



Where Is She Heading

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OVERWHELMED OVERSEAS!

Ways to cope when all that foreignness is just a little too foreign.

You left home and made your way to a foreign country. You are ready to help and make a difference. You are an international volunteer. You are about to experience so many new things.

Upon arrival, you find that the people don't speak your language and you don't understand street signs, the radio, or TV.

Your roommate either talks incessantly, snores, or doesn't talk at all. Some meals are made of the strangest combination of foods. Your bathroom and toilet are down the hall.

You now have anywhere from 6-15 constant companions who seem to dog your every step 24-7.

Perhaps you experience all of these things. When your first arrived, you smiled. Later, you continued to smile and tell yourself that you are fine. But after a while, you are no longer smiling or breathing.

The next person that looks at you funny is going to get it with both barrels. You are stressed, sleep deprived, scared, intimidated, feeling unworthy or just plain exasperated. You are ready to explode and YOU WANT TO GO HOME - NOW!

Congratulations! You are exactly on schedule. Relax because all you need to do is breathe.

What you are experiencing is not unexpected; it is simply new and therefore a little uncomfortable. After years of experience, agencies like the Peace Corps know that most people can smile and hold their breath for a short time. The usual cycle is 3-5 days, weeks or months into an experience. When a volunteer hits this wall, it is time to breathe, reflect and acknowledge the issues that it bothering them in order to find a solution.

I know where you are. I had my first breakdown/breakthrough three months into my twelve-month trip in 2006. I had held my breath and generally showed my company manners up until that point. After that, I had to be who I was in that exact moment and have a mini, internal temper tantrum.

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When I finally acknowledged that I was lonely, stressed, tired of moving every two weeks and always doing something on someone else's schedule, I could take steps to indulge myself to regain my balance, optimism and the knowledge that everything really was fine.

While you may only be away from home for a few weeks, you may experience the normal cycle and the kaleidoscope of emotions. Courage, my fellow volunteer; it is time to evaluate your situation so you can breathe. Ask yourself if you really do want to go home, but please consider these steps before you head for the airport.

BREATHE DEEPLY - Inhale three times in through your nose and out through your mouth. Now repeat these words. I am fine. I am safe. No one is really trying to annoy me. I just need time to connect with what I need to feel comfortable.

CHECK YOUR LEVELS - Just like servicing a car, make sure all your systems are running efficiently.

Are you hydrated? Strange as it may sound, you may simply be dehydrated. Drink water, lots of water and stay away from caffeine, highly sugared or alcoholic beverages. If you are in the tropics, make mild dilutions of Gatorade or re-hydration salts and drink that almost exclusively for a little while.

Have you eaten recently? Do you find yourself unable to cope with even the most reasonable request when you are hungry? I do! If you aren't thirsty, perhaps you need to eat something and give yourself time to digest. If nothing else, make no decisions until after your next meal.

Are you getting enough sleep? Foreign places, bedrooms, or unaccustomed roommates are a sure prescription for a disturbed sleep. Carry your own pillow or at least a pillowcase. Eyeshades, earplugs, ipod or sleeping pills can help in the short term to get over the hump and better sleep. No one makes good decisions or is at their best when they are sleep deprived.

Is everything okay in the bathroom? Travel can rearrange your clocks, all of them. If things aren't flowing as usual, try these non-prescription solutions.

Drink water

Eat balanced meals

Eat fruit - fresh or dried

Exercise - walk as much as possible

Find quiet time without a deadline when you can be in the room by yourself. When your system has been compromised, sometimes it simply takes longer than you have been allowing.

If the condition persists more than 2-3 days, ask the in-country coordinator to help you find professional advice.

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CAN YOU HEAR ME? - Do you need to get it off your chest? When you need a sympathetic ear, figure out who to talk to that isn't going to laugh or have you committed. Find the person who seems to be absorbing and enjoying the bumps in the road that are driving you crazy. Give yourself a time limit of 5-10 minutes. Ask the other person to simply listen. See if just saying it out loud makes you feel better or helps you find your own answer.

TAKE CARE OF NUMBER ONE - You are the expert on what it takes to regain your balance. Once identified, it is time to negotiate what you need to start breathing again.

Are you bored with a project? - Ask to be assigned something else or with a different volunteer as a partner.

Need some companionship? - Are you part of a small project without a partner or friend? Ask other the volunteers and join them on a work project or outing.

Do you recharge in solitude? - How much quiet time do you prefer daily or at least a few times per week? Ask the local coordinator to excuse you from some group activities and recommend places where you can safely be alone. If you have a roommate, negotiate after work activities to include a balance of solo, quiet time and group activities.

But, I'm on vacation and I feel like a drone in a beehive - WORK WORK WORK! - Ask about an afternoon or several hours off to explore or just sit and contemplate.

Are you missing home? - Find a phone or an Internet café and Skype your family or friends.

Need a Starbucks, McDonalds, a 7-11 or a meal that looks familiar? Ask if there is someplace close that has items from home that you can enjoy, if only for an afternoon. Sometimes just a single coffee can do the trick. If you are truly remote, ask the person who buys the groceries if they can purchase some of your favorite style food.

Are you away from home for a long time? - Pace yourself and schedule regular indulgences. Find the closest movie theater that has English language films, a library or bookstore, athletic club, or a shopping mall that is similar to home. Spend a night or a weekend in a nice hotel to break your routine.

DO NOT FEEL GUILTY - What you are experiencing is normal. You aren't destroying the purpose of your trip with a few splurges. You are simply recharging your batteries. When you take care of yourself, you are able to do the work that you came to do with a smile, regular breathing and a calm heart.

Until next month,
Travel in Safety.
Jane

* I would love to hear about other things that help you stay grounded during foreign volunteer vacations. Please send your comments or tips to wiladyjanes@gmail.com.