



STUDYING ABROAD: YOUNG ADULTS AND MENTAL HEALTH

If you're fortunate enough to study abroad, you have a unique opportunity to broaden your horizons – not only through your studies, but through life experiences you'll have along the way.

By immersing yourself in a different culture, trying different kinds of food, learning a new language, and enjoying new activities, you'll open yourself up to a whole new level of tolerance and understanding. That's because studying abroad allows you to discover an alternative way of living. And meeting people from diverse backgrounds, becoming part of a community, and understanding the value of your educational opportunities can also help you to become more resilient.¹

Declining mental health

Mental health problems are prevalent among young people, and have been steadily on the rise in recent years.² Mood disorders, rates of anxiety, incidences of depression, and suicide-related occurrences among adolescents and young adults have all increased over the last decade.^{2,3}

Studies have shown that:⁴

- Mental health illnesses primarily **begin during adolescence and early adulthood**
- **One in five young people** between the ages of nine and 17 has a diagnosable mental health condition
- **One in 10 young people** has a condition that causes significant impairment
- Only **one third** of those affected receive the necessary treatment

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This means that many young people are entering adulthood with an untreated mental health condition. It should therefore come as no surprise that young adults report poorer mental health than older generations.⁵

Covid-19 and mental health

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to affect the mental health of young people. It is natural to feel anxious about a post-Covid future. However, anxiety is not just emotional, it can cause physical symptoms too. A recent study found a direct correlation between higher levels of Covid-related anxiety and physical symptoms, including fatigue, pain, and gastrointestinal issues.¹²

The effects of isolation:^{9,10,11,12}

- There is high correlation between isolation and loneliness.
- Younger generations are lonelier than older generations. Nearly eight in 10 Gen Zers (79%) and seven in 10 millennials (71%) are lonely, vs. half of boomers (50%).
- Many young adults reported loneliness, anxiety, depressive symptoms, substance use, and suicidal thoughts.
- Disruption to mental health services – including those undergoing therapy and counselling sessions.



Decreasing mental health among young people – contributing factors

1. **Social media** plays an important part in psychological health and wellbeing. In fact, The 2020 Cigna Resilience Index that focused on youth and parents in the US found that young people who use social media for over five hours a day have a lower level of resilience to those who use it for shorter periods.
2. **A lack of social support** and infrequent meaningful social interactions with family and friends.
3. **Negative feelings** about personal relationships.
4. **A lack of “balance”** in daily activities – doing too much or too little of any given thing (e.g. sleep, studying).

Staying resilient and getting the support you need

Looking after our mental health is as important as caring for your physical health.



Following a nutritious, balanced diet, getting enough sleep, and exercising regularly are pillars of a healthy lifestyle that can promote both physical and mental health. But did you know that building resilience can also play a part?

“Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, or stress,” says Solange Fichet, Nurse Case Manager at Cigna. “It’s not a specific quality that a child or young person displays, but rather resilience is something that emerges based on their interaction with others – whether it be at home, school, or communities. In other words, relationships are key to resilient outcomes,” she adds.⁸

Poor resilience among young people is often associated with higher stress levels, greater anxiety, lower self-esteem, and limited academic goals and achievements.⁶

In fact, young adults are eight times less likely to believe they have opportunities to apply their abilities when they have lower levels of resilience.¹

Support networks of trusted friends and family who can be confided in are of utmost importance, particularly when over half of young people between the ages of 18 and 23 experience feelings of not belonging.⁶ As a student living abroad, in-person support networks can also be key. Becoming a part of a group can minimize loneliness and isolation and open doors to connections and friends who are going through similar experiences.

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Looking out for others

Looking after our own mental health and that of those around us is important. Learning how to recognize when someone needs help will help to understand what you can do if they reach out to you. Here are some common warning signs that might suggest that someone you care about is in need of help. These include when they:⁷

- withdraw from activities they usually enjoy
- start isolating themselves from people they care about
- feel sad or despondent
- harm themselves
- have drastic mood swings
- are unable to concentrate or sit still
- start to get involved in high-risk behavior and activities.



If you’re concerned about someone close to you – reach out to them. Start a conversation asking them how they’re feeling and expressing your concerns. Try to encourage them to share their thoughts, worries, and fears. But remember, if you think they need additional help, it’s important that you encourage them to speak to a professional.

NEED ADDITIONAL EMOTIONAL SUPPORT?

Remember, you have access to the following programs:

MAKE ONE SMALL CHANGE: RESILIENCE

AN ONLINE LIFESTYLE MANAGEMENT
PROGRAMME FROM CIGNA

GO TO MSC: RESILIENCE

THE STUDENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

PROVIDES SUPPORT TO IMPROVE
OVERALL HEALTH AND WELLNESS

GO TO SAP

If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact your HR department. Alternatively, visit www.cignawellbeing.com.

This article was reviewed by Solange Fichet, Nurse Case Manager at Cigna.



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