

Charlie

BSc Psychology

**A Month in Fiji – My Mental Health volunteering
project**

My project was with the charity Think Pacific, who work in partnership with the Fijian Ministry of Health. I was based in Nubuyanitu village, in the Navosa province of the Vitu Levu island in Fiji. I lived with a host family within the village while running mental health workshops there and became truly immersed in their culture and ways of life.

Suicide is the number one cause of death amongst 18–24-year-olds in Fiji, and with the country only having one psychiatric facility, mental health awareness is crucial. My village was an hour and half away from the nearest medical centre, and so health care, especially mental health care, is not easily accessible. Our goal was to raise awareness of mental health, and to share and educate the village.

For three and a half weeks, Monday to Friday, myself and a group of 25 other volunteers, alongside the youths of the village (young people aged 16 to 35), would run mental health workshops. Topics ranged from defining mental health conditions, to how mental and physical health intertwine with each other, to suicide awareness. With many mental health terms, such as anxiety, not having a direct translation in Fijian, it was important to establish what mental health illnesses are first. The workshops lasted three hours each morning and were discussion and activity based, allowing the youth to engage with the material.

The topics I personally helped run were ‘Training our Emotional Fitness’ and ‘Extra Curricular Activity Creation.’ For my first session on emotional fitness, we focused on how we can define emotional fitness and brainstormed together negative and positive events that would impact it. We discussed ways we could overcome any negative events, and why having stronger emotional fitness is better for our mental wellbeing. For my second session on extra-

curricular activities, we discussed how we could begin to run more activities within the community and village, and how these would improve the wellbeing of the people attending. We created a Dragon's Den style gameshow activity, where each group would present their idea of an extra-curricular activity to judges, who gave positive feedback on their ideas. The workshop led to the creation of evening sessions, such as a 'ladies' night' for the women of the village, yoga sessions, and arranged sports game, like village volleyball.

My month in Fiji has taught me the true meaning of community. This project gave me the opportunity to improve my public speaking skills, as I was presenting these workshops to a group of 40 to 50 people, and directly alongside that, my confidence. It has helped me gain experience in an area of Psychology I'm particularly passionate about, while allowing me to see parts of the world I would never have imagined seeing. It pushed me out of my comfort zone in the best way possible and granted me an outlook onto life that I never would have experienced in the Western world. Some examples include practicing Sabbath every Sunday and undertaking traditional ceremonies such as the sevusevu ceremony. I learnt different teaching techniques, which were particularly useful when it came to breaking down complex terms, so that we could overcome the language barrier between us volunteers and the youths. One of the most effective techniques included relating terms to the village's culture, so that it gave the youth personal and relevant examples to help guide their understanding.

I gained large amounts of transferable skills from my time in Fiji that will stay with me into my future employments, from public speaking to session planning. I would recommend this experience to anyone, and I am beyond grateful that I had the opportunity to go.