

## WELLNESS TIPS FOR SIT GRADUATE STUDENTS

SIT Graduate Institute offers exciting and challenging academic programs. As you prepare for your graduate experience, please read through the information that follows. We encourage all students to create a personal wellness plan for yourself to make the most of your time with SIT. If you are currently working with a mental health provider or other health professional, we encourage you to involve them collaboratively in this process.

A key aspect of your Global Master's program is the experience of studying in a different context and culture. The cultural immersion process requires psychological flexibility in the face of different customs, beliefs, and living conditions. These new situations may trigger "culture shock" marked by symptoms such as sadness, anxiety, homesickness, and difficulties eating or sleeping, to name a few. The adjustment process, with all its ups and downs, is a manageable experience for the vast majority. But sometimes preexisting health conditions can become exacerbated in new and unfamiliar settings. You are always encouraged to seek assistance if you are not feeling well or have any questions at all.

SIT has mental health consultants available to connect with students remotely to provide short-term support. Additionally, counseling resources in-country have been identified, where available. Views on mental health vary greatly around the world, as do the types of resources that are available. Some countries have a broad range of services, including access to English-speaking or Western-trained providers, while others have more limited options. However, you can best prepare for a positive international experience by developing a set of healthy coping strategies that you can utilize during the program. These might include journaling; reaching out to a friend; taking a walk; meditation; yoga; breathing exercises; avoiding substances such as alcohol, caffeine, or sugar; or simply taking prescribed medications as directed.

### Preparing for your specific program

You are encouraged to explore not only the academic and cultural opportunities available in your chosen program, but also how the program structure might impact you on a personal level. As you prepare for your international experience and shape your personal wellness plan, here are some aspects to consider:

- What is the nature and length of your program? How long will you be in one place?
- What is the expected amount of travel or number of excursions? Most programs include some in-country excursions while others involve travel to different countries, resulting in frequent periods of transition and cultural adjustment.

- How physically rigorous is the program?
- What is the nature of the learning community during your program? How much group work and contact with fellow students can you anticipate? How much private, down time is optimal for you, and how will you adapt if there is less alone time than you are used to?
- Do you have social identities (such as sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, religion, race, ethnicity to name a few) that are important for you to express?
- What are the housing options? Will you need to share a room with another student? Will you opt for a homestay if that is a possibility? How will you adjust if there are limited options for housing?
- What is the availability of in-country medical and mental health support?
- If you take prescription medications, can you bring an adequate supply with you into the country?
- What is the access to internet and phone usage for maintaining connections back home?

## Components of a wellness plan

**Identify stress triggers.** Consider the types of situations that you find particularly stressful. Awareness of potential stressors is the first step in minimizing difficulties or responding effectively if they do occur.

**List specific coping strategies** that are useful for you and that you can employ while on program.

**Enlist your support system.** Identify in advance people who are willing and available to be part of your support team – parents, other family members, friends back home, or therapist. Think about how to obtain meaningful support while abroad for identities or matters that may be important to you, for example, sexual orientation, gender identity / expression, race, ethnicity, disability, religion or spiritual practice, maintaining sobriety, and so forth.

**Get adequate sleep.** Sleep is foundational for optimal physical and mental health. Traveling internationally across time zones or adjusting to a new environment with its distinct sleeping arrangements can lead to disrupted sleep. Bring along ear plugs or listen to relaxation apps to help you fall asleep in new situations.

**Consider diet.** New foods and eating customs are an important part of international experiences, but diet changes can sometimes disrupt gastrointestinal functioning. Keep an open mind and enjoy the local cuisine, but also bring along over-the-counter remedies or calming teas and identify bland foods in-country that you can rely on if you don't feel well.

**Incorporate exercise into your routine.** Maintaining physical activity is important for well-being. Find out about local resources / options in-country in terms of exercise or sports. If you are a jogger or like to take yoga classes but will be in a location where those are not an option, investigate other ways to get exercise that are culturally appropriate and available.

**Develop communication strategies and know how to ask for help.** Know your early warning signs of stress, anxiety, depression, or other health conditions. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish normal adjustment to a new environment from symptoms of a more serious health issue. When in doubt, it is best to consult with a health professional. Do not wait until your symptoms are severe and interfere with functioning; inform your faculty or staff as soon as possible to get connected with resources.

## In conclusion

Planning and preparation are important first steps in proactively shaping an enjoyable international educational experience. But there is much that cannot be predicted or controlled, many experiences will surprise you once you are immersed in the new setting. Maintaining flexibility and a positive attitude will go a long way in helping you to adapt and embrace your experience. **Please do not hesitate to ask questions or address your concerns at any point along the way.**

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