

## **Mental Health**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

JET participants come to Japan and engage in a completely new environment and a culture dissimilar to their own. This experience may cause changes within their lives, whether they be physical, mental, or otherwise.

The changes in the mental health that JETs experience, both living and working in Japan, can also affect their ability to represent their country and culture to the Japanese people, and their performance at work.

This report will explore the following areas:

1. The current state of JET mental health.
2. The current services provided to JETs regarding mental health.
3. The role Prefectural Advisors play in the mental health of JETs.
4. Most common stressors for JETs
5. Provide suggestions to improve the mental health of JETs

### **METHOD**

The data and analysis for this report is based on an on-line survey distributed to 396 people with a 92.4% completion rate conducted in February of 2011. Of the respondents, 361 were ALTs, 30 were CIRs and one was an SEA. The highest percentage of respondents, 40.7%, were first-year JETs, while 25.3% were in their second year, 19.2% were in their third year, 11.0% were in their fourth year and 3.8% were in their fifth year. The types of questions asked were multiple choice, open-ended questions, and multiple answer. The distribution methods were via email, the social networking site Facebook, ajet.net, prefectural JET websites, and word of mouth.

### **RESULTS**

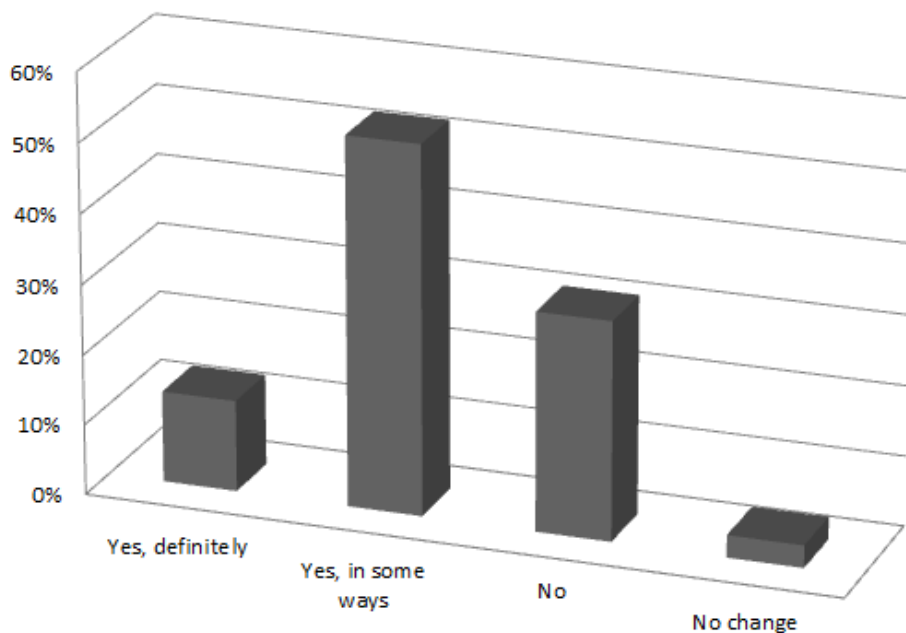
#### **JETs Self Assessment of their Mental Health**

During the course of the survey, AJET asked survey-takers questions whereby they assessed their own mental health. When asked about stressors, JETs highlighted the following points as the most stressful:

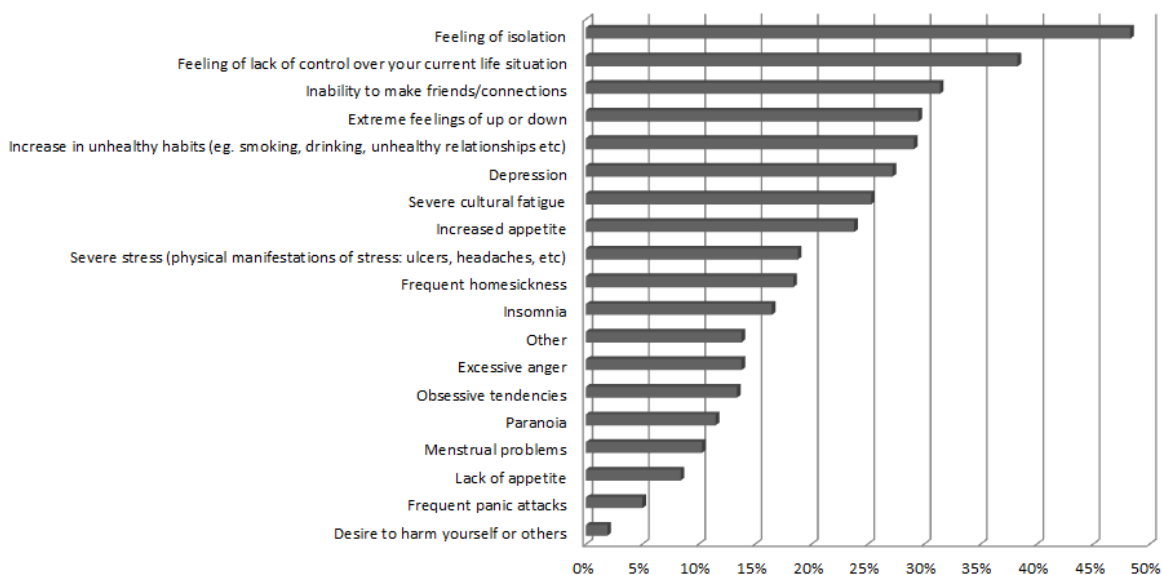
- language barrier or language difficulties
- social isolation
  - living alone,
  - being apart from family, friends and other JETs
  - difficulty in making friends
- lack of communication
- lack of privacy
- medication or services unavailable in Japan

- body image issues - comparison to the Japanese image

When asked if life in Japan was more stressful than their pre-JET life most people (52.6%) answered “yes, in some ways” with 65.5% overall indicating an increase in stress.



JETs were also asked what sort of undesirable symptoms they had developed since starting on JET.



As can be seen from the graph, some of the major causes of poor mental health were language barrier, lack of privacy, work-related issues, isolation, physical changes and a lack of friends and family.

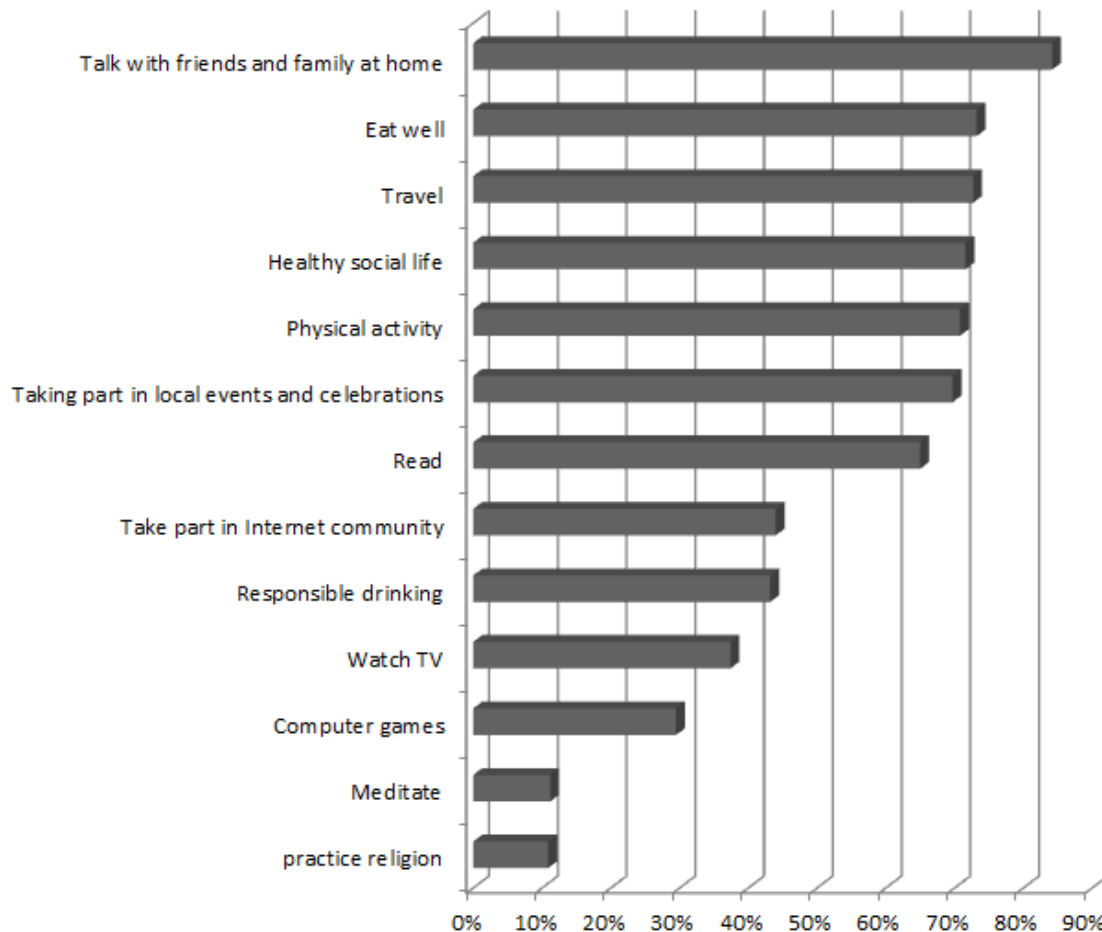
*For example, one JET said in regards to isolation:*

“[T]he daily reminder via stares on the train, bus, by my students, and faculty that I am not Japanese... I also miss my home culture where no one stare[s] or averts eye contact when caught.” (1st year ALT, Hiroshima)

Another JET commented on their mental health regarding their self-image, stating, “I have developed eating disorder-like tendencies here that weren't present before, because I am so self-conscious about the way my body is judged by others here.” (4th year CIR, [removed])

### Maintaining Good Mental Health

Encouragingly, most respondents indicated they have ways of keeping good mental health, as can be seen from the graph below:



From these results, it appears JETs associate mainly social activity with good mental health.

### Current Health Services

75.2% of JETs participants who took the Mental Health survey indicated that they have not used any of the JET mental health services on offer during their time on JET. Of those who selected that they have used a JET mental health service, 67.5% have used them only once or twice during their time on JET.

The Prefectural Advisor system seems to be the most used of the systems available as more than double the number of respondents chose that they had used this service in comparison to any of the others listed (further discussed in the section entitled **Prefectural Advisors**).

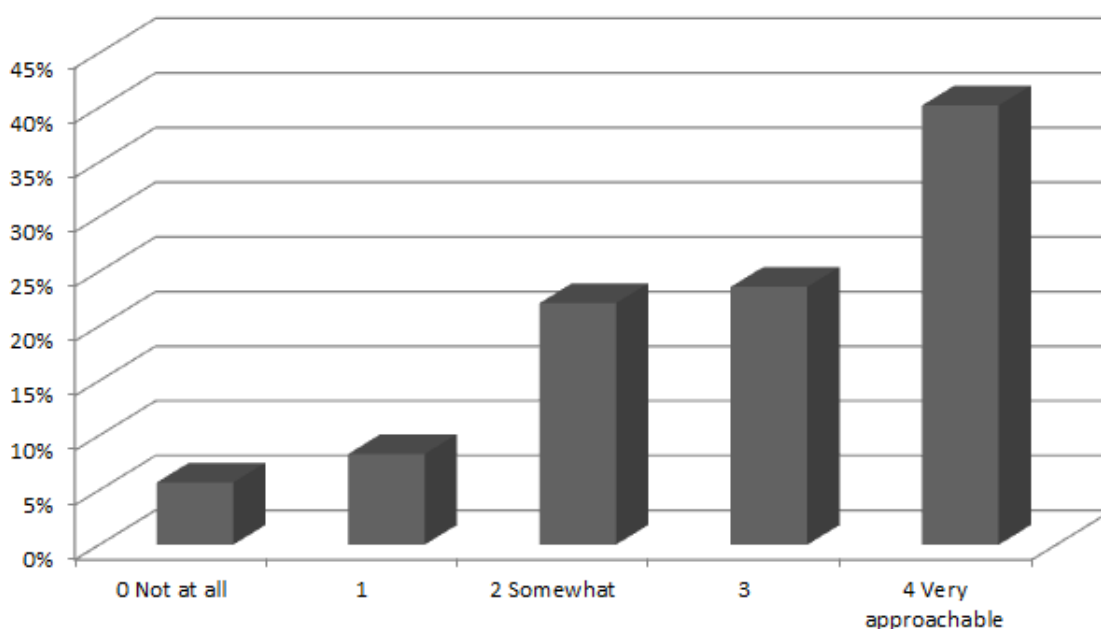
21 of the 56 JETs who left comments regarding additional mental health services they would like available, mentioned professional counselling or mental health specialists.

CLAIR, through its links with the CSC and other health professionals, has the ability to help JETs find professional counselling. However, only five people indicated that they had used CSC specifically and 20 respondents indicated that they were using non-JET related professional counselling. The number of JETs who specifically commented they wanted access to professional counselling was almost the same as the number who have used counselling, which suggests that more advertisement of professional health care is necessary.

In general, the current services provided by CLAIR appear to reassure JET participants that they will have someone to turn to for advice and help.

### **Prefectural Advisors**

AJET asked respondents to rate, on a five-point scale, “How approachable is your Prefectural Advisor in addressing your personal issues?” The majority, 222, of the 396 respondents, find their PAs “*approachable*” or “*very approachable*”.



It was encouraging to see that several respondents had high praise for their PAs.

However, when AJET asked, as an open-ended question, "Has your relationship with your Prefectural Advisor(s) ever prevented you from contacting them with an issue?", from the comments given it can be seen that there are a large number of JETs whose relationships with their PAs have prevented them from discussing personal issues.

### ***JET Peer vs. JET Advisor***

Survey respondents commented that PAs have to find a balance between their roles as both

peers and advisors. An ALT from the Chugoku region stated, “I have never felt comfortable talking to my PA’s about personal issues. I view them as my peers and my colleagues, not professional counselors who I would trust with confidentiality.”

Respondents specifically said that they were comfortable discussing “*work-related issues*” with their PA, but more than one used the exact phrase, “*I do not feel close enough*” in reference to sharing personal issues with a PA—and a striking number of respondents (24 people, 17%) used variations on that sentiment. As this JET states, “*It’s hard getting advice from someone who is not your close friend [n]or a professional.*” (4th year ALT, Kyushu)

A 2nd year ALT from Chubu also raised the point that PAs have conflicting professional roles, saying, “*I felt that discussing mental health issues would prevent a PA from recommending me for jobs and graduate school after my JET term.*”

### **External Advisors**

Some JETs expressed a desire for a third party to confide in. That is, someone who is impartial but still familiar with the JET Programme.

### **Professionalism**

Some respondents considered PAs to lack professional counsel training, to be poor listeners and to be irresponsible or indiscreet.

“*[My PA]...posts inappropriate things about [the PA’s] job on Facebook*” (3rd year ALT, Kanto).

A 3rd year ALT, prefecture unknown, commented, “*I do not trust my PA with confidential information, due to various reasons, including worries that what I said would be shared with other JET friends...*”

### **Lack of Experience**

Perceived lack of experience was another point given in the comments. “*They [the PAs] are first years ... I’d much rather go to a 4th or 5th year JET who knows the drill,*” a 2nd year ALT from Kansai stated. A 4th year ALT from Tohoku echoes, “*the current PA is much younger, less experienced and more carefree than me.*” In their comments, many JETs preferred a non-first year PA.

### **Same-sex PAs**

Many JETs expressed a desire for a PA of the same sex: “*...they are all men. I would appreciate a female PA. In fact, I think it should be mandatory.*” (2nd year female ALT, Chugoku). Although females were the most likely respondents to express this preference, some male JETs also expressed a desire for a same-sex PA.

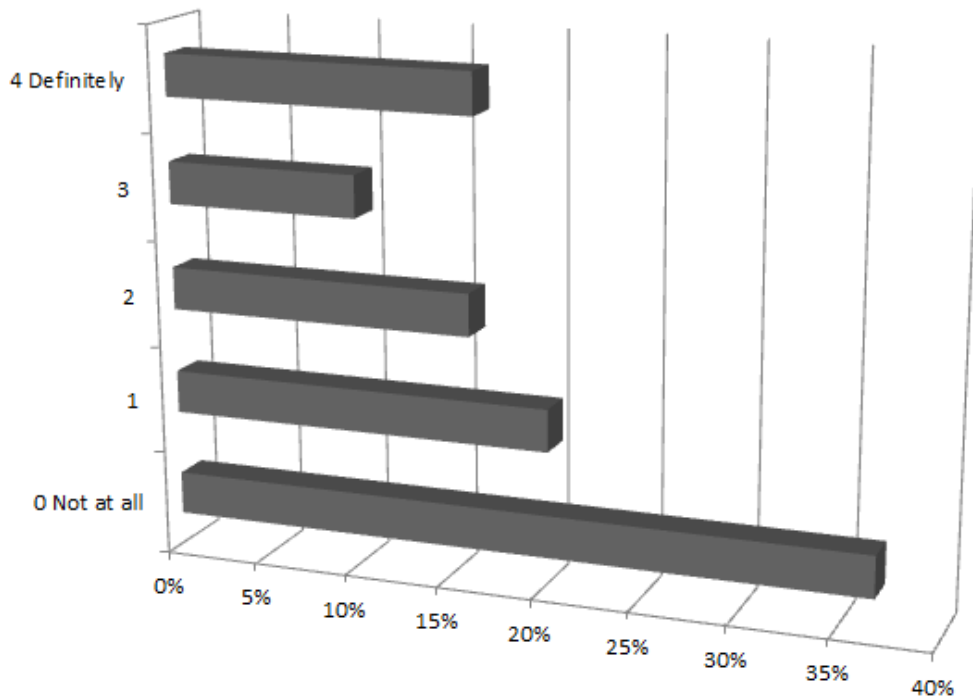
### **More than one PA**

Of the 145 respondents to the above open-ended question, only 71 respondents (less than 50%), indicated that they felt they could approach at least one PA with a personal issue. One in five of 71 respondents’ comments indicate they have multiple PAs, but only one PA who is approachable. This highlights the value of the PA system’s practice of having more than one PA for a prefecture.

### **Re-appointment**

When asked if their mental health is an important factor in relation to their re-appointment decision, just over half of JETs indicated that it was at least a small consideration. However a

large portion of JETs did not consider mental health to be a major consideration regarding re-appointment.



## DISCUSSION/SUGGESTIONS

### ***Prefectural Internal Services***

According to the survey, the Prefectural Advisor system is the most used of the JET services offered. People may feel most comfortable using internal prefectural systems where they can talk to someone they know and trust.

*AJET suggests:*

- some additional internal prefectural services, such as:
  - A system suggested by survey participants was a peer mentor system for newcomers, in which a senior JET is designated to help a new JET adjust to life in their specific region of Japan.
  - Recently some prefectures have set up a host family programme. This programme pairs an ALT with a local Japanese family. Originally set up in Fukui prefecture, AJET recommends that this program be made well-known to other prefectures either through the GIH or PA Handbook.

### **Advertisement of Services**

Survey results indicate that CLAIR's links to CSC and external professional counsellor services, are not well-known by JETs. The current information on both the JET Programme, and AJET websites provided about CSC and other professional options is very limited.

*AJET suggests:*

- More advertising of current services. This includes services such as PSG, the JETline and more general things that JETs can do themselves to potentially improve mental health. For example, a list of ways to stay mentally healthy, using results from this Mental Health Survey could be created. Currently a

brief list exists on the JET programme website but only in regards to culture shock

(<http://www.jetprogramme.org/e/current/support/cultureshock.html>). Lack of promotion means JETs are not fully using the help that is available to them. A good example of this exists at the Beyond Blue website ([http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?link\\_id=89.586](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?link_id=89.586)).

- Further expansion of the information available on the CLAIR website regarding CSC and professional counselling services.

It is also worth noting that a Peer Support Group list of services and contacts already exists. AJET has tried to promote these mental health services, however, without additional support, promotion is extremely difficult. Many JETs don't want to go through their supervisor or PA to get information about mental health services.

*AJET suggests:*

- CLAIR furthers collaboration with AJET to promote the PSG hotline, the PSG wiki page on mental health ([http://www.ajet.net/psg/index.php?title=Main\\_Page](http://www.ajet.net/psg/index.php?title=Main_Page)), and add a FAQ about mental health on the CLAIR website.

### Japanese Staff

Several respondents echoed an opinion that more guidance for Japanese staff, regarding JET relations, was just as important as guidance for JET participants, regarding Japanese relations, and that a lack of understanding can cause problems for both parties.

*AJET suggests:*

- More guidance for JTEs and supervisors focusing on the cultural differences between Japan and JET-participating countries. This should include differences in attitude, workplace customs, and expectations that the JET and JTE or supervisor may have about the JET's role in the workplace. As is seen in the statistical analysis (figure 2), isolation plays a significant role in contributing to mental health issues.

### Improvement of the PA System

JETs surveyed noted the current PA selection system could be improved upon. For example, many specifically commented that first year JETs should not be placed in the PA position. Additionally, having a team of at least one male and one female PA was preferred.

*AJET suggests:*

- Introducing a mandatory system of PA selection that is based on current JETs' leadership and involvement in the community rather than JETs just being assigned the role.
- A good idea by a 3rd Year CIR in Saitama, concerning PAs during their first year performing PA duties: "...I would recommend making participation in the private PA forums mandatory and other more direct/"hands on" ways to support them esp[ecially] during the first few months, if not the first year."
- Updating the CLAIR website to include information on the professional nature of the training that PAs receive. If possible awarding the PAs a credential after completion of their PA counselling training, this could take the form of an in-house CLAIR certificate. Though not an official qualification, such

certification could add a sense of authority to the PA training, which would in turn lend itself to the roles the PAs are expected to undertake.

### Further Counselling Services and Mental Health Education

The JET Programme provides participants with many excellent services that can be used for support during a person's tenure, but some additional education on mental health and minor adjustments of the current help available would be beneficial.

*AJET suggests:*

- In addition to the Peer Support Group Service and Wiki page already offered by AJET, a 1st year CIR from Mie suggested *“People would be more open and quicker to use a service that is provided through Skype or similar forms of internet based telecommunication media; due to the high costs that accompany the use of cellphones/telephones..”* (Japanese response translated to English). Perhaps a system could be set up in which English-speaking counsellors are available for counselling sessions via the Internet. This would be particularly useful for rural JETs, who may find getting help in English sparse.
- Offering JETs the option of insurance that covers the cost of mental health-related services would be beneficial. Another JET, from Tottori, stated, *“Making counseling services that are not linked to the JET programme available through our insurance plan would be wonderful.”*
- A mental health workshop during Tokyo Orientation would be beneficial to JETs. Currently the topic of culture shock is given a large focus in comparison to other issues. A workshop could give a broader view of what may effect your health and an emphasis on where to get help. The different help options available are briefly advertised, but JETs appear to forget what is available to them. Having a specific workshop focused on mental health services could leave a stronger impression on JETs. Topics could include:
  - Ways to keep good mental health
  - Aspects (besides culture shock) which can contribute to a deterioration in mental health in Japan
  - Where to go if help is needed.
  - Cultural differences in the workplace
  - How to cope with the climate in Japan
  - Diet changes and body image
- Asking embassies to give JETs information on cultural differences, to help JETs have a more realistic expectation of what life in Japan will be like before they arrive in Japan.
- It was also suggested that, *“...if more JETs could live in shared accommodation this would help. e.g. share a house/apartment.”* (2nd Year CIR, Fukui) Though NAJET appreciates that personal circumstances are often outside the scope of the JET Programme at CLAIR level, having JETs placed in the same apartment building or close by can make it easier to access one another.
- CLAIR could encourage PAs to more proactively mention mental health services at Prefectural Orientations, Mid Year Seminars, etc. Such a reminder, a month or so into the JET year, would also be useful as JETs receive so much information during their first month that it can be easy to forget what services are available.



- Encouraging AJET chapters to provide less demanding activities, aside from lively parties or travel activities, to create a more mellow atmosphere for socialising JETs. Due to National AJET's affiliation with prefectural AJET chapters, it is possible for NAJET to encourage chapters to take up such activities if they are not already providing it.
- A refresher course on culture shock/mental health issues for re-appointing 3rd, 4th, 5th year JETs.

## QUESTIONS

1.a) Would CLAIR be willing to update the information provided about PSG on the JET Programme website to include the fact that volunteers receive training from professionals? Could CLAIR also link the PSG Wiki page ([http://www.ajet.net/psg/index.php?title=Main\\_Page](http://www.ajet.net/psg/index.php?title=Main_Page)) on the JET Programme website?

1.b) Could CLAIR update the JET Programme website to expand information explaining the differences of AJET and CLAIR services? Could CLAIR expand the information they provide about CSC and professional health care services?

1.c) Could CLAIR provide more information to JETs regarding the training Prefectural Advisors receive? Would it be possible to give an in-house qualification to PAs who complete CLAIR training?

2. From the findings in this report, it appears JETs are not fully aware of all the services available to them whilst in Japan. Therefore, do CLAIR, MOFA, MEXT and MIC feel that a Tokyo Orientation workshop covering what problems a JET may face during their tenure, how to keep good mental health and where to receive trained help, would be valuable? Would a brief version of this be useful to recommend to embassies/consulates for inclusion at their orientations?

3. If AJET compiled a list of mental health tips, would CLAIR be willing to include a link on their website? Would CLAIR and the Ministries be willing to publicise this to new JETs at various orientations, and in the monthly CLAIR news? Subsequently, could CLAIR update the "How to Cope [with Culture Shock]" list on the JET Programme website and re-brand it as "Keeping Good Mental Health in Japan"?

4. National AJET has done its best to promote PSG and other services the JET Programme provides, however this survey has shown that without the support of CLAIR, MEXT, MOFA or MIC, these mental health services reach fewer JET participants. Would CLAIR, MEXT, MOFA or MIC be willing to join National AJET in making a greater effort to promote these services as part of the JET Programme?

5. If AJET prepares the information, could CLAIR provide materials to Prefectural Advisors to set up systems, such as JET mentors or the host family programme, to increase in-prefecture support for JETs?

6. This report survey included JET responses related to the Prefectural Advisor system. Would CLAIR be interested in utilising the information for upcoming PA training seminars?