What is Culture Shock?

Most people who live abroad for an extended period experience difficulties in adjusting to the new culture; this is commonly called "culture shock". In order to understand culture shock, one must remember that our ability to function in the world depends on our capacity to read hundreds of signs, respond to subtle cues, and behave according to countless explicit and implicit rules. At home we know how to read street signs, how to use the telephone, how much to tip, etc. Much of what we do in our daily lives is automatic and requires little thought. Abroad, the reverse is true and simple tasks become difficult because we don't know how to behave, our actions and words don't get the expected responses, and we don't understand the messages we are getting. We are confronted continuously with new ways of thinking, valuing, and doing things. Sometimes, our common sense is no longer useful. This disorientation that can cause severe stress is culture shock. Fortunately, culture shock is predictable and manageable and, if students are prepared for it, they can do a great deal to mitigate its effects.

Culture shock is a cycle of adjustment that may take quite some time. The cycle is marked by four basic phases, and most people experience at least two low periods during their stay abroad. However, the length and severity of these low periods vary greatly for different individuals. The four basic phases are:

Euphoria

This is the tourist phase. Students are excited about living in a new place. At first glance it seems to students that the people and their way of life are not that different from what they were used to at home.

Irritation and Hostility

After the initial excitement is over, students start noticing more and more dissimilarities between life in the foreign country and life at home. The initial curiosity and enthusiasm turn into irritation, frustration, anger, and depression. Minor nuisances and inconveniences lead to serious distress. Symptoms experienced during this phase include:

- homesickness
- boredom
- withdrawal (i.e. spending excessive amounts of time reading, only seeing other Americans, avoiding contact with local people)
- need for excessive amounts of sleep
- compulsive eating or drinking
- irritability
- exaggerated cleanliness
- stereotyping of or hostility toward local people
- loss of ability to work effectively
- unexplainable fits of weeping
- physical ailments (psychosomatic illness)

This second phase of culture shock is often a difficult period and may last for quite a long time. Fortunately, most people only experience a few of these symptoms, but it is helpful to be aware of the symptoms so that students understand what is happening to them or their friends and can take steps to counteract them.

Gradual Adjustment

Over time students will gradually adapt to the new culture. Once students begin to orient themselves and are able to interpret some of the subtle cultural clues and cues, the culture will seem more familiar and more comfortable to them. They will feel less isolated, and their self-confidence will return.

Adaptation or Bi-Culturalism

Full recovery has occurred when students are able to function in two cultures with confidence. At that time, students will find they enjoy some of the very customs, ways of doing and saying things, and personal attitudes that bothered them so much in phase two. Students may not realize how well they have adjusted to the new culture until they return to the U.S., at which point they may well experience reverse culture shock.

How to Cope with Culture Shock

Since culture shock is a cycle of adjustment, people who make the effort to learn as much as possible about their temporary home country before they leave and who arrive abroad with an open mind, eager to learn as much as possible, often find it much easier to adjust. To make the transition easier, students should not wait for others to make the first move but should start reaching out right away. Buying a map of the city and becoming familiar with the new neighborhood is helpful. Finding out where the closest bank, post office, telephone, grocery store, etc., are located will also help. The student's next step might be to familiarize him/herself with some of the basic names and phrases which appear on signs, menus, etc. Even other English-speaking countries use phrases unfamiliar to most Americans. A British or Australian passerby will not know you are looking for a "chemist" if you ask for a drugstore or pharmacy.

The following are some suggestions given to students for coping with culture shock:

- Find someone who understands the U.S. and the host culture and ask them about some of the things that are frustrating you.
- Listen carefully to people and remember they may not be making the same assumptions you are. If you are not sure of what they mean, ask.
- Speak the foreign language as often as possible.
- Maintain regular living patterns--eat and sleep at regular intervals.
- If you have certain hobbies or are involved in sports at home, try to do the same abroad. This is a great way to make friends.
- Keep a journal about your experiences and emotions abroad.
- Set time aside each day to do something special and make sure you do it.
- Find a place you feel comfortable and spend time there.
- Talk to friends or counselors if you feel you have problems coping; try to look at your problems one at a time, and set out to solve them the same way.
- Avoid hanging out with other Americans who are disgruntled with the host culture and spend their time complaining.
- If you feel depressed, ask yourself these questions:
    - "What did I expect?"
      "Were my expectations reasonable?"
      "If so, what can I do to make them come true?"
      "If not, how can I make the best use of my time?"
- If you develop physical problems (i.e. headaches, stomachaches, insomnia), these may be signs of stress. Discuss your symptoms with a counselor or doctor, and learn to reduce/handle the stress.

What is Reverse Culture Shock?

The experience of studying abroad does not end upon return to the United States. Classes may be over but the student has another phase of adjustment--reverse culture shock. Readjusting to the home culture involves integrating the abroad experience with life in the U.S. It begins by saying good-bye to people and places abroad and renewing relationships at home. For some students the transition is easy; for others it is stressful. They may not feel that people at home can relate to their experiences abroad. However, there are many students on the Whitman campus who return each semester who often seek each other out for support.

The following are some suggestions given to students for counteracting reverse culture shock:

- Share feelings rather than experiences with friends or family (it sounds less like bragging).
- Become informed about the U.S. again. Things change and the student's information may be out of date. Learn the new "trends," such as styles, vocabulary, food and technology.
- Seek out others who have had international experiences they may want to share.
- Give people the two-minute answer to the question "How was your study abroad experience?" rather than the two-hour answer, or at least give them the choice.
- Find out what your friends and family did while you were gone. It shows interest in other people and encourages the sharing of experiences, not just the telling.

(From There and Back Again by Beulah F. Rohrlich and Survival Kit For Overseas Living by L. Robert Kohls)