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THE STAND
SEX, DRUGS AND KIDS ABROAD

So many young people, teens and early twenties, travel abroad. Whether sightseeing in Europe or soul searching in Nepal, many parents are worried about terrorism and mysterious viruses. They really have other things to worry about.

Young people abroad are much more prone to drug and alcohol use and abuse. Kids are removed from friends, family, school and a structured environment. They face the challenge of a different language and culture. They often get less discipline and a greater license to do what they will. Drugs and alcohol are usually readily available and teenagers are prone to indulge. In one study of young travelers to Southeast Asia, 75% said they took drugs during their trip. As a result, and for other reasons, as many as one in eight of young travelers may have an episode of psychiatric symptoms including sleeping disturbances and depression during the trip abroad. The effects are instant while traveling and carry over and continue to be problems when the kids come home.

Many young traveling students and teenagers get pregnant abroad. Said one doctor: "My students aren't getting Malaria: they're getting pregnant." Less structure and discipline, a different culture and values can create an atmosphere of license where anything goes, including sex. Consequently, the pregnancies. Many doctors equip traveling women with a prescription for pills that can be taken after unprotected sex, so common is the occurrence and the resulting problem. No matter the moral structure at home, it seems to be far different abroad.

Many college students who spend considerable time abroad studying develop even more serious problems. Some experience acute cases of Anorexia and Bulimia. Some such students even require emergency evacuation for medical treatment at home. Travel abroad produces an every day stress which results from having to find and sleep in different places, eating strange foods, figuring out the scheduling and lifestyle differences and witnessing poverty or other human conditions which may not be so apparent in America.

Doctors also describe what they call a MAGICAL THINKING PHENOMENON. Young travelers develop a subconscious feeling that what they do abroad doesn't really count or have consequences. They do things they never would at home such as engage in casual sex, ride a bike without a helmet or ride a motorcycle while barefoot. Inevitably, problems result. Another doctor calls it the LOVE BOAT THING. Such a phenomenon can lead to casual sex from which 10% or even more of returning travelers will acquire sexually transmitted infections. In that casual approach and environment, sexual assault can readily occur to the significant harm of young women.

To be sure, educators and doctors preach common sense and warning. Such good advice often goes unheeded. The magical thinking seems to prevail and virtually anything goes while abroad. Parents of such young travelers must be actively involved and must provide standards. Parents should evaluate the stresses and the support and medication available at the destination abroad. There should be e-mail and phone support readily available. Students should be advised and checked by doctors, travel specialists and have access to student health services wherever they are.

Travel abroad is fun, educational and challenging. It is something every young person should do, but do sensibly, carefully and with the full involvement of concerned parents. A trip abroad should produce lifetime memories, not lifetime scars.