

## Chapter 1

# Common Factors of Mental Health Challenges Among International Students

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International educators do not have to look far to find evidence of rising mental health challenges. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) reports that almost one in five U.S. adults experiences mental illness (NIMH 2017). The ratio increases to about one in four when zooming in on populations of average college age (NIMH 2017; Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer 2016) and to about one in three for college freshman specifically (APA 2018; Jackson 2019). It is regularly observed that these numbers are compounding over the years (e.g., Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer 2016). Research indicates that this rise extends to international students, as well, with one study citing a 6 percent increase in international students who report that health issues have impacted their academic performance—and nearly 83 percent of these cases were “mental” or “psychological” (Atack 2018).

While it is difficult to gain accurate data on rates of mental illness among international students—for reasons discussed at length in this volume, including social stigma and cross-cultural communication barriers—available research confirms this is a pivotal topic for university staff who work with international populations. Studies of international students in the United Kingdom find that 36 percent of international students report “poor mental health” (Atack 2018; Kennedy 2018) with the same percentage admitting to having felt suicidal at some point. Accounts of specific mental health disorders or symptoms, such as depression and anxiety, are far from uncommon among international students as well (Poyrazli 2015).

Most professionals who work with international students have likely experienced scenarios similar to those described below:

### **Scenario 1**

Grace is a 25-year-old international student in the second year of her doctoral program. She is from China and has been in the United States for about a year. She recently “disappeared” from her classes and has not responded to emails or phone calls. Her adviser becomes concerned about her, eventually locating her and walking her to the dean’s office. In the dean’s office, she has difficulty communicating in English. She says she struggles in classes and has been sick recently. She feels ashamed because she was a top student in her country of origin, and homework was never a problem for her. She feels guilty for not having successful results on her research project. She has been avoiding her adviser for a long time. Grace says she feels overwhelmed, and she has not been sleeping and eating well for weeks. She says she misses home, but she has not told her parents about her difficulties. She believes she cannot not tell her peers or advisers either. She feels isolated and hopeless. She’s wondered what it would be like to “not need to worry about all these difficulties anymore.”

## Scenario 2

Henry is an 18-year-old international student who is completing his first semester of college. He attended an international school in his country of origin and went on some short trips to other countries as a teenager. Therefore, he thought that the transition to the United States would be a smooth one. He is doing fine academically after coming to the United States, but he is surprised by the difficulty of connecting to his U.S. peers. He finds he does not share common interests or hobbies with his U.S. peers. He is treated like an outsider, which leaves him feeling isolated and depressed. He used to have a big group of friends in his country of origin, which is quite a contrast to his current experience. He doubts whether coming to study abroad in the United States is the right choice for him.

The two scenarios above reflect how everyday stressors can lead to more serious mental health challenges. They highlight some factors that contribute to the mental health struggles that many international students face—such as isolation, communication barriers, academic roadblocks, and new perceptions of self-identity—and common manifestations of these struggles—such as feelings of physical illness and withdrawal from family and other support systems.

This chapter discusses these factors in more depth. It presents common challenges that international students may face and how these obstacles contribute to their mental distress or access to mental health resources, laying the foundation for the chapters and practical advice that follow in this volume. It is worth noting here that all international students have different experiences, so professionals should not assume that these challenges impact everyone in similar ways or to similar degrees.

## SECOND LANGUAGE ANXIETY

It is not novel to highlight that language and communication are two of the biggest concerns on international students' minds. Most international students whose first language is not English relay that they cannot fully understand others in classes and in social interactions. Talking with others in any setting can provoke anxiety, due to hurdles including understanding different accents; “keeping up with” the conversation; and understanding cultural references, slang, and jokes (Hamamura and Laird 2014; Kuo 2011). Many international students are self-conscious of their own English language abilities, consistently wondering, “Did I just make a grammar mistake?” or “Did others notice my accent?” or “Did they understand me?” This second language anxiety is not only common among students who are relatively new to the United States, but also is prevalent in students who have lived in the United States for years and who, from others' perspectives, are fluent in English.

As a result of these and other second language anxieties, many international students choose not to call on- or off-campus offices, including those that can offer resources for addressing mental health issues. It is intimidating to communicate without being able to rely on other clues, such as facial expressions, gestures, or other environmental hints. Particularly for students who come from cultures that commonly combine verbal and nonverbal messages to understand the bulk of communications, talking with someone on the phone means that a portion of the message is missing, which can provoke misunderstandings and confusion. Second language anxieties can lead to isolation not only from one's peers, but also from professionals who can help in times of mental health crises. (For more on connecting international students with mental health professionals, see chapter 3.)

## ISOLATION

Feeling lonely and isolated is common among international students. In a Pennsylvania State University (PSU) study of 198 international students, loneliness was the fourth most common psychological stressor; more than a quarter of respondents reported experiencing such feelings (Poyrazli 2015). A lot of international students describe their life as a pendulum clock moving between the classroom or lab and their own apartment. Sometimes, they do not interact with even one other person in between.

Even during my classes, people hardly spoke to each other. I saw most of them sticking to their folks from their own country or being on their own. By the end of the second month, my enthusiasm had literally died. I felt quite isolated. Like everyone else, I started searching for fellow Indians in my class and on campus. Skepticism had set in. I was not sure if I could adjust in the new environment.

—Moshmi Sanagavarapu, international graduate student from India

Some students explain that the lack of interaction stems from busy schedules, or the nature of their study or work environment. But most of the time, it also relates to second language anxiety in social settings, difficulty identifying common interests with domestic students, confusion about previous interactions with domestic peers (which may make the student more apprehensive to try again in the future), and misunderstandings caused by different cultural communication norms or definitions of friendship. For example, some international students feel confused when their U.S. peers pull out their calendars to try to schedule a “simple” friendly meetup, whereas hanging out with friends does not need a lot of advanced planning in their home culture.

Commonly, international students struggle with small talk, not knowing where to start a conversation with U.S. peers. Others struggle with how to deepen connections after passing the small talk phase. The concept of “boundaries” is often brought up in the process of building or maintaining friendships. This concept can be new to some international students, especially to those who come from collectivist cultures. These international students long for deeper connections and commitments in friendship. They may find disappointment in friendships they build in the United States, which creates senses of loneliness and isolation. Many times, such loneliness and isolation eventually contribute to more severe mental health issues.

## CRASH OF EXPECTATIONS

Oftentimes, the most difficult problems that students face are the ones that catch them by surprise. Yes, most international students expect that studying abroad will be difficult, but many do not realize just how hard it can be or how hardships will affect their self-perceptions until they come to the United States and live in the environment.

Many students have the image of U.S. life as liberal, financially stable, and happy. But when their experiences are quite different from what they expected, the power of this crash is strong enough to put them at low points, even making them doubt their decision to come to the United States, and in many cases think of returning home or dropping out of their institution. This crisis in the initial arrival stage is not uncommon among new international students.

Not only are students' perceptions of their new environments altered, but often so are those of their home countries. Many international students share that only after leaving their home country do they understand what it means to be a person of their nationality. They start to be more aware of how their cultures impact the ways they think, feel, and behave. These observations and insights, on one hand, may help increase self-understanding and self-acceptance. On the other hand, they may make students question their cultural practices, which can shake fundamental beliefs that they have held for a long time. Sometimes, intergenerational conflicts can arise as students and their parents grow apart on values. Identity crises and resulting family conflicts may lead to mental distress.

Beyond changes in perceptions of place and culture, the deviation from self-expectations can be especially hard to deal with. A lot of international students come to the United States as victors of rigorous selection processes, exams, and financial hoops. They have strong senses of mission, such as continued success in the United States (regardless of what "being successful" means to them). Consciously or unconsciously, they have certain expectations for themselves. When they notice that they start to have difficulties in class or may not pass a course for the first time in their academic careers, it is hard to accept that their academic performances are different than anticipated. In these instances, it is almost automatic to feel like a failure. Shame, guilt, and worries arise quickly, which can be hard to bear.

Identity crises can also happen when students are no longer practicing hobbies or studying topics they enjoyed in their country of origin. For example, a student may have been a dancer in his or her country of origin, but has not danced since starting to study abroad. In other cases, students decide to change their career paths due to restrictions (e.g., some research labs will not accept international students due to the sensitivity of research subjects to homeland security) or other considerations (e.g., how easy or difficult it is to find a job in the field as an international student).

Some cases of identity crisis involve students developing new understandings of sexual orientation and gender issues after living in a more liberal environment or being exposed to new knowledge and facts; in the PSU study, 6 percent of respondents noted sexual orientation as a "psychological concern" (Poyrazli 2015). Other cases of identity crisis relate to being "given" new identities (e.g., being a racial minority in their department or on campus). For example, students from Africa talk about their experiences of being treated as African Americans by their peers and experiencing for the first time assumptions and stereotypes sometimes attached to this identity in the United States. Regardless of the cause, old senses of self are often challenged, and new ounces of identity gradually develop as a result of adjusting and adapting. The process itself can be intense and create mental well-being crises.

The crash of expectations can also apply to the adjustment process itself. Many international students hold the belief that the adjustment process is linear; they will struggle at the beginning, but then they will overcome these struggles, feel adjusted, and everything will be great afterward. However, as scholars point out, the adjustment process is not necessarily straightforward (Wang et al. 2018; Black and Mendenhall 1991; Rhinesmith 1975). Instead, it more closely resembles a U shape or a roller coaster with waves of ups and downs. Without this understanding, many international students are caught by the surprise of nonlinear adjustment experiences, and they tend to internalize those "deviated experiences" as their own faults, which leads to intense mental distress.

As a result of these crashes of various expectations and identity crises, many international students report that they feel huge senses of loss. The loss of their family (since family is far away), the loss of familiarity (to their old environment and to their old routine), the loss of confidence (they may suddenly

feel like a child, not knowing how to express themselves or what to expect), the loss of their old notion of self (they may not be the top student any more), and the loss of direction (not knowing where they will be after graduation since it is uncertain whether they will find a job in the United States). These layers of loss contribute to worries, doubts, and senses of not belonging.

## **FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS**

A serious challenge that many international students face is maintaining long distance relationships with their family members, partners, and in some instances, their spouses and children. In the PSU sample, 23 percent of international students reported family concerns and 15 percent reported relationship problems. For married international students, this rate rose to more than one in four (Poyrazli 2015). This contributing factor of poor mental health is amplified among international graduate students.

Many international students mention that they come to their new institution with a mission from the family—staying in the United States after graduation. This mission may align with their own goals, but not always. Students feel stuck between following their own hearts and fulfilling others' wishes. This struggle may complicate the dynamic with their family members, which makes it hard for them to tell their family about their true thoughts, feelings, or difficulties, let alone ask for support and help.

International students often choose not to disclose their challenges to their family members for a variety of reasons: (1) they do not want family members to worry; (2) their family members may not be able to relate to their challenges; and (3) they think their family members cannot give effective advice because they are not familiar with the host environment. It is common for international students to note that their families think they are having fun and living a good life, while the truth is that they are suffering, failing, or feeling confused and desperate. Struggling with long distance relationships can further contribute to strong senses of loss, loneliness, and isolation, which in turn fuels mental distress.

## **FINANCIAL INSECURITY**

International students are not eligible for federally-funded or most privately-funded financial aid, which limits their options for financial security while they study abroad. A survey of international students at a Minnesota university revealed that almost 60 percent of respondents experienced stress related to finances in the past year, by far the most commonly noted factor (Johanson 2010). Also, being informed that many positions or companies do not consider international students as candidates when they apply for jobs can be devastating to international students. The limitation on job options, extra requirements on documentations, and limited financial support fuel insecure feelings.

## **CONCLUSION**

Understanding the factors that often contribute to mental health challenges faced by international students lays the foundation for advisers and other professionals to best address these needs. Isolation from family or U.S. peers, intense or extended distress from culture shock, and various insecurities can all exacerbate poor mental health. (Additional cultural contributors are discussed in the next chapter.) Moreover, language and communication barriers can make it difficult for international students who need or want help—either in the form of counseling or dependable social networks—to receive it.

The rest of the chapters in this volume approach these challenges through various angles, examining opportunities to either mitigate mental health issues through preventative measures or connect students already experiencing crises with the help they need.

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