

Travel Stress



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Although travel is generally enjoyable and sometimes life transforming, there is no doubt that it can be stressful. Lack of familiar support systems, disrupted daily routines, language barriers, culture shock, and unexpected situations can intensify stress levels rather than alleviate them. Travel also forces you to give up your sense of control: It challenges perceptions, can reveal personal limitations, and may alter your thinking, mood, behaviour, and reactions.

Travel stress

Stress is the body's natural response to a threat or danger – whether it is real or imagined. Travel stress varies from person to person and depends on past experiences and tolerance of new circumstances. Nervousness about things going wrong and fears about the unexpected can be overwhelming for some travellers.

Travel stress can trigger or exacerbate mental health problems. Even if you have no prior history of mental illness, mood changes, substance misuse, and extreme anxiety can potentially disrupt a trip. Recognizing the warning signs and knowing where to get help abroad are key to a safe trip.

Managing expectations

Visualizing a trip is helpful for planning purposes, but having preconceived notions about how it should unfold can lead to unrealistic expectations causing psychological stress.

If your trip does not go as planned, it can be disappointing. Dealing with unexpected circumstances in a country where you don't know the language, are not surrounded by familiar support systems or are unable to express your needs can be overwhelming. Travelling to validate your self-worth, seek happiness abroad, or avoid circumstances back home may not turn out as expected and could be frustrating.

How to manage expectations during travel

- Regularly reassess your original plans and change them if needed to minimize your stress levels.
- If your expectations are not met, find acceptable, non-confrontational solutions to improve the situation.
- Take the time to enjoy the people, new sights, sounds, smells, experiences in your host country. Be present and try to live in the moment.
- Know your mental and physical limits.



Photo by Negative Space, Pexels.

Coping with culture shock

- Take the time to research your host culture, learn about the customs and social mores.
- Learn the language. If you don't have time, learn basic words and phrases to help you get around. Locals appreciate the efforts you make to communicate in their language.
- Learn about the current political situation and social environment of the country you will be visiting.
- Travel with a positive attitude and find ways to accept things that don't satisfy you completely. If you have difficulty adapting, talk to a trusted friend, family member, or a mental health professional about your experience and figure out how to improve your situation.
- If you're planning a long-term trip, join activities or practice your hobbies in your new community to meet people who have the same interests as you.
- Back home, volunteer for an organization that can benefit from your experience abroad.

When personal goals are not met self-blame, sadness, anxiety, depression can occur or you may vent your frustration at others. Keep in mind that you are in control of your own outlook and expectations, and you may need to make adjustments based on your circumstances. The need to be in constant control or compete with others can lead to negative travel experiences.

Culture Shock

Culture shock is a temporary psychological stress that occurs when you are overwhelmed by a new culture and do not know how to adapt or fit into the new environment.

Factors contributing to culture shock:

- not speaking the language
- not understanding the local customs; not knowing what is appropriate behaviour
- disliking the food, accommodations, or lifestyle
- being a visible minority
- witnessing or experiencing situations so different and unimaginable to your own life (poverty, war, starvation, homelessness, as well as homophobia and racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination)

Symptoms of culture shock:

- sense of insecurity and inadequacy
- homesickness, isolation, loneliness
- sadness, confusion, anxiety, frustration, or depression.

All travellers experience culture shock to varying degrees, but the intensity depends on one's disposition and tolerance for new experiences. You may not experience culture shock immediately, but as excitement about the trip wanes, the reality of being in an environment where things are done differently can set in.

How to prevent rage during travel

- Refrain from drinking alcohol or using other psychoactive substances when travelling, especially in transit.
- Learn how and when to let go of situations you cannot control; adjust your behaviour based on the circumstance. Accept that other people are not responsible for events beyond their control.
- Know when to stop a challenging situation from escalating. Find acceptable, non-confrontational solutions. Do not take it personally; it most likely was not intended to offend or disappoint.
- Meditate, practice your spirituality, or find a peaceful place to relax. Practice breathing exercises to relieve stress.
- Integrate physical activity such as walking and stretching into your itinerary. Make sure to get the appropriate amount of sleep and eat a healthy diet.

Reverse culture shock occurs when a returning traveller has problems re-adapting to life back home. You may dread getting back into a daily routine after experiencing an exciting and fulfilling trip. If you were away for a long time, you may have problems reconnecting with friends or family members, discover that you have grown apart, or have difficulty sharing your travel experiences. Others who return home may question their lifestyle and beliefs, and feel a sense of guilt, disappointment or anger for living in a privileged consumer-oriented society.

Symptoms of reverse culture shock:

- feelings of bereavement, anxiety, and sadness
- alienation, loss, frustration, anger

Rage

The inability to deal rationally and calmly with a challenging situation can progress to rage (also known as air rage and road rage). It is typically expressed in outbursts of extreme anger or violence that are unprovoked or disproportionate to the provocation, either real or perceived. Travel-related rage is not common, but it has gained widespread media attention.

Incidents of rage tend to occur in unfamiliar and overstimulating environments like airports, airplanes, hotels, major transportation hubs, and popular tourist sites. For some travellers, overcrowding, delays, lack of information, lack of manners and boorish behaviour, as well as arguments with transportation or service personnel can result in uncontrollable rage. Heightened stress levels, alcohol and drug misuse, as well as smoking prohibitions in many public places are common factors inciting rage. This behaviour can also be a symptom associated with mental illness.

Signs of oncoming rage include:

- raised voice
- not listening to, or ignoring, the other person
- sweating, chest tightening, palpitations, and twitching
- verbal abuse, physical violence, destruction of property

Be aware that in many countries disturbing the peace and suspicious or violent behaviour can result in criminal charges, fines, or imprisonment.

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.

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.

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.