide need to be addressed immediately. Although uncommon, some people travel abroad attempting to commit suicide in the hope that it may relieve their suffering.

## Mood swings

Travellers who develop extreme mood swings – highs (mania) and lows (depression) – often make poor judgments and engage in behaviour that puts themselves and others at risk. Starting a trip in a manic phase can impair critical decision-making; you may not fully realize the consequences of your actions and may find yourself in unwanted or dangerous situations. In extreme circumstances a person may suddenly experience rage, psychosis (incoherence, delusions, hallucinations), or catatonia (physical agitation, odd movements). Treatment during travel usually involves hospitalization to stabilize symptoms and possible evacuation.



Photo by Negative Space, Pexels.

### Signs of mania:

- euphoric moods, feeling invincible
- exaggerated self-esteem
- high energy, high libido
- racing thoughts
- irritability
- decreased need for sleep or eating

Keep in mind that diagnosing mood changes during travel is difficult since it requires longer observation periods.

Once back home, follow-up with your doctor to rule out illnesses such as autoimmune disorders, hypothyroidism, neurological changes, or substance dependence. Treatment options may include psychotherapy, medication, and learning skills to manage mood disorders.

### I have a mood disorder

Travellers who are actively managing and controlling mood disorders can travel safely. Consult your mental health professional to determine if travel is an appropriate activity for you. If required, stay in touch with your mental healthcare practitioner or find a qualified doctor at your destination in case of an emergency.

If you are prone to depression, try to anticipate your reaction to being away from home, isolated from familiar support systems, and immersed in a different culture. Life-changing events occurring just prior to a trip such as a death in the family, a birth, illness, or difficult personal/professional circumstances may also influence your psychological well-being and social interactions during travel. Although a trip may bring temporary relief to some depressive symptoms – travel can be mentally and physically reinvigorating or provide a change of perspective – it is not a cure.

If you have bipolar disorder, heightened sensory stimulation like noise, crowds, smells, sights, and some social interactions can be overwhelming. Unfamiliar environments, language barriers, not understanding cultural and social mores can increase stress which may trigger an episode or relapse. Plan ahead: Travel with a trusted person, choose a low-stress destination, consider time zone changes, take direct flights or routes, and allow for plenty of time to arrive and leave during transit. Recognize stress factors and warning signs that can lead to an episode and seek medical attention as soon as possible.

### A note to family and friends

If you are accompanying a traveller with a mental illness, don't forget about your own health. Know how to recognize signs of psychological stress and avoid being isolated. You may want to hire a professional companion traveller to help during all or part of the trip. An internet search for 'professional travel companions' will bring up local and international organizations specializing in this service.

## Travel and mental health checklist

### Before you leave

- Consult your healthcare practitioner to discuss if the type of travel you are planning is right for you. Get advice on how to stay healthy and cope with the effects of travel stress and jet lag. Ask if you can stay in touch with your healthcare provider during your trip.
- Find a reputable mental health professional at your destination who speaks your language. You may want to contact them prior to your trip to ensure continuity of care.
- Familiarize yourself with the psychiatric healthcare system of your destination country. Know what steps you need to take in case of an emergency.
- Book the most direct route possible to your destination; avoid layovers and long hours in transit.
- Travel with a trusted friend, family member, or professional travel companion. If you are travelling alone, set up regular check-in times to reach a family member or friend.
- Register with your embassy or consulate in case you need their assistance during an emergency abroad.

### During your trip

- Give yourself plenty of time to arrive and go through security checks. Note that airports, train stations, and bus depots generally have medical facilities.
- Establish a routine that sets the tone for your trip. Familiarize yourself with your surroundings and if you can, integrate some activities that you are used to doing back home or bring you a sense of comfort.
- Bring a calming item (book, mobile device), memento, or journal that provides comfort during stressful situations.
- Know your mental and physical limits. Regularly reassess your original plans and change them to minimize stress levels.
- Know when to stop a challenging situation from escalating. Find non-confrontational solutions.
- Practice relaxing breathing exercises and integrate physical activity like walking, stretching or meditating to relieve stress. Get the appropriate amount of sleep, eat a healthy diet, and stay hydrated.

### When you return

- Book an extra day or two off after you return to mentally and physically recover from your trip. This will help you adjust from jet lag and help you get back into your daily routine.
- Follow up with your healthcare practitioner if you needed emergency care abroad or to address any concerns you may have related to post-travel readjustment.

## Do you, or someone you are travelling with, have thoughts of suicide?

- Remove self-harming objects such as knives, toxic chemicals, alcohol, and other psychoactive substances from reach.
- Seek help from a mental health professional that speaks your language.
- If the person is travelling alone and you know where they are staying, contact their accommodation to alert them of the situation. Ask the concierge to contact a mental health professional or ambulance. Also contact the traveller's embassy or consulate for emergency assistance.
- Suicide attempt survivors may require legal assistance in countries where suicide is illegal, for example in India and Singapore.

Fake medications are found all over the world. These medications contain the wrong ingredient, the wrong amount of the active ingredient, no active ingredient, or toxic substances. Fake medications and packaging can look very similar to the real ones.

Buy medications before your trip and pack an extra supply in case they get lost or stolen. If you need to purchase medications abroad, locate a reputable doctor or pharmacist; university hospitals often have reliable mental health practitioners. Buy medications from a large pharmacy in a major city and do not purchase medications from street markets.

### Know before you go

- Social and cultural acceptance of mental health in your destination country determines the type of care you will receive. Forced admission (where voluntary consent is not the norm), substandard psychiatric facilities (unhygienic conditions), questionable treatment (isolated confinement, lack of appropriate medicines), and difficulty finding mental healthcare professionals that speak your language should be taken into account when planning your trip.
- In some countries, disturbing the peace, uttering threats, or exhibiting strange behaviour can lead to arrest, criminal charges, imprisonment, or forced admission to a hospital or mental health facility.
- Be prepared to incur out-of-pocket medical expenses if you require psychiatric care abroad. Standard travel health insurance plans do not cover mental health conditions. Look for plans that cover psychiatric care – an independent broker can help.
- Get coverage from a company that specializes in emergency evacuation and repatriation. This service generally covers patients who have managed their illness and are being hospitalized abroad. Check the fine print for restrictions and exclusions. Last-minute evacuation insurance is extremely expensive (starting in the tens of thousands of dollars) and may be refused on the basis of the patient's mental health condition.

### Health tips for your trip


- Avoid taking sleep medications during your flight as long periods of immobility can lead to the formation of blood clots.
- Do not drink alcohol if you are taking psychiatric medication.
- Establish a routine and continue taking your medication consistently. Do not stop or decrease the amount of medication you take unless instructed by your healthcare practitioner.
- If you require an emergency refill, show the attending physician the copy of your original prescription and letter from your doctor to facilitate the consultation. Be aware that some medications will not be available in your destination country or may not be available in the dosage that you require.

## Travelling with medications

### Consult your mental healthcare practitioner

- Find out which travel-related vaccinations and medications recommended for your trip may interfere with your current medication. You may need to seek alternative protection measures.
- Ask your healthcare practitioner how to adjust your medication dosage across different time zones.
- Get a copy of your prescription and a letter from your healthcare practitioner detailing your condition and treatment plan. This will facilitate border crossing and, should the need arise, during a medical consultation with a healthcare practitioner at your destination.
  - The letter should include the following details:
    - Your name (the same as on your passport).
    - Your healthcare practitioner's name.
    - A list of all medications and the dosage prescribed. Ensure that the generic and brand name (if applicable) are mentioned. Drug brand names may differ in other countries so providing the generic name will help the pharmacist or doctor abroad in case you need a refill.
    - A list of your medical supplies and equipment.
- Follow up with your healthcare practitioner if you needed a prescription refill abroad to ensure continuity of care back home.

### How to pack your medication

- Pack all the medication you need for the duration of your trip, including an extra supply in case of an emergency. Medical standards and practices differ between countries and your medication may not be available at your destination.
- Keep all medications in their original packages or containers. Place medication packages in sealable plastic bags and breakable containers in bubble wrap.
- Divide tablet medications between your carry-on and checked luggage in case one of your bags is lost or stolen. Make sure the medication can be stored in the low temperatures of the luggage hold.
- Gels and liquid medication must be packed in your carry-on bag. Liquid medication can freeze at low temperatures in the luggage hold. If your medication requires refrigeration, use insulated wallets or containers during transit and make arrangements at your destination for safe storage.
- Don't send medication to your destination by post since it may get lost or stopped at customs. 

### A note on psychotropic and narcotic medications

- In general, you can carry a 30-day supply of prescription medications for personal use. Medications that target the central nervous system (CNS) such as psychotropics and narcotics are controlled substances and their importation is highly regulated.
- If you need a supply of these medications for more than 30 days, a prescription or license for import may be required. Check the [International Narcotics Control Board \(INCB\) website](#) for information on country restrictions (although it is not a complete list). You can also check your destination's embassy, consulate, and ministry of health websites for further information. However, these sources may not always be helpful.

The Travel and Mental Health Series was reviewed by William W. Forgey, MD, Melvyn M. Nizny, MD, DLF, and David R. Shlim, MD.

We used many sources to write the series. Please contact us to get the complete list.