



What is Culture Shock?

No matter whether you call it Cross-Cultural Adaptation Stress, Intercultural Adjustment Disorientation, Displacement Anxiety, or Culture Shock, "the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" is a real part of almost everyone's sojourn abroad. Along with our spoken language we have learned an enormous number of non-verbal cues which indicate to us such things as when to shake hands, what to say when we meet people, how to tip, how to make requests, how to buy things in different settings, when to accept and when to refuse invitations, and when to take a person's statements seriously and when not.

In addition there is the larger issue that one's learned culture and cultural knowledge have only limited value in the new setting. Kalervo Oberg, one of the earliest researchers on culture shock, notes that "when an individual enters a strange culture, all or most of these familiar cues are removed. He or she is like a fish out of water. No matter how broad-minded or full of good will he may be, a series of props has been knocked out from under him/her."

Not everyone is affected by culture shock in the same way, at the same time, or to the same degree. For some the symptoms may be severe, for others quite mild. For some this may be a long drawn out affair, for others very brief. It is, however, typical for all humans (and other animals and even plants) to undergo some sort of transplant/adaptation stress when they move into a new environment. Robert Kohls notes that this move "can cause intense discomfort, often accompanied by hyper-irritability, bitterness, resentment, homesickness, and depression. In some cases distinct physical symptoms of psychosomatic illness occur" (63).

Other symptoms may include "excessive washing of the hands, exaggerated concern over drinking water, food, dishes and bedding, the absent-minded, far-away stare, a feeling of helplessness and a desire for dependence on long-term residents of one's own nationality; fits of anger over delays and other minor frustrations; delay and outright refusal to learn the language of the host country, excessive fear of being robbed or injured, great concern over minor pains and eruptions of the skin, and finally that terrible longing to be back home, to have a good cup of coffee, to walk into that corner drugstore, to visit one's relatives and friends and, in general to talk to people who really make sense" (Oberg).

For many people, the sojourn abroad proceeds through several phases. While these phases may reflect all or part of your own adjustment process, there is no one "normal" pattern. Reactions to living in a new culture are as different as the people who are doing the reacting. You may find that your adjustment proceeds faster or slower than what is indicated here. The following are, however, typical.



Phases of Culture Shock

Pre-Departure

- Time: Pre-Departure
- General Attitude: Anticipation
- Events: Planning, packing, processing, partying, orientation
- Emotional Response: Excitement, enthusiasm, some trepidation of unknown, concern about leaving family, friends, lovers, familiar environment, desire to escape problems
- Behavioral Response: Anticipation, loss of interest in current responsibilities
- Physical Response: Tiredness, generally normal health
- Verbal Response: I just can't wait to . . .

Honeymoon or Spectator Phase

- Time: Weeks 1–4
- General Attitude: Exhilaration, euphoria
- Events: Red carpet welcome, new homestay or dorm, new classes and teachers, exploration of sights and shops
- Emotional Response: Tourist enthusiasm, sense of adventure
- Behavioral Response: Outward curiosity about host nationals, avoidance of negative stereotypes, enthusiasm for studies and site, passive observer of culture
- Physical Response: Intestinal disturbances, minor insomnia
- Verbal Response: "How quaint; this place and these people are a lot like home."

Increasing Participation Phase

- Time: Weeks 5–8
- General Attitude: Bewilderment, disenchantment, restlessness, impatience
- Events: Classes, homework, everyday life, responsibilities in homestay or dorm, unfamiliar food, manners, language, customs, cost of living
- Emotional Response: Qualms, uncertainty, irritability, loss of enthusiasm, skepticism, frustration, questioning of values of self and others
- Behavioral Response: Search for security in familiar activities (e.g. reading books in English), increased alcohol and/or food consumption, withdrawal
- Physical Response: Colds, headaches, tiredness
- Verbal Response: "Why do they have to do it like that? Why can't they just...?"

Crisis Phase

- Time: Weeks 9–12
- General Attitude: Hostility, irritation, aggression
- Events: Uneven work performance, confrontation with differences
- Emotional Response: Discouragement, lethargy, depression, suspicion, boredom, homesickness, anger, extreme sensitivity and irritability, loneliness
- Behavioral Response: Withdrawal, avoiding contact with host nationals, excessive sleep, fits of weeping, loss of concentration, tension and conflict with others
- Physical Response: Minor illnesses, headaches, preoccupation with personal cleanliness

- Verbal Response: "This place s—s! I hate it here. This place and these people are stupid." Use of stereotypes, chauvinism, nationalism. "We" excludes host nationals.

Adaptation Phase

- Time: Weeks 13–20+
- General Attitude: Recovery
- Events: Work performance improves, able to interpret cultural clues, can laugh at and tell jokes
- Emotional Response: Sense of comfort with surroundings, sense of belonging, sense of shared fate, biculturalism
- Behavioral Response: Ability to see things from perspective of host nationals, empathy
- Physical Response: Normal health
- Verbal Response: "Home" is homestay or dorm. "We" includes host nationals.

Reentry Phase (shares many of the same attributes as the previous phases)

- General Attitude: Ambivalence
- Events: Wanting to tell others about experience and finding others generally not very interested.
- Emotional Response: Mixed-up, disconnected, disoriented, irritability, depression, homesickness for overseas site, uncertainty about "home"
- Behavioral Response: Criticism of home and friends, lethargy, keen interest in foreign affairs and news
- Physical Response: Colds, headaches
- Verbal Response: "I never realized..."

~Adapted from the *Fulbright Newsletter*, 1988

Some General Advice About Culture Shock

Problems most often arise abroad when there is a discrepancy between our expectations and reality. However, as normal human beings, we tend to expect others to be like we are. Even though we know we are in a different cultural reality abroad, we expect, often unconsciously, that things will be and work like they do at home. When we begin to recognize that things and other people are different, we often experience the symptoms noted in the chart. Thus, we suggest you

- Expect change and difference. Keeping an open mind and remaining flexible are two excellent attributes for a successful Study Abroad experience. Make change and difference tools for learning, not enemies to be overcome. Avoid getting caught up in the little things. Keep your sense of humor. Be willing to fail at some tasks and feel stupid (or like a 5-year-old) when doing others. Study Abroad involves a great deal of risk-taking—not necessarily bungee jumping type risks, but more like buying a movie ticket or asking directions in a foreign language.
- Guard your health. Be sure to get enough to eat, drink enough water and get enough sleep.
- Acknowledge symptoms of culture shock, when they occur and then do something constructive to deal with them. (See Dr. Grossman's comments for suggestions.)
- Spend some time before departure (both overseas and returning) to review your goals using the worksheet in this handbook. Keep your expectations reasonable and revise them at regular intervals.

Be realistic about yourself and your abilities. People who have the ability to relax and ride with events tend to be more effective and enjoy themselves overseas.

- Develop an attitude of patience and tolerance towards yourself as well as others. Tolerance towards ambiguity is an important skill for learning how to live in a new culture. Most of the time we do not know what things mean or how things work and it will frustrate us, if we let it.
- Develop the habit of mentally stepping back from an uncomfortable situation and describing the situation as you see it. What is the specific thing that has triggered the feeling in you. Then go on to interpret the situation, that is say what you think about what you see. And then finally continue with an evaluation, that is what you feel about what you think you see. Frustration and other feelings of discomfort are traceable to a specific cause or action, usually an ambiguity, a disparity between expectations and reality, an unrealistic goal, a sense that things should move more quickly, or a cultural blunder.

A Word About Coming Home

Returning home is for some as difficult an experience as going overseas. The reentry process recapitulates the same phases as the sojourn abroad, albeit in a more compressed manner. When returning home it is important to make use of the same skills and tools that you developed while overseas. The preceding list of suggestions can help ease the transition back into life at "K". Many students have told us that finding an outlet for sharing their Study Abroad experiences was an important part of their personal reentry process. Talk with your instructors, your academic advisor, or the Center for International Programs about possibilities. If you should experience severe emotional discomfort after returning home, contact the counseling office or the health center.

Culture Shock Responses

Collected by Dr. Robert Grossman, Kalamazoo College

I think of our responses to stress as falling into four types.

1. Critical or anger released reactions — magnifying the negative aspects of the experience, belittling others, minimizing the positive.
2. Anxious or fear-aroused reactions — catastrophic thoughts, physical reactions, desire to avoid any situations which increase the fear which can result in only spending time with other "K" students.
3. Depressive or low self-esteem reactions — desire to withdraw, self-critical thoughts, low motivation, lack of interest and strong desire to return home and, in the worst cases, self-destructive thoughts.
4. Denial of the stress — This is the tendency to totally ignore risks or problems. Men especially are trained in this style of response and many think this results in the high degree of stress-related cardiovascular problems they have in our society. There is some evidence to indicate that high-achieving women are also steeped in this tradition. Overseas it often results in serious illness in both males and females from eating food that is not recommended. In some cases this has led to going off on personal adventures without appropriate backup and safeguards. This style often results in obliviousness to serious cross-cultural problems. Worst of all, the person comes back

from the overseas experience with prejudices and stereotypes unchanged. Such people often remain ethnocentric and miss out on the opportunity to be bicultural or even multicultural.

Ways to Cope with Adaptation Stress

From L. Robert Kohl's *Survival Kit for Overseas Living*, Chapter 19 "Rx for Culture Shock," pp. 69–73.

- Pursue information gathering assiduously. (Kohl suggests looking at areas such as history, basic facts, making a human profile, collecting Do's & Don'ts, current politics and problems, national heroes/heroines, and identifying intercultural 'flashpoints', undertaking a logical orientation to the city: identifying sights, monuments, scenic areas, etc. See the "Culture and History Worksheet" in this handbook for further suggestions.)
- **Look for logical reasons** behind everything in the host culture which seems strange, difficult, confusing, or threatening. Use the DIE(S) technique: **D**escribe, **I**nterpret, **E**valuate, and then **S**witch perspectives with the other person.
- **Don't succumb to the temptation** to disparage the host culture.
- **Identify a host national** who is sympathetic and understanding and talk with that person about specific situations and your **feelings** related to them.
- **Have faith in yourself.**

I suggest you look for the kernel of truth and of exaggeration in every disparaging thought that occurs to you rather than trying to suppress your desire to criticize the host culture. This is the best way to handle all emotionally driven thought. Writing helps in this process. Consider keeping a journal of your Study Abroad experience.

A Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

Ethnocentric States

- **Denial of Difference.** No recognition of cultural difference because of isolation or intentional separation. Attribution of deficiency in intelligence or personality to culturally deviant behavior. Tendency to dehumanize outsiders.
- **Defense against Difference.** Recognition of cultural difference coupled with negative evaluation of most variations from native culture — the greater the difference, the more negative the evaluation. Evolutionary view of cultural development with native culture at the acme. A tendency towards social/cultural proselytizing of "underdeveloped" cultures.
- **Reversal.** Tendency to see another culture as superior while maligning one's own.
- **Minimization of Difference.** Recognition and acceptance of superficial cultural difference such as eating customs, etc., while holding that all humans beings are essentially the same. Emphasis on the similarity of people and commonality of basic values. Tendency to define the basis of commonality in ethnocentric terms (i.e. everyone is essentially like us).
- **Physical Universalism.** Emphasis on commonality of human beings in terms of physiological similarity.

- **Transcendent Universalism.** Emphasis of commonality of human beings as subordinate to a particular supernatural being, religion, or social philosophy.

Ethnorelative States

- **Acceptance of Difference.** Recognition and appreciation of cultural difference in behavior and values. Acceptance of cultural differences as viable alternative solutions to the organization of human existence. Cultural relativity.
- **Adaptation of Difference.** The development of communication skills that enable intercultural communication. Effective use of empathy, or frame of reference shifting, to understand and be understood across cultural boundaries.
- **Integration of Difference.** The internalization of bi-cultural or multicultural frames of reference. Maintaining a definition of identity that is "marginal" to any particular culture.

References:

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