Letter to IYFD students or youth/family development workers

Every internship experience is different especially when you add a new country, culture, language, and job description to the mix. Rather than write a general letter to future students and Y&F development workers, I want to share a few tips that I have learned through my Peace Corps experience and that I feel others could benefit from in their own cross-cultural internships. I am definitely not an “expert” in working cross-culturally, but hopefully, future students can learn something from my journey and forge an even better path for themselves as a result.

Advice for Future Peace Corps Volunteers or Youth and Family Development Workers:

1) Always use “yes” as your first answer. Especially at the beginning of your service, this is a great way to push yourself into situations that are way beyond your comfort zone and to build relationships with host country nationals. At the same time, do not completely forget that you do have the option of saying “no” as well.

2) You need to pick people in your community and just trust them. Yes, they could easily burn you, and you might never understand why, but you need to learn to trust again. Being alone in a foreign country and culture is just not an option. You will get nowhere by yourself.

3) Know that this is YOUR experience. If something is not working, advocate for yourself, and change your situation! No one knows what happens in your community and in your daily life besides you. Speak up!

4) If possible, always pick host-country nationals as your primary support structure. Try not to spend all your weekends in the capital with other ex-pats and have their negativity wear off on you. Instead, use that time to build relationships in your
community or with host families. That IS why you wanted to be a PCV or international worker, right?

5) Start a blog and post consistently. It allows you to reflect on your work, boosts your morale that things ARE actually happening, and helps your friends and family back home understand your situation a little bit better.

6) Don’t share all your negative experiences with people back home. They will only get frustrated that they can not do more to help you and might subconsciously start encouraging you to just come home. Lean on other PCVs in-country who understand the situation better, or seek support from your fellow IYFDers.

7) Listen, but also be heard. Do not let yourself, your needs, and your feelings be trampled on by others.

8) Realize that you will fail every day in some way, but you need to learn to accept that and move forward.

9) Recognize that there are some aspects of the culture that you will never really understand but many others that will provide lasting memories and experiences.

10) Do what you enjoy and hopefully you can find projects through that – for example, music, sports, hobbies, and so forth. People will be drawn to your passion, excitement, and energy.

11) Be strategic with your vacation days and use them during dry spells or to break-up difficult periods in your service. These can offer important times to rejuvenate and to reflect on or even revise your own perspectives. However, be aware that it might be an emotional struggle to jump back into things in your community after you have been “on the outside”.


12) The first year can be quite difficult, but do not quit. It really does get easier especially when you start to integrate into the community and gain a better grasp of the language and culture. There is a reason the Peace Corps is a two-year program; it takes at least the first year to learn the language, build relationships, gain respect in the community, and understand how things work. But if you must quit, try not to leave on a bad note. Waiting for those good times to come will just keep pushing you forward to persevere through the challenges.

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