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Mental Health

[Information for Volunteers](#)

Notes

Mental health issues can affect men and women of all ages and backgrounds. We feel it is important for you to be aware of mental health issues prior to beginning your international placement. This booklet will provide valuable information on how to understand and manage different mental health issues and highlight who you can approach for support.

Project Trust will be as helpful and supportive as we can to anyone who tells us that they are managing a mental health issue or are affected by someone else's mental health.

Disclaimer

In producing this booklet, Project Trust has made every effort to provide advice based on up to date evidence for what is effective. It is not intended as a substitute for thorough medical assessment and clinical intervention. If you are concerned about your mental health, please consult Project Trust or a professional for advice and support.

Acknowledgements

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Emotional Well-Being

Everyday well-being is about how we feel, think and behave. Nobody feels blissfully happy, thinks positive thoughts and behaves sensibly all the time. However, if you are in a pretty good state of mind, it is generally much easier to enjoy life and cope with its challenges.

Looking after your state of mind is just as important as taking care of your body, yet most of us manage our physical health far better than our mental health. As soon as we feel a physical ache or pain we generally try to do something about it, but when we find ourselves feeling very low or stressed we tend to think it is just part and parcel of life and don't do anything to improve the situation.

You are not alone if you feel down, anxious or distressed. One in four of us experience a mental health problem in any one year.

The phrase "mental health problems" covers many different conditions, ranging from mild or temporary distress to problems which severely limit a person's ability to cope with everyday life. The move from a mild state of anxiety or depression to a severe one can be very gradual, but it is important to recognise the signs so that action can be taken before the condition becomes serious or prolonged.

Young Minds

Young Minds have a fantastic website with lots of information and advice.

www.youngminds.org.uk

Mind

Offer advice and guidance in relation to mental health issues and how to support others.

www.mind.org.uk

Healthlink 360

We have a partnership with Health Link 360 and they have supported our Volunteers abroad for a number of years. If you feel that you would benefit from professional support while you are placement please contact Project Trust and we will arrange for a staff member at Health Link 360 to contact you directly. You can visit their website for further information or chat to us about what services are available to you during your placement and on your return to the UK.

www.healthlink360.org

Project Trust

Do not hesitate to contact us if you need support or would like to chat to a member of staff. You can reach us by emailing info@projecttrust.org.uk or by calling the office on **+44 (0) 1879 230 444**.

9 Be aware of changes to their mood

Keep an eye on changes in your friend's emotions and offer support if you think they are struggling. Ask for help from a trusted adult if you are concerned or need support.

10 Encourage your partner to talk to someone

You don't need to take on the burden of supporting your partner alone. Your partner may benefit from talking to a trusted adult (*eg* parent, doctor, someone from Project Trust, or a mental health professional) and may need help finding that person. Be a friend by helping them identify and talk to that person. Remember, if you feel your partner is at risk of serious harm then you should not be dealing with it on your own. See below for details on all the immediate telephone and online support available to you.

Further Help & Information

Samaritans

Samaritans offer free and confidential help in the UK 24/7, you do not have to be suicidal to get in touch. While you are abroad, you can email jo@samaritans.org

The Mix

The Mix offers free and confidential support to under 25s. Email and web chat support are available at their website.

www.themix.org.uk

Top Tips for Maintaining Emotional Well-Being

1 Set yourself achievable goals

Make sure that your goals are specific and achievable. If they are too vague, you will never know if you achieved them. If you set them too high, you will end up frustrated. Too low and there will be nothing to aim for.

2 Be good to yourself

Take notice of your achievements, however small and reward yourself. Think about what gives you pleasure and enjoy the reward. Tell others about your achievements. Giving time to activities we find rewarding increases our sense of well-being, whereas a routine made up almost entirely of things that we have to do can have the opposite effect. Doing things to put you in a good mood is sensible, not self-indulgent; so don't feel guilty about it.

3 Believe in yourself

Self-confidence is concerned with how we feel about our abilities. Self-esteem is slightly different as it reflects the degree to which we value ourselves. You can always build up your self-confidence and self-esteem if it's low.

4 **Manage your Time**

Good time management means setting goals and planning to tackle the most important things first. Do not waste time on low priority jobs or spend valuable time on things outside of your control. Take 5-10 minutes each morning to plan the day.

5 **Face and solve your problems**

We all have a tendency to avoid facing our problems. Avoidance is not helpful in the long run because it can make the problem worse, it can create new problems and thirdly it stops you getting on with your life and leads to more stress and tension. Don't be afraid to ask for help and support to face your problems.

6 **Keeping things in perspective**

There is always more than one way of seeing things. This means that although you may not be able to choose the facts, you may be able to choose how you react to them. You can help yourself feel better and be more effective by looking at your situation with an open mind and being realistic about what you can manage.

7 **Learning to relax**

Practising relaxation will give you more energy, decrease anxiety and irritability and reduce pains due to tense muscles. Relaxation time should be seen as an important part of your daily routine. Read a book, listen to music or write a letter/diary entry as a way to wind down and relax at the end of the day.

5 **Spend time with them doing fun stuff**

Creative or relaxing activities can really boost mental health. Find some things to do together that your partner might enjoy. But remember to check in that your partner is genuinely comfortable with the activities and not going along with you to keep you happy.

6 **Encourage healthy choices**

Motivate your partner to look after themselves by encouraging them to eat healthily, do some exercise and get enough sleep. All these things can improve mood. However this doesn't mean treats should be banned as treats can also make you feel good (mmmmnnn chocolate)! It's also a good idea to help them avoid drugs and alcohol as these can have a negative effect on mental health.

7 **Don't let their mental health issues dominate**

It's really important that you treat your partner as you have always done. They're still you're your partner despite their issues. Sometimes it's good just to hang out like old friends and talk about other things, not just their problems. It is also important not to let their mental health become too much of a burden on you as it is not your job to support them professionally. If their mental health starts to affect your own mental health then it is okay to put yourself first and talk to an adult you trust.

8 **Let them know you are thinking about them**

Letting your partner know you care can boost their mood and stop them from feeling isolated. Try not to discuss their problems too much as they may begin to feel like a burden.

Supporting Others

1 Look after yourself first

It's important to put yourself first. The only way you will be able to support your Project Trust partner is if you feel strong enough. All these tips can help you to stay in the best possible shape to help your partner, but don't take it all on by yourself, seek help if you need it or don't know what to do.

2 Don't judge - try to keep an open mind

It is important not to judge your partner for having mental health issues or dismiss their feelings. If your partner feels judged or that you 'don't get it', they will be less likely to see you as a source of support.

3 Make time to listen

It can be hard to listen properly if you're distracted or there's lots going on. Creating a space to listen to how your partner is feeling will help them feel heard and valued. Choose a place you know they will feel safe and comfortable to talk. Why not turn your phone off when you're with your partner? Sometimes it's really easy to get distracted by notifications. Turning your phone off shows your partner that you really want to listen.

4 Learn more about mental health

Learning more about mental health and the specific issue they are experiencing will help you give the right support. You could give them self-help books or help them research online. However do not try to diagnose them and remember that you can't completely understand what they are experiencing.

8 Exercise

Regular exercise is good for us in many ways. It can increase our confidence and self-esteem, stimulate "feel good" chemicals in our bodies, provide an outlet for tension and frustration, relieve anxiety, help us sleep better and prevents some physical illnesses. Choose a sport or exercise you enjoy.

9 Learn to say NO

Learning to say 'No' in an assertive and tactful way is a difficult but important skill to learn. Remind yourself that you have this right.

10 Expressing your feelings

Expressing our feelings promotes a sense of well-being and freedom from tension. It helps us to recover from hurtful experiences, and also helps other people to understand what is going on inside us. Of course, there are times when displays of emotion are not helpful, but hiding or holding back our feelings can cause tensions that affect our physical and mental health.

11 Managing your diet

For general well-being, the secret is a balanced diet. The foods you eat can play an important part in the way you feel, physically and mentally. Too much sugar, caffeine or salt can cause tension and irritability, and alcohol is a depressant.

Depression

Most of us have felt low from time to time, but usually the low mood passes after a few days. Sometimes, a person sinks into depression to a point where they may need professional help.

Depression does not mean that you are weak or lazy. It is a common illness like high blood pressure, diabetes or arthritis. It can occur at any age. The good news is that there are things you can do to help yourself and treatments that work well.

Signs of Depression

When we become depressed, we may experience:

- Loss of identity and self-esteem
- Sadness, when there is maybe nothing to feel sad about
- Extreme guilt over minor matters
- A sense of failure when this is not realistic
- Loneliness, even among other people
- Tearfulness, when there is maybe nothing to cry about
- Constant exhaustion
- Feelings of hopelessness, misery or despair
- Difficulty in concentrating or making decisions
- Thoughts of death or suicide.

Anger

Anger needs to be expressed. If it is bottled up inside it can cause harm or boil over into rage. Anger has to be expressed calmly, not aggressively.

Remember that losing your temper is never a good solution. It may provide temporary relief, but later on you will feel bad, which can lead to more anger.

First aid for anger

- Breathe slowly and deeply
- Slow down – don't rush into words or actions you may regret
- Count to 10
- Walk away if possible
- Do something physical like a vigorous walk or housework
- Take some exercise such as running, walking, cycling or swimming – but not a competitive sport as this can increase feelings of aggression

When you feel calm, take time to reflect on why you were angry or upset and speak to someone you trust about it. If required, you can be supported to address issues that cause you anger without causing any distress or upset to other people around you.

Panic attacks

Panic attacks are very frightening because they seem to come out of the blue.

Most people describe a sudden, overwhelming sense of anxiety, including:

- Feelings of absolute terror
- Very rapid breathing and heartbeat
- Dizziness or faintness
- Sweating and hot or cold flushes
- Nausea

Coping with a panic attack

- Try to slow your breathing (in through the nose, out through the mouth is a helpful reminder)
- Stay where you are
- Remind yourself that you are safe and that the feeling will pass
- Try to distract yourself by looking hard at something nearby

Coping with Depression

- Try to avoid sitting or lying about doing nothing
- Identify things which you used to enjoy and try to engage in those activities
- Plan to gradually increase the routine of pleasant activities
- If a task seems too difficult, try breaking it into a series of small steps
- Above all reward yourself for your efforts
- Avoid discussions of bad feelings - solving problems is more helpful. However, do not be afraid to speak to someone you trust about how you are feeling if you need support
- If your appetite is poor, eat small quantities regularly and drink lots of fluids
- Keep to a normal sleep routine. Avoid daytime naps. At night, get up if you are awake for 30 mins or more, and try to relax.

Depressive Thinking

When you are depressed there are changes in the way you think, as well as in how you feel. You tend to look on the black side of everything, see the worst in yourself, in your life and your future. Once you are feeling down, you are more likely to remember the bad things that have happened and ignore the good ones. Negative thinking can also trigger depression and it slows down recovery.

Identifying negative thinking

Negative thoughts can be difficult to spot because they become a habit, they can flash quickly into your mind and most of us are not used to noticing our thoughts. Learning to spot and catch these negative thoughts is a skill you can master with time.

Some examples of negative thinking are:

- Thinking the worst, **eg** your boy/girl-friend doesn't phone. You assume they don't like you anymore.
- Ignoring the positive and only seeing the negative, **eg** 'The shelves I put up are no good because one screw fell out.'
- Taking things personally and blaming yourself for what others do, **eg**. 'My student failed that exam. I should have helped him more. I am a bad teacher'.

You may also have beliefs that are unrealistic:

- I should be happy all the time.
- If someone is hurt by something I say or do, I am a bad person.
- If I show emotion, I am weak.
- If I don't succeed, I am worthless.

and allow them to become relaxed

- Let your mind go empty. Some people find it helpful to visualise a calm, beautiful place like a garden or meadow

Stay like this for about 20 minutes. Then take some deep breaths and open your eyes. Remain seated or lying down for a few moments before you get up.

Slow breathing to reduce anxiety

Anxiety can make you feel breathless. The natural response to this is to breathe in more or to "over breathe". However, this makes the problem worse. The best solution is to slow down your breathing, which will alleviate the unpleasant feelings of anxiety.

Remember to breathe in using your abdomen (not your chest). This is sometimes called stomach breathing, because the abdomen should gently rise and fall rather than your upper chest.

- Breathe in slowly through your nose to the count of 3 seconds
- Then slowly breathe out to the count of 3 seconds
- Pause for 3 seconds before breathing in again
- Continue this exercise for 5 minutes or so
- Practice twice a day for 10 minutes (5 minutes is better than nothing)
- Try to check and slow down your breathing during the day
- You can use the slow breathing technique whenever you feel anxious

Coping with Anxiety

- Learn to relax and do relaxing things
- Reduce caffeine and avoid using alcohol
- Regular physical exercise will help
- Make a plan to solve problems and take action
- Identify which situations or circumstances make you feel anxious and work on ways to overcome these
- Talk to someone you trust

Worry and negative thinking is a habit and it takes time to change. Don't put pressure on yourself to overcome symptoms of anxiety quickly. Taking positive steps to manage your anxiety will make a huge difference to how you cope with it on a day-to-day basis.

Relaxation exercise

- Choose a quiet place where you will not be interrupted. Before you start, do a few gentle stretching exercises to relieve muscular tension
- Make yourself comfortable, whether sitting or lying down
- Start to breath slowly and deeply, in a calm, effortless way
- Gently tense, then relax, each part of your body, starting with your feet and working your way up to your face and head
- As you focus on each area, think of warmth, heaviness and relaxation
- Push any distracting thoughts to the back of your mind; imagine them floating away
- Don't try to relax; simply let go of the tension in your muscles

Changing negative thinking

You can learn to think more positively with the 3 Step Approach and this can make a huge difference in your life.

1 Write down your negative thoughts

Write down your negative thoughts as soon as possible. If it is difficult to notice any thoughts, try noticing when you feel down and ask 'What went through my mind just before I started feeling sad?'

2 Ask yourself 'Is what I believe TRUE?'

Ask yourself if everyone would have the same belief. Think of other possible explanations for the event. Try a real-life experiment. For example, if your friend does not phone, call him or her to ask why.

3 Balance each unreasonable thought with a more realistic one

These should be different to the unreasonable beliefs. Try to make them realistic statements. Try to make as many alternatives as possible.

If you are worried about feelings getting out of control, keep track of your feelings, thoughts and behaviour on a "mood chart". This will help you notice anxious or negative thought patterns as soon as they begin, so you can start using your self-help strategies.

Make a list of specific feelings, thoughts and behaviour that sometimes apply to you. Only you will know what to put in these lists, but here are some examples:

<p>Feelings I am aware of; <i>sad, lonely, anxious, upset.</i></p>	<p>Thoughts that bother me; <i>nobody likes me, I am not coping, I am not doing my job well.</i></p>
<p>Negative behaviour; <i>I am trying to do too much at once, I am avoiding people, I am ignoring tasks.</i></p>	<p>Positive checklist; <i>I am coping well, I am in control of my thoughts and feelings, I have achieved ... , I have people to support me.</i></p>

Anxiety

It is normal to feel anxious if you are facing something dangerous or difficult, but it is not usual to feel anxious all the time or to feel that anxiety is ruling your life. Severe anxiety is like a “false alarm” – the body over-reacting to something that is not really dangerous. The most noticeable physical signs are nausea, light-headedness, sweating, a racing heart, palpitations and rapid breathing.

People often react to severe anxiety by avoiding the situation that makes them feel bad. However, this is not helpful in the long run because the more you avoid something, the more difficult it will seem to you. It also limits what you can do and does not give you the chance to discover that the situation was not really dangerous after all. Try making a plan to help you face your feared situation, with the least frightening event to be tackled first.

When people are under stress, there is also a tendency to worry more than usual. Worry and unrealistic or negative thinking can be triggers for anxiety. People who get anxious sometimes think in ways that bring on the anxiety or make it worse. You may also have beliefs about yourself and about other people that are unrealistic. Anxious people can often imagine that other people are judging them harshly.