

CULTURE SHOCK

People usually experience many emotions while adapting to a foreign culture, changing from excitement and interest in the new culture to depression and fear of the unknown. The difficulties that you experience as you integrate into a new society can be a result of what is termed "culture shock." Most experts agree that culture shock, although often delayed, is inevitable in one form or another. But adjusting to a foreign culture, and living through difficult times of change can be a satisfying experience, one worth the occasional discomfort and extra effort.

Attitudes come in a wide variety of species, ranging from broad and pervasive cultural attitudes to the most specific and personal attitudes. Because of the scope of this subject, it is probably the most difficult to discuss. However, because the attitudes you take with you to your host country(ies), and those you form once there, will have such a great effect upon your perception of the people and ways of your host country, it is very important for you to be aware of the role attitudes play in your overseas experience.

Normally, attitudes exist on a more or less subconscious level. When faced with a new situation, most people will recognize their reaction to it, but not necessarily the underlying attitude responsible for that particular reaction.

When we deal with people who share the same basic cultural attitudes as ourselves, the system works well: the differences in attitude between two Americans, broadly speaking, are far more likely to be of the specific and personal kind than the cultural kind. When we interact with people of different nationalities, however, the problem arises. Communications break down because their cultural attitudes are fundamentally different than ours, and the results are often feelings of confusion and hostility on both sides. This situation is called "culture shock." This can be a misleading term.

One tends to get the impression that "culture shock" is some kind of disease that everyone routinely catches and after a certain length of time, recovers from, but nothing could be farther from the truth. There are people who go overseas and never recover from this condition despite the length of their stay. This is because "culture shock" is actually caused by the aforementioned mismatch of cultural attitudes, not by some virus, as sometimes seems to be implied. And it's easily seen that the traveler who doesn't maintain an open mind, and doesn't invest any effort trying to understand a foreign culture, is always going to be in a state of shock. Such people had best stay at home, for if they rigidly hold onto their own attitudes, they will -- in reality - have never left!

An underlying cause of negative reactions to another culture is the tendency to judge something that is different as inferior. It is important to be open toward the culture into which you are going, to try to discard stereotypes, and to read as much as you can about the culture before your departure. If you educate yourself on the many aspects of the country in which you will be living, you will better understand and appreciate your new surroundings much sooner. Before departure, learn about the country's history, natural resources, social customs, religions, art, and political structures. Find out the culture's set of manners, expected behavior, and unspoken rules. Read up on the country's present day problems and current national issues. Learning about current affairs will help you to get a sense of how people evaluate events from different perspectives. Talk to other students who have gone to your host country to learn what problems you may encounter. Your study abroad office can help put you in touch with returned students.

But even with this preparation it is inevitable that you will experience some symptoms of culture shock. You may be unaware that the frustrations and emotions you are experiencing are related to culture shock; in retrospect, this becomes apparent. If you understand the phenomenon and its possible causes, you can decrease its effects. Try to acquaint yourself with its signs. For more information about cultural differences and culture shock, check out [Exploring Cultural Differences](#) and [Cross Cultural Adjustment](#).

PHASES OF CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

Recent studies have shown that there are distinct phases of culture shock which virtually everyone who lives abroad goes through. Each phase has a number of characteristic features, one of which is usually predominant. These stages include:

- **Preliminary stage:** This phase includes awareness of the host culture, preparation for the journey, farewell activities.
- **Initial euphoria:** The initial euphoria phase begins with the arrival in the new country and ends when this excitement wears off.
- **Irritability:** During the irritability phase you will be acclimating to your setting. This will produce frustration because of the difficulty in coping with the elementary aspects of everyday life when things still appear so foreign to you. Your focus will likely turn to the differences between the host culture and your home, and these differences can be troubling. Sometimes insignificant difficulties can seem like major problems. One typical reaction against culture shock is to associate mainly with other North Americans, but remember, you are going abroad to get to know the host country, its people, culture, and language. If you avoid contact with nationals of the host country, you cheat yourself and lengthen the process of adaptation.
- **Gradual adjustment:** When you become more used to the new culture, you will slip into the gradual adjustment stage. You may not even be aware that this is happening. You will begin to orient yourself and to be able to interpret subtle cultural clues. The culture will become familiar to you.
- **Adaptation and biculturalism:** Eventually you will develop the ability to function in the new culture. Your sense of "foreignness" diminishes significantly. And not only will you be more comfortable with the host culture, but you may also feel a part of it. Once abroad, you can take some steps to minimize emotional and physical ups and downs. Try to establish routines that incorporate both the difficult and enjoyable tasks of the day or week. Treat yourself to an occasional indulgence such as a USA magazine or newspaper, a favorite meal or beverage, or a long talk with other Americans experiencing the same challenges. Keep yourself healthy through regular exercise and eating habits. Accept invitations to activities that will allow you to see areas of the host culture outside the university and meet new people. Above all try to maintain your sense of humor.
- **Re-entry phase:** The re-entry phase occurs when you return to your homeland. For some, this can be the most painful phase of all. You will be excited about sharing your experiences, and you will realize that you have changed, although you may not be able to explain how. One set of values has long been instilled in you, another you have acquired in the host country. Both may seem equally valid.

TIPS TO EASE CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

Here are some general tips for traveling and interacting with foreign cultures, which, if kept in mind, may help ease cultural adjustment:

- Travel in a spirit of humility and with a genuine desire to meet and talk with local people.
- Do not expect to find things as you have them at home . . . for you have left your home to find things different.
- Do not take anything too seriously . . . for an open mind is the beginning of a fine international experience.
- Do not let others get on your nerves . . . for you have come a long way to learn as much as you can, to enjoy the experience, and to be a good ambassador for your country.
- Read carefully the information in your Student Guide and from your program . . . those who have gone before you have good advice to share.
- Do not worry . . . for one who worries has no pleasure.
- Remember your passport so that you know where it is at all times . . . a person without a passport is a person without a country.
- Do not judge the people of a country by the one person with whom you have had trouble . . . for this is unfair to the people as a whole.
- You shall remember that you are a guest in every land . . . for one who treats a host with respect will be treated as an honored guest.
- Cultivate the habit of listening and observing, rather than merely seeing or hearing.
- Realize that other people may have thought patterns and concepts of time which are very different than yours -- not inferior, just different.
- Be aware of the feelings of local people to prevent what might be offensive behavior. For example, photography must be particularly respectful of persons.
- Make no promises to local, new friends that you cannot implement or carry through.
- Spend time reflecting on you daily experiences in order to deepen your understanding of your experiences.