

# Culture Shock

**Culture shock:** the anxiety produced when you move to a completely new environment. It's the feeling of not knowing what to do or how to do things in a new environment, and not knowing what is appropriate or inappropriate. It generally starts during the first few days/weeks of arriving in a new place.

Culture shock includes the physical and emotional discomfort you suffer when coming to live in another country or a place different from what you know. The way you lived before may not work in the new place. So much is different, from the language to banking, from telephone etiquette to flirting, from how you behave with a professor or a fellow student to how you schedule your day.

The symptoms of culture shock can show up at different times, and sometimes conflicting feelings overlap. Although you can experience real pain from culture shock, it's also an opportunity to learn about yourself, your own culture, and your host culture.

## **Symptoms may include:**

- Sadness, loneliness, melancholy
- Preoccupation with health
- Aches, pains, and allergies
- Insomnia or a desire to sleep too much
- Changes in temperament, including depression or feeling vulnerable, powerless, or lethargic
- Anger, irritability, resentment, or unwillingness to interact with others
- Identifying with the old culture or idealizing the old country
- Loss of identity
- Trying too hard to absorb everything in the new culture or country, or to abandon your own ways
- Inability to solve simple problems
- Lack of confidence or feelings of inadequacy or insecurity
- Developing stereotypes about the new culture
- Developing obsessions such as over-cleanliness
- Longing for family or homesickness
- Feeling lost, overlooked, exploited, abused, or misunderstood

# The Stages of Culture Shock

Culture shock has many stages, which may occur one by one or overlap.

1. The **honeymoon stage**: you may feel euphoric and be pleased by all the new things encountered. Everything seems wonderful and exciting.
2. You encounter some **difficult times** and crises in daily life. Miscommunication may occur. You may feel discontent, impatient, angry, sad, misunderstood, or even incompetent. This happens when you are trying to adapt to a new culture that's very different from your culture of origin. The transition between your ways of doing things and the way things are done in the new country is a difficult process and takes time to complete.
3. You begin to gain some **understanding** of the new culture. A new feeling of pleasure and a sense of humor may be experienced. You may start to feel a certain psychological balance, to feel less lost and to start having a feeling of direction. You have begun to be more familiar with the environment and you want to belong. This can initiate an evaluation, or even a comparison, of the old ways versus the new.
4. You gain **perspective**, realizing that the new culture has both good and bad things to offer. Sometimes this occurs while you are still getting to understand the new culture, or even while you are still feeling off-balance. Integration is accompanied by a more solid feeling of belonging.
5. "**Re-entry shock**" can occur when you return home. You may find that things are no longer the same. Some of your newly-acquired customs are not appropriate at home. On the other hand, some of the things you remember most fondly might have changed, or you might not like them any more.

These stages are present at different times and each person has his/her own way of reacting to culture shock. As a result, some stages are longer and more difficult than others. Many factors contribute to the duration and effects of culture shock: mental health, personality type, past experiences, socio-economic conditions, familiarity with the language, family and/or social support systems, and level of education will all affect how you experience living in a different culture.

# Ways to Fight Culture Shock: A Non-Exhaustive List

1. **Remember your strengths!** Remind yourself of your talents and abilities.
2. **Keep an open mind:** different is not necessarily better or worse. Try not to be judgmental; maintain tolerance for otherness.
3. **Keep your sense of humor.** If you can laugh, you will be better able to fight off embarrassment, fear, shame, despair, and some of the other reactions people sometimes feel when experiencing culture shock.
4. **Eat healthy** foods and get enough rest.
5. **Develop a hobby** (also a good way to meet people).
6. **Seek Additional Resources:** Remember that there are always resources that you can use, and don't be afraid or shy to ask for help.
7. **Be patient.** Adaptation is a process, and it takes time.
8. **If you encounter a problematic** situation and don't know how to handle it, ask someone you trust to help you understand it from a local perspective.
9. **Don't try too hard** to be like everyone else: you need to be flexible, but not to change your core self.
10. **Learn to include** a regular form of physical activity in your routine. This will help combat the sadness and loneliness in a constructive manner. Exercise, swim, take an aerobics class, etc.
11. **Relaxation and meditation** have proven to be very helpful for people who are passing through periods of stress.
12. **Be curious.** Ask questions – this will get you using English and learning colloquial phrases while learning important cultural cues and norms.
13. **Maintain confidence in yourself.** Follow your ambitions and continue your plans for the future.

# The American Classroom

## Classroom etiquette

- Food: ask the professor whether s/he will permit food and/or drink in the classroom
- Be on time for all lectures, labs, and other meetings. On time means on the dot, not five minutes late.
- Do ask questions. American education tends to be about analyzing information rather than accepting it whole, so listen, consider, and challenge when you disagree or want further clarification.
- Don't interrupt; professors will ask for questions. If you need to ask and the opportunity hasn't been offered, raise your hand and wait for the professor to recognize you.
- Address your professor with the title "Professor" rather than by his/her first name, unless s/he asks you to call him/her something else
- Respect fellow students' opinions, in the US diversity of opinions is expected in the classroom and on campus.

## Office hours

- Professors typically hold office hours each week. They may have students sign up for particular time slots, or may see them on a first-come, first-served basis.
- Office hours are a time to discuss papers, readings, lecture points you found troublesome, or any other matter relating to the course or the professor's field of expertise. Contact your professors if you need assistance, contrary to what you may think, they are there to assist you with your academic career.

## Readings

- Unlike syllabi at most universities, your course syllabus will list specific chapters, articles, or books and the dates by which to read them. Most professors relate their lectures back to the readings, so doing the readings on time will enhance your understanding of the topics presented in lecture. It is very difficult to catch up once you fall behind, so the schedule also helps you stay on track.

## Academic honesty

- In the US students are held to an Honor Code. It explains what constitutes cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic dishonesty.

- If you use something from a text to make an argument in a paper, you must cite it properly. Olin Library has several style guides to help you write proper footnotes, and the Writing Center also can help with this.

## Papers

- In your papers, you must make and support an argument, using what you have learned from lectures and course readings as well as independent readings.

## Assessment (quizzes, midterms, papers, etc.)

- At most US universities, and in most courses, professors will prepare a variety of mechanisms to test your progress: quizzes, short papers, midterms, research papers, labs, and final exams are among these.
- Your grade will be based on these factors, as well as class participation. This means you are expected to participate in class discussions and activities. Most professors will tell you what percentage of your grade will come from each component listed above.

## Independence vs. structured study

- US universities offer students more independence than most other universities in course choices and participation, but much less in how students must fulfill course expectations.
- You must attend class (it is appropriate – and appreciated -- to tell your professor in advance if you are unable to attend a session, and to explain why), read assigned texts, participate in class discussion and other activities, and complete all assigned papers, quizzes, and examinations.
- Attendance (or the lack thereof) is often noted.