

Cultural Adjustment

What is Culture Shock?

Cultural adjustment is a process an individual has to go through to be able to work effectively and live comfortably in a place that is new and unfamiliar to them. Living in a new culture requires you to learn a new set of cultural patterns and behaviors. This process can be very challenging and sometimes uncomfortable. There are generally three main types of cultural adjustment, according to Janet and Milton Bennett, 1999:

CULTURE SURPRISE usually occurs during the first few days of your visit as you initially become aware of superficial differences. Examples: people dress differently, signs are in a different language, and nonverbal behaviors are different.

CULTURE STRESS is a fairly short-term response to "stimulus overload." This occurs when you begin to respond to the behavior of the "new" culture. Examples: trying to drive a car, doing your own shopping, hearing comments about yourself.

CULTURE SHOCK is a normal, healthy psychological reaction to the stress of living in a different culture. You experience feelings of tension and anxiety because you have lost familiar cultural cues. Your actions do not always get you what you want. And your inability to communicate effectively with others is frustrating.

At some point during the cultural adjustment process, you will probably experience culture shock. Culture shock is caused by the stress of being in a new culture and is a normal part of adjusting to a new place. When you live in a new culture, your own values are continually brought into question. Also, you are cut off from the cultural clues and known patterns with which you are familiar. Kalvero Oberg, the man first credited with diagnosing culture shock, describes it this way:

“These signs and clues include the thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life: when to shake hands and what to say when we meet people, when and how to give tips...how to make purchases, when to accept and when to refuse invitations, when to take statements seriously and when not...”

You will probably not just wake up one morning and say, “Oh, I am experiencing culture shock!” It is a gradual, cumulative process that builds up slowly. It is important to recognize the symptoms of culture shock so you can be better prepared for it.

Some Symptoms of Culture Shock:

- Anxiety, Crying a lot
- Irritability, Hopelessness
- Homesickness, Distrust of hosts
- Avoiding contact with host, nationals
- Fatigue, Stereotyping
- Depression, Withdrawal
- Boredom, Self-doubt
- Difficulty studying effectively

Not everyone experiences culture shock in the same way. You may have difficulty sleeping while your friend sleeps most of the time. You may experience many of the symptoms listed above or only a few of them. The most important thing to remember is that culture shock is a normal part of the adjustment process. If your symptoms are severe, be sure to let others know how you are feeling. Talk to a friend, an international student advisor, or a counselor in the counseling center. You do not have to be alone!

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What You Can Do to Help Fight Culture Shock:

1. Realize that culture shock is a natural part of adjusting to a new culture. Practically everyone who lives abroad experiences culture shock to some degree—you are not alone. If you are familiar with the symptoms of culture shock and anticipate them, you will have an easier time adjusting.
2. Don't be afraid to share your feelings with others. Talk to other international students about what you are feeling and experiencing. You will probably find that others can relate to how you are feeling.
3. Become involved in activities on campus or in the community. This is a good way to meet people and will help enrich your time in the United States. If you feel uncomfortable joining a program or activity, ask a friend to come with you.
4. Develop a "support system." Being away from family and friends who normally support you can be difficult. It is important to connect with others who can provide you support.
5. Take care of yourself. Living in a foreign country can be very stressful on your body. Remember to get plenty of rest, eat well, and exercise. Join an intramural sport, try out Dixon Recreation Center, cook your favorite dish from your country, or try the local ethnic grocery stores.
6. Take some "time out." Speaking a foreign language all day can be very exhausting! Remember to spend some quiet time each day reading a book or listening to music in your own language.
7. Keep your sense of humor. It is important to be able to laugh. Allow yourself to see the humor in misunderstandings and embarrassing situations.
8. Set small goals for yourself. Remember that many of the things that were easy for you may not be so easy in a new culture. Make realistic goals so you can feel good about reaching them.
9. Ask questions and learn from others. If you don't understand something, remember that it is okay to ask for help. OSU faculty and staff, classmates, and other international students can help answer your questions and increase your understanding of American culture.
10. Keep a positive attitude. You will most likely experience some negative feelings while you are in the U.S. While this is perfectly normal, it is important to not let them dominate you. You might try keeping a list of your enjoyable experiences so your outlook remains positive.

Material adapted from Survival Kit for Overseas Living, Robert Kohls, Chicago: Intercultural Press, 1994.

More information about Culture Adjustment:

Culture Shock and Adjustment: http://www.worldwide.edu/travel_planner/culture_shock.html

Video about International Student Experiences and Culture Shock:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPFB6GlijM9Q>