



Minding your mind while abroad

Working and living in a different country and culture, away from family and friends, can be stressful. It requires adaptability, resiliency, self-sufficiency and good coping skills. Without these, an expat is twice as likely to develop anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions.¹ And because mental and physical health are intertwined, it's essential we mind our minds and bodies while abroad.

Minding your physical health

Poor physical health can lead to an increased risk of developing mental health problems while poor mental health can have a negative impact on physical health. To maintain good physical *and* mental health, it's important to eat well, maintain a healthy weight, exercise, and get enough sleep – not always easy with a demanding schedule and in an unfamiliar country.

Depending on the host country, expats often have to relearn how to eat nutritiously. Staple foods available at home may be scarce and local produce strange and confusing. Expats need to be adventurous and try local produce and regional flavours. It may even be good for health. For example turmeric, the main ingredient in many curries, is purported to have anti-inflammatory and healing properties. Turmeric and another popular Asian staple, ginger, may help fight Alzheimer's, according to recent studies. Researchers point to the fact that rates of Alzheimer's in India are four times lower than in North America, perhaps because people there typically eat 100 to 200 milligrams of curry every day.

Playing a sport is a great way to exercise and meet new people. Your favourite game may not be popular, or even possible, in your new location, so consider participating in a local sport – whether that's soccer, cricket, rugby or table tennis. It's somewhat easier to stay active in many cities where it's often easier and faster to walk or bicycle, however always observe traffic laws and signage.

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Minding your mental health

Whether we're at home or abroad, we need to pay as much attention to our mental health as we do to our physical well-being. It's important to:

- **Take time for yourself.** It's often difficult to maintain work/life balance but it's important to make time for personal and family activities.
- **Be social.** Keep up with social activities. Expand your local support network by meeting new people. Try getting involved with the expat community, joining a local sports team or taking a class.
- **Stay connected.** Living abroad is not only hard for expats; it's also hard on their families and friends at home. Technology has made keeping in touch much easier, but different time zones and busy schedules can present challenges. Consider organizing regular weekend Skype calls with the whole family or a private Facebook page to exchange news and photographs.
- **Connect spiritually.** If you are a member of a faith community, find a place of worship that best meets your family's needs. If you are not a person of faith, meditate or practice mindfulness.
- **Reach out.** There are times when we need professional help. If you or a family member feels overwhelmed by a problem or situation, contact your Employee Assistance Program and ask to speak to a counsellor.

Five Steps to Mindfulness

Mindfulness means living in the moment. It's defined as a state of active, open attention on the present where you observe your thoughts and feelings from a distance without judging them good or bad. It can be difficult to be mindful when we live such hectic, stressful lives, but there are some simple steps we can take.

1. **Take five minutes each day to stop “doing” and experience “being.”** Take a bath, quietly drink some tea, listen to music, meditate or pray. Try mindfulness meditation: sit in a comfortable chair. Empty your mind and focus on your breathing – the “in” breath, then the “out” breath. If your mind begins to wander, refocus on your breathing.
2. **Practice gratitude.** No matter how frantic our day is or how stressed we may feel, there is always something for which we can be grateful. Many people find it helpful to keep a gratitude journal in which they write down things they are thankful for every day. Practicing gratitude helps bring our minds to the present moment and the things that are important in our lives.
3. **Acknowledge feelings.** You don't have to be happy *all* the time. If you're missing home or loved ones, it's natural to feel frustrated or sad. Don't pass judgment on yourself. Allow yourself to feel the way you do at that moment.

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4. **Accept people for who they are.** Don't expect family, friends or coworkers to be perfect. Accept that people will not necessarily act the way you want them to and that things may not go exactly as you had planned. Acceptance doesn't mean resignation. It means not focusing on your opinions, judgments and desire to do things differently.
5. **Be compassionate.** When professional or personal issues overwhelm us, it's easy to think we're the only ones struggling. Having compassion for others makes it easier to think about the positive aspects of our lives. We also need to have compassion for ourselves. When confronted by any difficult situation, we tend to blame ourselves with "what ifs?" This can send us into a state of inaction and eventually depression. Instead, we need to acknowledge our feelings and ask ourselves what we are going to do right now to move forward.

We don't automatically have good physical and mental health just because we don't have a physical or mental health illness. We have to work to keep ourselves healthy – at home and abroad.

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