



Struggling and Studying

How Chinese Overseas Students Cope with Depression

T01 Social Responsibility

Dalian Maple Leaf International School,

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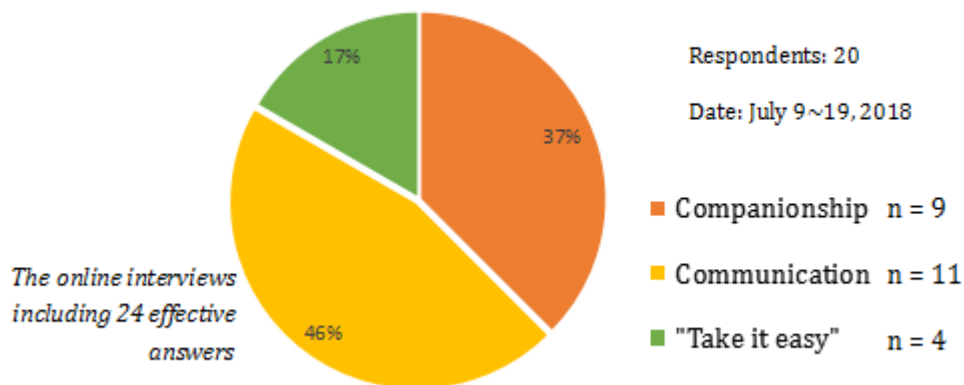
Wandering on the campus of INTI International University Nilai in Malaysia, Yuan Tian is pursuing further studies in the alien country by herself. While adapting to the new environment, she is eager for acceptance of her classmates and the local people, which has been difficult and stressful. With the growing pressure, Tian has been overwhelmed and even depressed, “I believe every overseas student had suffered from psychological issues.”

As the Common Application (Common App) for 2018-2019 college admissions is available on August 1st, the new application season has started. Many Chinese students who plan to pursue advanced studies abroad are busy with the application process. Starting from 2013, more than 20,000 Chinese students have applied for universities through the Common App every year. With the rapid development of the quality of life in China, more and more students are choosing to go abroad for further education.

However, reports of Chinese students abroad committing suicides have drawn great attention of the public in recent years. A survey released in 2013 by Yale researchers found that 45 percent of Chinese international students on campus reported symptoms of depression, and 29 percent reported symptoms of anxiety. The psychological well-being of students is now a major concern for students and families planning to study abroad.

In twenty separate interviews with overseas students via video chat on WeChat, insufficiency in communication and companionship are the two most notable factors that contributed to the psychological issues among Chinese international students.

Suggestions about Adjusting Mental State for Chinese Overseas Students



Communication

Amy Liu, a Chinese overseas student who has been studying in Australia since the age of 14, is now attending a public senior high school in Canberra.

According to Liu, three of her Chinese overseas friends were in serious depression, resorting to self-harm.

If what Liu said was true that the pressure of studying there was far less than that in China, what had been the last straw that led to their depression?

“Communication,” Liu answered without hesitation, “I seldom saw those three students participate in any conversations with the natives actively. One of them barely spoke to anyone in English in 3 years of school.”

On the contrary, despite her poor English, Liu’s outgoing nature enabled her to bravely interact with the new environment. “I guess it isn’t how well you speak English that really matters, it is how willing you are trying to communicate,” said Liu.

As a Chinese overseas student who has successfully been through the frustrating yet inevitable period of depression, Liu reaffirmed the importance of communication, “It was communication that brought me valuable friends that helped me through the most difficult times.”

According to Liu, communication, which can provide one with acceptance and a sense of belonging, is crucial for overseas study and maintaining mental health.

Though some students are able to solve their problems successfully through communication, there are still cases where troubles escalate. Grace Tang, a second-year student at University College London, shared her unpleasant flat-share experience. Tang is known to have a nice personality, and people feel comfortable around her. “It is the first time that I’ve met such an overwhelming problem,” she recalled the distasteful flat-share.

Tang and a friend of her, also a Chinese student, were sharing an apartment with two Asian-Europeans. Due to discrepancies in their cultural background, Tang and her friend were not into the habit of checking for quality guarantee period of vegetables. There were expired vegetables left in the fridge by accident.

“They literally went through all the things we put into the fridge checking for expired food,” Tang thinks that the roommates were overreacting. “Whenever they

point out our problems, we would correct them immediately in order to make up for our carelessness earlier.” They tried to communicate and explain the situation, yet discussions did not go on smoothly. They were having more and more quarrels over trivia, “they even blamed us for the stains on the range hoods!”

During the video chat through WeChat, Tang calmly presented her life, “we had to live under great pressure, being afraid of them criticizing us again.” Looking backward, she sighed, “I felt wronged, and for weeks, I was short-breathed and suffering from heartaches from time to time. I started to lose sleep and feel depressed.”

Clearly, communication is not a feasible solution in this case, “I never thought a flat-share would cause so much trouble.” According to Tang, quarrels and stress in flat-shares are quite common among overseas students. Her flat-share experience also reflects the current situation of a majority of Chinese overseas students.

Chinese students abroad are undergoing more stress than people normally conceive, due to the differences in their cultural backgrounds and possible prejudice against Chinese students. According to the survey conducted by Yale researchers, depression happens 32% more often among Chinese international students than the others. Both dimensionless tasks at school and rough adaptations to the foreign environment are undermining the psychological well-being of the students.

Companionship

When the obstacles to communication cause students to feel distressed and lonely, the companionship from their parents would play a vital role to improve their state of mind. However, according to the Chinese Ministry of Education, 608,400 Chinese students left the country to pursue advanced studies in 2017, and a recent report shows that 309,000 of them are studying in the United States alone, without their parents.

Dr. Rui Ma, a psychologist from the General Hospital of Ningxia University, had provided consultations for mental disorders including depression and bipolar disorder (a mental illness causing patients to shift between ecstasy and depression) for more than 10 students studying abroad in just 6 months.

Speaking of companionship, as Dr. Ma illustrated, after discovering that their children are undergoing challenging times, parents should give their children as much company as possible. “Sometimes the best thing you can offer an international student,

is your support and company,” said Dr. Ma. If parents can always hold a tolerant attitude and give show more consideration for their children, then Chinese overseas students would be more willing to communicate and seek help.



*A second-year college student in California sitting in the classroom, staring at her book.
ADAA/ Anxiety and Depression Association of America*

Besides parents' efforts in keeping in touch with the students, in the actual situation, the distance usually separate overseas students from their parents. Dr. Ma encourages Chinese international students to actively seek for company by communicating with their friends and families more frequently and sharing more about their conditions during school time.

With Dr. Ma's consultation which emphasizes the importance of companionship, many of her patients have been reported to be in better mental states. "For many of them, acquiring the sense of companionship is the foundation for their brighter life abroad," Dr. Ma believes.

Usable Resources

Chinese students have become the largest international student group in the world, about 32% of the general population, this brings their psychological problems to the attention of more people. Besides campus health centers, many related organizations

and institutions are offering students feeling depressed or suicidal resources to address their issues.

“Take it one step at a time, care for yourself, seek support and have fun.” The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA), a U.S. nonprofit organization, has been constantly offering educational information and resources for teenagers with anxiety and depression, it helps students to get in touch with mental health professionals in their neighborhoods and get effective consultations.

Online medical centers, like the Mayo Clinic, offers great help for troubled students as well. The Mayo Clinic provides free professional consultations online concerning psychological issues, and information about college depression are also available for students to correctly understand and cope with it.

In conclusion, the deep exploration into the experiences of overseas Chinese students revealed the common factors, communication and companionship, closely related to one’s mental health. They are the places wherein strength, courage and happiness are drawn by overseas Chinese students, to painstakingly pursue their dreams and to gain a foothold in a place distant from home.

However, just like what Tang encountered, there are still cases in which problems cannot be addressed through communication nor through companionship. Lessons should be learned that some external factors, such as the conflicts between cultures and entrenched prejudice, are beyond an individual’s control. Chinese overseas students still have a long way to go, struggling and suffering to address their emotional depression.