

Running Head: LIFE SKILLS

Life Skills Learnt

In France

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December 31, 2008

On a recent solo trip to the south of France (with a few days jaunt into Italy) I was surprised to discover that some of the travel survival tips I learnt could apply so well to everyday life. Travelling can be stressful even if one knows the language well (which I didn't), and is familiar with the country (I wasn't though I had some familiarity with the French culture). What I learned relates to basic physical and psychosocial needs but what was remarkable is how much of a difference it can make when applied to day to day living. When under duress I believe we need to pay more attention to our basic needs in order to decrease rather than increase the stress our bodies are under.

The first basic survival skill I rediscovered was the importance of water and of having some with me at all times. The brain (as well as other body parts) works better when it is hydrated enabling better decision making and coping skills (thankfully I didn't have to test this knowledge but easily could have). In Europe fresh drinking water is not always readily available and bottled can be expensive. Exploring the sights can mean a lot of walking in the heat, dehydrating the body. I managed to get lost in Rome wandering around Palatino (a huge area of ruins near the Colosseum that didn't seem to have any exits or at least the Italians did not feel the need to have any signs to locate them), it was almost three hours in 30 plus Celsius heat before I found my way out. Each time I headed in the direction of a familiar landmark and went down in amongst the ruins I would come up in the wrong place and no closer (or even farther) to where I wanted to go. It seemed that nobody (that was English speaking) was exactly sure of where they came in. I don't think I was ever more thankful to have water with me. The experience reminded me of the importance of water and that even though it is usually readily obtainable, especially in North America, often I don't drink as much as I should.

Hand in hand with water for survival is food; it is easy to include something to eat with you (biscuits, cookies or crackers travel well and can provide energy in times of need). (I even know of some OR nurses that keep a stash in their locker for those nights of never ending surgeries.) I made the mistake of not ensuring I had something with me before the aforementioned time I was lost and was feeling a little desperate as it had been about eight hours since an unsubstantial breakfast (Italians don't seem to find the need for those either); I had been walking for five to six of those hours in the heat. As an afterthought this may have contributed to the difficulty I was having finding an exit. I would hope that I have learned from this experience for future travels but it also makes me realize how easy it is to get distracted by the demands of the day and not pay attention to nutritional needs; I find I function smarter and more efficiently when I have paid attention to fuelling my brain.

Once food and water have been taken care of another important basic need comes to mind, and often was in my thoughts in Europe. It is important to always know where the closest toilet is or learn enough of the language to be able to ask (and don't neglect taking advantage when you are in a restaurant or café; where they are usually clean and free). Not all toilets are the same and half way through my trip I thought I should have started a washroom photo documentary. Just when I thought I had seen every type of facility and discovered every possible way to flush a toilet I would come across a new experience; sometimes it was a challenge just to figure out how to flush. One might push or pull a knob or lever from any number of obscure places or step on a hidden button or pedal on the floor. It was also amazing how small a space one can fit a toilet and sink in to. Even though washrooms are readily available on this side of the world how often

have I not taken the time for this fundamental need, especially when I am busy at work? I think nurses are notorious for this but taking the time to go not only relieves stress (in more ways than one) but it is much healthier overall to allow our bodies to function as designed.

Apart from the physical demands of the body there are some psychosocial needs that can increase or decrease stressors depending on how they are dealt with. One of the most important of these is communication or the need to be understood. I found it was better to ask, and ask again until I was sure I was in the right place; just because I had been given directions or my ticket said a location to be it didn't mean that it was correct (if it didn't feel right it probably wasn't). For example, when I arrived at terminal B at the airport in Rome as per my ticket I soon got the feeling this was not right; no check-in counters for Nice, France had opened and it was now less than two hours before an international flight. Sure enough, after inquiring I found out that it was terminal A that I was supposed to be at. In England I had been told by an airport employee to go to Gate 5 but when I arrived there, there was no activity that would indicate a flight was leaving from this gate. After inquiring I was told it was actually Gate 86 which (thankfully) wasn't far away; apparently there were signs to Gate 5 which was close to Gate 86 which had no posted signs. Proper communication applies to all aspects of life and taking time for clarification is so vital but often doesn't happen; possibly because both parties think they are understood. I have made much more of a point of clarifying since my experiences travelling and found people would rather be enquired of again than be misunderstood (especially at work things tend to run much smoother).

Another discovery is the fact that life does not always go according to plan so, especially for major arrangements, have a plan B (or make one quickly if plan A seems to be failing). It is often advantageous to also have a plan C or even a plan D in the wings (from my own personal experience). I have found in almost any situation that when you know you have an alternative plan it relieves the pressure and stress and makes it easier to focus on the original one. My first day in Antibes, France I was having difficulty finding the #8 bus going the direction I needed to go, and it wasn't just a matter of crossing the street to take one in the opposite direction as Europe has a mass of one way streets that run on angles to each other (gives a new appreciation to streets running north/south and east/west). The directions from the bus driver did not make sense even though he knew some English and the French couple who didn't know any English weren't much help though very pleasant and full of smiles. After a long hot day in town coupled with lack of sleep from the lengthy flight, suddenly I felt very overwhelmed (this was the first of a few "you crazy woman, what are you doing here by yourself" moments). After a quick moment I decided this was not productive; I had seen a few taxis and had an address so made a plan B. This immediately took the pressure off and allowed me to think clearer. I was able to figure out the bus system and managed to find my way using it as well as learning a valuable life skill I am finding very helpful to reduce stress in life and work today.

The last tip I feel is important is to give oneself extra time. So often I rush and try to squeeze too much into my day, not allowing a reasonable amount of time to accomplish things. All this does is leave me feeling rushed and stressed and not feeling satisfied about what I have accomplished. Also, when diversions get in the way (and

they will) I haven't the time to deal with them. In France & Italy I so often was not sure about where I was going or how things were going to work out but I found leaving myself extra time made such a difference. If I ended up in the wrong place I still had time to get to the right place, or if I arrived early or had to wait I had a book with me to unwind and pass time (much less stressful than being late). When I thought I had lost my passport just hours before leaving for Italy I had given myself ample time to pack. This meant I had the time to go through my entire belongings and room numerous times as well as stay calm enough (barely) to realize that it probably wasn't stolen as nothing else was missing from my bag. (I did find it in an obscure zippered pocket in my shoulder bag, apparently a safe place to put it.) I can assure you I was also working on plan B at this time.

Not meeting our basic physical and psychosocial needs adds unnecessary stress to our lives. During my travels some of these needs were brought to my attention in a very fundamental way as it often felt like basic survival. The significant point though is to realize the importance of those basic needs, meet and apply that to everyday life to reduce not only stress but also the ill effects of stress on health. As a nurse I am in the forefront of being an exemplar of good health and yet am I being a good role model? Taking the time for basic needs of food, water & elimination is fairly simple and does lead to better health and reduced stress. Stress is also reduced by good communication and allowing sufficient time to accomplish tasks. Life is more than accomplishments, the journey is just as important as the end result (maybe more), and if you think about it, the necessary things do tend get done, no matter how much stress was involved.