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Out of Your Comfort Zone:
Tools for Mental Health
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Having tools to support good mental health can be the difference between a vitalizing study abroad experience and an overwhelming one. Young people today face challenges unseen in any previous generation: globalization, social media and online identity creation, saturation of pornography, fast-paced dating and sex culture, over-scheduling, and increased pressure to succeed in competitive economic and social realities. The mental health outcomes of these factors are real and urgent, and travel can act as an amplifier. Through education, we have an opportunity to provide solid mental health tools that can be applied immediately to enrich and empower the lives of young people, now and for the future.

Within a travel experience and away from the security of the familiar, culture shock will shine a light on exactly what coping strategies young people have developed, and how those strategies may be failing. If effective tools have not been taught, then young people will develop reactionary behaviors to solve problems in the short term that often create long term distress. The challenges of travel can destabilize mental health, which, in rare cases, can lead to a full crisis. Out of their comfort zone, how do students make decisions about what to do, where to go, who to trust, and how to evaluate their experiences?

We do not need to stoke fear or alarm. Empowering students means providing tools to develop self-agency, awareness, confidence, and healthy decision making. An effective approach should validate pain, assist recovery, encourage pleasure, and emphasize positive outcomes that can be achieved through conscious transformation. It should build courage to overcome obstacles without resorting to self-destructive, risk-taking, or denial-based behaviors.

Within the education system is the opportunity for mental health intervention. Mental Health Practitioner Elizabeth Connolly works with individuals in student populations of Florence, and argues that "education should not only provide an enriched, broad-based, academic program, but also provide a supportive learning environment that challenges young people to explore who they want to be as a person, societal challenges, relationships with others, personal values and beliefs, and peer influences."

Asking for help still carries a stigma, especially for young people who want to prove their independence and invincibility. Some who need therapeutic support will access it, but many will not, or will be unable to for complex social, financial, and cultural reasons. Multiple approaches are required to make mental health support accessible and available to all. What I offer here is a framework for mental health practice that can be used during the travel experience, and throughout life.

The key areas I identify here are drawn from my own experience. I survived a violent drug-rape in Florence, and the lengthy court process that continues today, six years later. I have learned what it takes to thrive overseas despite all obstacles. My life is now better than it was before the assault – nourishing and rewarding. This is not because crisis automatically functions as a growth experience, or because my life is free of struggle. It is the result of solid mental health practices that I learned during years of therapy.

The key areas I am identifying are centered on self-examination and have had a profound impact on my quality of life. Because often I found myself saying, "I wish I had known this before," I now want young people to have immediate access to these skills. It is not only crisis situations that are served by mental health support, but every area of life. I have outlined each topic as a series of questions to guide an exploration of identity, the self, and current strategies (or lack of) for managing emotional and psychological health.

It is not about eliminating tough days or tough feelings. We do not try to control the impossible. It's about having a system to get to the core of each situation and its effects, and a strategy for choosing our responses based on a clear grounding in identified values and needs, as well as in-

formed collaboration with our contexts.

Values and Goal-Setting

To develop a full self-concept, students must identify their strengths, needs, and values. This self-knowledge becomes the basis for healthy decision making. This process should be revisited throughout life to reflect upon changing ways of thinking, shifting priorities, our vulnerabilties, and the best strategies for working with these evolving definitions of self. Who I was is not who I am, and travel is a transformative experience for my sense of identity. The outer self is a flexible construction that can be adapted throughout our lives. The inner self is the stable core, often buried under false beliefs and patterns, that is the source of intuition and "gut feelings." I can learn how to separate them, and develop a practice for checking in with these "selves."

Underpinning goal-setting is the recognition of desires and the ability to evaluate chioces and make decisions about how to act upon them. If I understand what I want and, more importantly, know why I want those things, I can become more flexible and adaptable to how the experience may unfold. This is a key factor in resilience.

University hook-up and shot-drinking cultures are a significant influence on young people, who are heavily invested in gaining peer approval and belonging. This affects how they define themselves and set goals. It is important to identify problematic goals such as "getting an Italian partner," "having sex," "getting wasted drunk." Dating, sex, and alcohol use are not problems in and of themselves, so what makes certain goals problematic? It is a problem when the behavior is unconscious and/or the student is seeking to resolve a core emotional struggle, but that behavior will not result in long-term change or increase the individual capacity for self-care and emotional regulation. They are behaviors that introduce a new set of risks and difficulties that add to the emotional burden rather than relieve it.

Openness and Boundary Setting

What does it mean to be open to new experiences? To be open to

myself, to others, and to my environment? How does this relate to risk and fear? What is a healthy risk, and what is a dangerous one? Risks are not only related to physical safety, but also to emotional and psychological factors as well. Knowing I can evaluate and navigate risk builds confidence in trying new things. How can I use curiosity and courage to open myself up to unexpected adventures? Tools of contextual awareness, respectful interaction, and negotiation contribute to making new experiences meaningful. What are the social rules and particularities that we must be aware of in a foreign culture? Where and how do I learn them?

Boundaries increase freedom, providing a stable ground from which to launch adventurous experiences. How can I understand what boundaries I already have in place, those I'd like to have, and those I may need? A strong emotional response is often a clue to missing boundaries. What does it mean to listen to any discomfort I'm feeling, and other inner cues? What do I do when my boundaries clash with another person's, and how do I negotiate conflicting needs in a travel context? How do I set boundaries between me and my friends, new roommates, my host, the flirtatious waiter at the restaurant, interactions on the street? How can healthy boundaries and informed negotiation help me manage conflict, compromise, and respectful engagement with the culture and context around me?

Risks and Reducing Risk Factors

There are the specific risks that come with living and traveling abroad. Florence is like any other big city, but it can feel deceptively like a small town, disabling one's usual level of awareness. Crisis skills involve understanding the risks. This includes knowledge of common strategies used by criminals who specifically target foreigners, without engaging in excessive fear or catastrophizing. A risk is not only an external danger but includes exhaustion or emotional overwhelm. We want to work with, rather than against, these limitations.

Reducing risk factors is not about the total elimination of risk. It is having the tools ready to manage situations that may arise. These include awareness training, bystander support, and self-reflection. It also

includes moderating alcohol or drug use in unfamiliar environments, planning how to get home, and knowing key information about support and emergency services in Florence.

We need to trust our intuition and respond to its signals. The challenge is separating intuition from false fears. This can be tricky, and a lifelong process, but will serve us well. It's never impolite to leave or say no, and it's ok to assert our boundaries when we feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

Each person needs to identify a diverse network of support. For example, after the rape, I was supported by a therapist, a lawyer, and a selection of peers and mentors to whom I could turn to when my own strength failed. Bystander training, such as learning to spot the red flags and simple but effective intervention techniques, is also vital to community support. However, there is an important difference between being an active bystander, and becoming a caretaker. This means knowing how we can help, balanced with knowing when and how to enforce our limits.

Avoid Blame and Crisis Management

Working to reduce risk factors does not equal accountability in the case of an assault or attack. The victim is never at fault, but do we really understand why? We must examine the concept of self-responsibility, recognizing that it is important to take full responsibility for our own actions, but this does not make us responsible for the actions of others. The person who chooses to abuse is accountable for the outcomes of their actions. For example: If I choose to binge-drink, I am responsible for my hangover, for challenges in regulating my emotions and maintaining my mental health, and for my own behavior and the impact it has on other people. I am not responsible for being targeted by a criminal.

We need to recognize red-flag behaviors and environments, and develop the courage to remove ourselves from those situations wherever possible. We need skills to navigate legal, medical, and recovery systems in the case of a crisis.

The more we understand about victim myths, rape myths, and any negative perception of foreigners in tourist destinations, the better we are

prepared to assert our own personhood and rights in the face of those pressures. We can learn about the challenges of navigating medical and legal systems in a foreign country, and the valid reasons victims have for believing that reporting a crime is futile. Nevertheless, reporting criminal activity is essential. Whether or not a person commits to making a complaint or, in my case, a full court process, having an official record will increase awareness of criminals by law enforcement, and it can influence the outcomes of future legal actions. The act of making a report is also an act of power, a step towards saying that what happened was not acceptable. This goes a long way to challenging victim blaming, which can be deeply internalized.

I can find out what it will mean if I do commit to a legal process, the legalities, costs, and timelines involved. If I can work through those blocks in advance, I am more likely to push through them if and when it's needed, either by me or someone I know.

Sexual Consent

What does healthy, active, and continuous consent look like? What is the difference between verbal and non-verbal communication, and how do they impact our ability to give and perceive consent? What does communication mean in the sexual context, and how can it both increase pleasure and ensure healthy consent at every stage of sexual interaction? Many of the tools we have already been learning, like boundaries and core values, apply also to consent. We need tools to have more open conversations, negotiate needs and desires with partners, and redirect sexual focus towards curiosity, pleasure, and discovery, rather than simply "getting laid."

Communication is complicated by cultural differences, and there are limits and challenges to reading verbal and nonverbal cues, especially when outside of our own language/culture/place. How might the sex and dating culture here be different from back home, and what might those differences mean for the way I interact? I can take the opportunity to reflect upon experiences I have already had, and those I may like to have, and consider them from the perspective of cultural differences. Particular attention should be paid to "red flags" and the importance of

not ignoring them with "cultural differences" as the excuse.

Caring for Self, Caring for Others

Self-care is essential, not as the popular perception of small self-indulgences, but as a constant, dedicated process of checking in with myself, doing emotional housekeeping, creating a balance between activity and rest, and feeling empowered to ask for help when needed. The areas outlined here serve as a firm foundation for this self-care practice. By practice, I mean that there is no "destination" to achieve, where I arrive one day, am mentally healthy, and therefore my work is done. Mental health is an ongoing process that evolves as my identity evolves throughout life, and is something that must be maintained in the same way I'd maintain a healthy diet or exercise routine.

It's important to identify wider networks of support and know when and how to hand over the situation to someone more qualified when I am out of my depth. I have learned that knowing my limits does not mean that I am weak, that I have failed, that I do not love another person, or that I am abandoning them. It means that I am being honest about my limits, taking care to not risk mental health further, and helping myself or others to find support if it's appropriate to do so.

Returning Home

There is a common phenomenon that occurs after a person returns from a transformational experience, like travel, and begins to care for their mental health in new ways. Their changed habits and attitudes can often cause some disruption in old relationships. This doesn't mean that the old relationships are over – not at all. It *does* mean, however, that a period of adjustment is normal; common within this period are feelings of loneliness, not feeling understood, feeling judged, and pressure to return to "normal." Stay conscious and compassionate with yourself and others, and resist the impulse to revert back to old habits out of fear. You made the changes for a reason. The benefits to your life will be motivation enough to stay the course.