

Many international travellers experience some degree of culture shock, the psychological stress experienced when adapting to a new culture or when re-entering your own culture after a prolonged absence. Travellers who are dealing with mental health issues before departure may be more prone to this type of stress, so learning to recognize its signs is important.

Changes in diet, activities, sleep and climate can have an impact on psychiatric symptoms and medications. In addition, some medications can be affected by foods you consume in foreign countries. For instance, aged and preserved foods containing high levels of tyramine – such as soy sauce, wine, cheeses, smoked meats and nuts – can cause severe side effects when taken with some anti-depressants.

Eating well, getting adequate sleep and exercise, and avoiding alcohol and recreational drugs can help prevent problems. If you have pre-existing psychiatric issues or disorders, see your health care provider or a travel health clinic to learn about precautionary steps you can take.

Before his trip, Carl was doing well on medication for his bipolar condition. He knew that its effectiveness could be weakened by differences in his stress level and diet, as well as by changes in time zone and climate. So, well before his departure, he researched how he could get psychiatric support abroad if needed. Carl also asked his doctor about adjusting his medication schedule to a new time zone, and about getting a letter for customs officials or overseas medical staff explaining his condition and the drugs he was taking.

