



INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION
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TO TRAVELLERS

IAMAT

My Travel Mental Health Checklist – Depression and Mood Changes

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My Travel Mental Health Checklist - Depression and Mood Changes

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. Sudden mood changes can disrupt travel or cause a relapse in persons with mood disorders. In addition to managing travel stress, recognizing the warning signs of depression and mood changes, and how to get help abroad 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 personal and social relationships, and is a serious medical condition that requires treatment.

In more 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 hoping it may relieve their suffering.

Mood Swings

Travellers who develop extreme mood swings (manic and depressive symptoms) often make poor judgments and engage in adverse behaviour putting 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 tends to focus on hospitalization to stabilize symptoms with possible evacuation.

No Prior History? What To Look For ...

Your travel plans may get disrupted if you develop depressive or manic symptoms during your trip. Lack of motivation or 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

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 auto-immune disorders, hypothyroidism, neurological changes, or substance dependence. Treatment options may include medication, psychotherapy, and learning skills to manage mood disorders.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- To alleviate a potential crisis abroad, familiarize yourself with the psychiatric healthcare system of your destination country and find a mental health professional whom you can contact immediately in case of an emergency.
- Disturbing the peace, uttering threats, or exhibiting strange behaviour can lead to criminal charges, arrest, imprisonment, or forced admission to a hospital or mental health facility.
- 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, counterfeit medications), and difficulty finding mental healthcare professionals that speak your language (in both urban and rural areas) should be taken into account when planning your trip.
- Be prepared to incur out-of-pocket medical expenses if you require psychiatric care abroad. Ask your travel health insurer if psychiatric emergency care or persons with pre-existing mood disorders are covered abroad.
- Emergency air transportation (medevac) insurance generally covers patients who have managed their illness and are being hospitalized abroad. Check the fine print for restrictions and exclusions. Last-minute insurance is extremely expensive (ranging in the tens of thousands of dollars) and may be refused on the basis of the patient's mental health condition. If you do not have evacuation insurance, contact your Embassy or Consulate for assistance.
- Are you travelling with, or suspect someone has thoughts of suicide?
 - remove self-harming objects such as knives, toxic chemicals, alcohol and other psychoactive substances from their reach.
 - seek help from a mental health professional and from your Embassy or Consulate. They can arrange for hospitalization and evacuation back home if required.
 - if the person is travelling alone and you know where they're staying, contact the place of accommodation to alert them and request that they contact a mental health professional or ambulance. Also contact your Embassy or Consulate for emergency assistance.
 - Suicide attempt survivors may require legal assistance in countries where suicide is illegal (ie. India, Singapore).

I Have A Mood Disorder

Travellers who have successfully managed and controlled mood disorders can travel safely. You may want to consult your mental health professional to determine if travel is an appropriate activity for you. If required, stay in touch with your mental healthcare provider or find a qualified therapist 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 immediately to avoid emergency hospitalization or evacuation back home.

Before You Leave

- Talk to your doctor to discuss if the type of travel you are planning is appropriate for you. Get advice on how to stay healthy and staying in touch while you are away (Skype, texting, email). Don't forget time zone changes.

- Find a mental health professional at your destination who speaks your language. Contact them to ensure continuity of care.
- Book the most direct route possible to your destination; avoid stopovers 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 safety checks. You may want to inform transportation personnel about your condition to make your trip more comfortable and less stressful. 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 (a book, iPod), memento, or journal that provides comfort during stressful situations.
- Know your mental and physical limits. Regularly re-assess 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 and stretching 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 doctor 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, you may 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 groups specializing in this service.

TRAVELLING WITH MEDICATION?

Before You Leave

- Find out which travel health vaccinations may interfere with your current medication. You may need to seek alternative protection measures.
- Ask your doctor how to adjust your medication dosage intake across different time zones.
- Bring enough medication to last the whole trip; ask your doctor for an additional dose to account for possible travel delays.
- Pack your medication in your carry-on bag. If you are travelling with someone else split the medication to minimize loss or theft. Don't pack medication in checked luggage or send it by post to your destination since it may get lost.
- Learn how to safely store medication. Check if it requires refrigeration and make arrangements at your destination. Keep in mind that extreme heat may also impact the medication's effectiveness.
- Bring a copy of your original prescription and, if possible, keep medication in their original containers. Ensure that they are clearly labelled with your full passport name, doctor's name, generic and brand name, and exact dosage. Keep in mind that some medication may not be allowed in your destination country. Check with your Embassy or Consulate to see if there are any restrictions.

- Bring a letter from your doctor (preferably translated in the language understood at your destination) or an IAMAT Traveller Clinical Record. This will facilitate border crossing and help the attending physician abroad.
- If you need syringes, get a note from your doctor explaining their use. Find out from your airline or other transportation company about the use of syringes during transit.

During Your Trip

- Take your medication routinely and consistently. Do not reduce or stop taking your medication without prior approval from your doctor.
- 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 host country or may not be available in the dosage that you require.

When You Return

- Follow-up with your doctor if you needed a prescription refill abroad to ensure continuity of care back home.

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