

SOCIAL AND PERSONAL ISSUES IN INDIA

DEPRESSION

If you suffer from (or have had history of) mental health issues, have taken (or take) any prescription drugs for issues related to depression, or suffer from anxiety under stress, it is important that you take responsibility for your own well being. Before you leave, talk to the program staff so that they are aware of your history. It is important if you have been on any medication (for mental health or any other health issues) to have a copy of your medical history with you. This can help if any emergency should arise, so that you can be put on medications that you have taken in the past with success and can avoid those medications to which you have had adverse reactions. It is never advisable to take yourself off any medications without consulting your doctor.

LBGT IDENTITY

Homosexual relationships are generally not publicly recognized in South Asia. There are pockets of acceptance among progressives, and there are homosexual support groups in cosmopolitan areas such as Bombay, Calcutta and New Delhi. But for the most part homosexuals are not as "out" in South Asia as they are in the States. "Gay identity" may have significance in the States, created by a lot of generalizations and stereotypes; but in South Asia the mere concept of personal identity is quite different. What may be confusing is that the private space and physical affection among members of the same gender are often much closer and intimate than in America. This means that women or men will think nothing of holding your (women or men respectively) hand, hugging you, playing or braiding your hair, and sitting very closely to you on vehicles. Any of these behaviors could be construed as sexual ones in an American context, but they should not be in India. This is not to say that outright homosexual behavior never occurs in India. Of course it does. South Asians will generally assume that some day you will marry and have a family, just as they have. You should not take this personally if, as a LBGT individual, your views on marrying are quite different from most of theirs. Because Indian social norms are very traditional in many ways, differences in lifestyle are often not an option.

WOMEN'S HEALTH ISSUES

Body Image

Notions of body image and privacy are very different in South Asia. Often the greatest compliment a woman may give you is to jiggle your arms or pinch your cheeks and tell you how fat and healthy you look. Others may ask why you aren't fatter and may wonder if you're sick, becoming over-concerned with your health and eating habits. South Asians, despite the cultural emphasis placed on physical modesty, will generally think nothing of pointing out your blemishes, suggesting various turmeric-based remedies to help your complexion. They will remark on your body hair (if you choose not to shave) and will not hesitate to finish the sentence, "You would be so much prettier if." The best way to fend off your insulted pride is to

keep a sense of humor. None of these sorts of comments are meant as insults; they may even be markers of an increasingly intimate relationship. Learn to respond to such comments with a bit of humility, a jab of humor, and a LOT of perspective.

Gynecologists

If you are in need of seeing a gynecologist, do not hesitate! It is important to keep in mind that no one on the program would suggest a doctor without previous association or good recommendations.

Menstruation

Do not be surprised if traveling and adjusting to a new environment plays havoc with your menstrual cycle. Some women will have their period as usual. Some may find that their cycle becomes infrequent or absent, while others may find that their previously erratic cycle becomes regular. Do not be alarmed by the change in your cycle. However, should you have any concern you can consult a doctor. Maxi pads are becoming increasingly popular and are easy to find in medical and grocery shops. Tampons are not readily available; so if this is the method you are most comfortable with, you might bring enough to get you through one or two cycles. Tampons and disposable pads should be wrapped in newspaper before being thrown away. For better or for worse, plastic bags are prolific in South Asia. You may want to throw all used products in a plastic bag before tying it up and throwing it in the general trash. If you are unsure where to put your waste—please ask! It can be very uncomfortable to get your period in the middle of a train ride and discover you have nothing but newspaper to catch the flow. So take the advice from those of us who have had to improvise: you should carry a few tampons or pads with you while you travel!

Yeast Infections

The change of climate in South Asia, the use of antibiotics, and the method of using water rather than toilet paper can trigger yeast infections. Even if you have never had a yeast infection, it is not surprising to experience one in India. While gynecologists are available, if you are prone to infections, you may want to bring a familiar brand with you to rid the infection quickly. Generally women tend to be more comfortable wearing cotton rather than synthetic underwear, especially if you use the non-western method of cleaning yourself. Canesten cream is available cheaply in India at pharmacies as an over-the counter remedy.