

CULTURE SHOCK

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Abstract: Culture shock refers to the impact of moving from a familiar culture to one that is unfamiliar. This impact includes the anxiety and feelings (such as surprise, disorientation, uncertainty, and confusion) felt when a person must adapt to a different and unknown cultural or social environment. It might include the shock of a new environment, meeting new people, eating new food, or adapting to a foreign language, as well as the shock of being separated from the important people in your life: such as family, friends, colleagues, and teachers.

Keywords: Culture shock, Honeymoon Stage, Distress Stage, Orientation Stage, Adaptation Stage, hand gestures, Eye contact, handshake

Culture shock is an experience a person may have when one moves to a cultural environment which is different from one's own; it is also the personal disorientation a person may feel when experiencing an unfamiliar way of life due to immigration or a visit to a new country, a move between social environments, or simply transition to another type of life. Common problems include: information overload, language barrier, generation gap, technology gap, skill interdependence, formulation dependency, homesickness (cultural), boredom (job dependency), ethnicity, race, skin color, response ability (cultural skill set). There is no true way to entirely prevent culture shock, as individuals in any society are personally affected by cultural contrasts differently.

Culture shock is experienced by students who participate in study abroad programs. Research considering the study abroad experiences states that in-country support for students may assist them in overcoming the challenges and phases of culture shock. As stated in a study by Young et al., the distress experienced by culture shock has long-lasting effects therefore, universities with well-rounded programs that support students throughout the study abroad program, including preparation and post-program assistance, can alleviate challenges posed by culture shock, allow for global development and assist with the transition back into the home culture.

One of the most common causes of culture shock involves individuals in a foreign environment.

Culture shock generally comes in four stages.

These stages are:

Step 1: The Honeymoon Stage

During this stage, everything is new and interesting. You may experience a feeling of euphoria and be in awe of all the differences you see and experience. You feel excited and stimulated, and you still feel close to everything familiar back home. During this stage, you generally focus on the similarities between your home country and your host country, but you appreciate the differences as well.

Step 2: The Distress Stage

Once the honeymoon stage wears off, you may suddenly start getting frustrated or annoyed by your new country, specifically the customs and values. The things you're experiencing no longer feel new; in fact, it's starting to feel like the strangeness of a new culture is preventing you from experiencing things. You may feel hostility toward the way things are done here, and you may think that they should be done in a different way. You start to idealize life "back home," and may feel that your current culture, language, and food are inferior to what you're used to. You feel confused and alone, and may realize that the familiar support systems of home are no longer easily accessible to you. Don't worry; this is perfectly normal.

Step 3 – The Orientation Stage

The Orientation Stage is the first stage in acceptance. During this stage, you begin to understand why things are done in a certain way. You start to respect the culture and traditions, whether you consider them to be good or bad. You begin to feel more comfortable in your new environment, and you begin to have a more positive outlook. You feel more confident and better prepared to cope with any problems that might arise. Remember that culture shock is not a perfectly linear experience; you may return to the Distress Stage multiple times until you hit...

Step 4 – The Adaptation Stage

During this stage, your attitude changes and you are able to function in both cultures. You have embraced the new culture and are able to see it in a new, yet realistic, light. In this stage you are typically well-oriented to your new life, and have developed your own habits and routines. You feel comfortable, confident, and capable of making decisions. You no longer feel alone and isolated; instead, you start to feel at home.

How does culture shock impact you when you move abroad?

When you move abroad to live or work, it is very common to focus on the practicalities such as where you will live and work, where your children will study and what you will do about things like banking and health insurance. It makes sense, then, that the emotional side of moving abroad can be less of a focus while you're preparing for your move. Therefore, it can feel like a 'shock' to the system once the initial excitement of the move has worn off.

There are obvious examples of culture shock such as getting used to a different language, a different climate, a different transport system and different food customs.

Less obvious examples of culture shock include acclimatising to:

- different hand gestures
- different facial expressions and levels of eye contact
- whether people wait in lines or not
- how people greet one another (hug; single kiss; kiss on both cheeks; handshake)
- whether you are expected to haggle and/or tip

It can help to find out as much as you can about the destination you are moving to before you go. There are expat Facebook groups for most of the top expat destinations. For example, Madrid was voted the most welcoming city in 2019, with Kuala Lumpur the easiest city to get settled in. And when it comes to making friends, Mexico City comes out on top, with 71% saying it's easy to make friends.

Tips to overcome culture shock

It's not just expats who have experienced it at some point of their lives: you are speaking to a person from a different background, and you suddenly realise you've made a cultural faux pas. It might be a misreading of the content, making someone feel awkward or misunderstanding of a joke.

If this mistake happened in your own culture, you would be able to make up for it quickly because you know the rules for apologising. However, when gaffes happen across cultures, they can leave you at a loss for what to do and how to respond.

To overcome culture shock and make the most of your new experience, seasoned expats suggest you:

- Prepare as much as possible before you go in terms of learning the language. Consider regional dialects too. So, for example, expats who learn Castilian Spanish before a move to South or Central America can find that there are significant variations. Also try to learn about etiquette before you go. This is particularly important in destinations like Japan, one of the most popular destinations for expats. But there are nuances in every country, even if the language is the same.

- Reach out to both expat and local groups to make contacts before you arrive. It can help to start with a specific interest such as sport, craft, dance or volunteering.

- Establish a routine as quickly as possible based around the new time zone and how a typical day runs. This may mean adjusting your bedtime, or building in a siesta for example.

- Avoid comparisons between your new destination and your home country. Be open minded and remember why you decided to make the move in the first place – to experience a new culture.

- Don't believe what you see on social media. Seek out realistic portrayals of becoming an expat and navigating culture shock, rather than highly filtered accounts on Instagram, for example. There are many excellent accounts of navigating culture shock from expats including YouTube videos and podcasts.

- Keep exploring and being curious about your new destination. Always keep some of that initial curiosity that led you to make the choice to become an expat. Watch the local television, especially the news. One day you will find yourself understanding it without having the subtitles on!

- Talk about your feelings. Don't keep things to yourself. There is nothing weak about having doubts or feeling homesick, it is completely normal. If you feel you are getting depressed, speak to a professional as soon as possible.

- Put your health first as everything else is harder to deal with if you are ill. Look after yourself, prioritise self-care, healthy eating and staying active.

Dos and don'ts for culture shock DO

- Commit to forging new connections. It's normal to seek a sense of familiarity by spending time with other expats. However, to overcome culture shock in the long-term you need to step out of your comfort zone. While 32% of expats say their friendship circle is mostly other expats, 48% say they have a mixed group of friends including expats and locals.

- Hang on to that growth mindset feeling that led you to be open and courageous enough to move abroad in the first place. The benefits are huge – from increased confidence, to improved career prospects. You're also modelling a growth mindset for your children and giving them a breadth of new experiences and taking on new challenges.

- Consider your partner and children. If they are one of the 11% of people who move abroad for love or the 7% who move for their partner's education or job, make sure they are settling in as well. Things will be different for them – especially if they don't have a job yet. You may already speak the language and have friends, for example.

- Look after your health. Stay active and remember to eat and sleep well. Take steps immediately if you feel your physical or mental health is being affected. Knowing where to go to see a doctor abroad isn't always obvious – check out our handy guide on seeing a doctor abroad.

DON'T

- Set your expectations too high. You may never feel like a local who understands every single cultural nuance and colloquial phrase.
- Spend too much time calling home. It's important to stay in touch with friends and family back home, but make sure it's balanced with making new connections as this is crucial to feeling settled and content.
- Rush it. Be patient and remember all stages of culture shock do pass.

And finally, if you've been through all the stages of culture shock and things are still not feeling right, don't be afraid to make a change. Is it not 'failing' if you decide to move back home after giving it a fair go in your destination country.

10 Culture Shocks in the USA

1. Big Sizes
2. Food Surprises
3. Family Lifestyle
4. Teen Lifestyle
5. House Rules
6. American High School
7. American Teachers
8. Holiday Passion
9. Total Strangers
10. Infinite Curiosities

Culture Shock Benefits...

Culture shock is the best and worst part of adapting to a different country. You like or even love some things. You dislike other things. But every single cultural difference offers a chance to broaden your horizons. Suddenly life is new and different. You see possibilities you never imagined existed.

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