

## **CULTURE SHOCK**

Living in a new culture can be exhilarating, personally rewarding, and intellectually stimulating. It can also be frustrating. It is one thing to visit a country, moving on when you have seen enough, and it is quite another to live there and function according to a different, and sometimes, mysterious set of norms. Participation in your chosen abroad program provides a rare opportunity for you to begin to know another society from within. But it involves certain responsibilities. The most obvious one is to adapt one's behavior to the customs and expectations of the host country. This is not to deny one's own culture but to respect that of others. Another, even more subtle, responsibility you have is to remain open in order to become aware of similarities and differences, to learn rather than to judge. This can be the most rewarding experience in your education.

## **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.

## REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK OVERVIEW

This section will discuss reverse culture shock -- the psychological, emotional and cultural aspects of reentry. While the phenomenon of culture shock is increasingly well known (and relatively well prepared for in the foreign affairs community), reverse culture shock is not as recognized and understood. This is due in part to the fact that people are returning home. So why should "returning home" result in culture shock?

1. **Voluntary versus involuntary reentry:** involuntary is worse
2. **Expected versus unexpected reentry:** unexpected is harder
3. **Age:** reentry may be easier for older people who have been through more life transitions.
4. **Previous reentry experience:** the first time is worse.
5. **Length of the overseas stay:** the longer the sojourn, the greater the chance for adaptation; hence the harder it may be to leave and come home.
6. **Degree of interaction with the overseas culture:** the more involved you become in the local culture the harder it may be to leave it behind.
7. **The reentry environment:** the more familiar and supportive the easier the reentry.
8. **Amount of interaction with the home culture during the overseas sojourn:** the more familiar the returnee is with changes in the home culture the easier the reentry.
9. **Degree of difference between the overseas and the home culture:** the greater the difference, the harder the reentry.

In contemplating your return, consider these three main points:

- Home has changed.
- You have changed.
- You have adapted to another culture and now you must readapt to your own.

## GENERAL CHALLENGES

- People at home aren't as interested in hearing about your foreign experience as you are in telling them about it.
- You aren't as interested in hearing about what has happened at home as they are in telling you about it.
- You miss being abroad.
- You miss the celebrity status of being an "American" overseas — at home, you don't stand out as much.
- You miss the "royal" treatment, lifestyle and social status you may have enjoyed abroad.
- You miss the tight-knit foreign affairs community you were a part of.

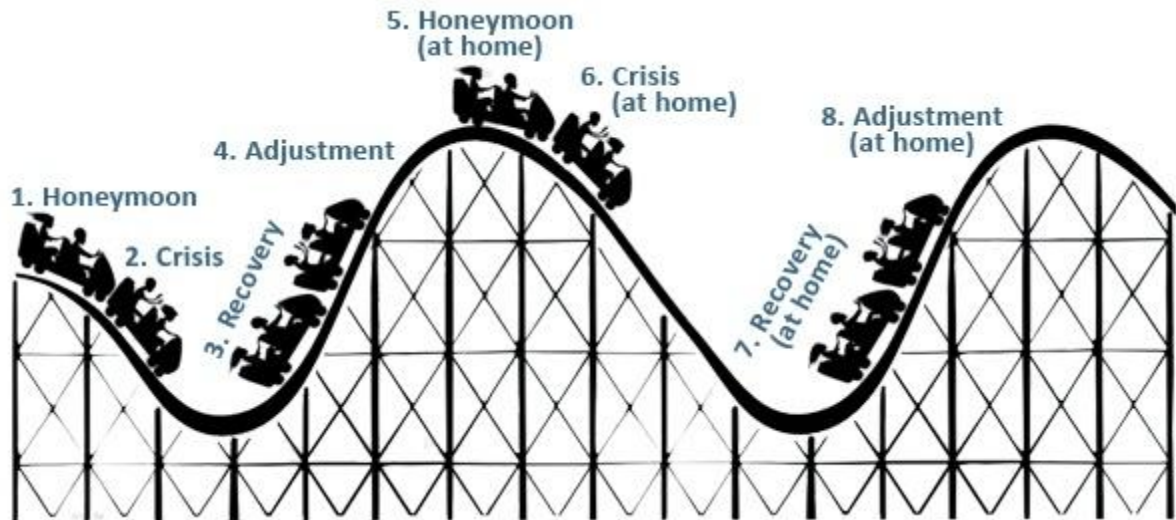
## CHALLENGES OF AMERICAN CULTURE

- **Materialism/Abundance/Waste** – Compared to many citizens of the world, Americans have expendable income. While this statement might not be true for all Americans, the majority tend to spend money on items that appear "material" to other cultures. Coming into this American environment from a culture that is less affluent may be a shock. Enter any well-stocked U.S. supermarket and the hundreds of food choices can boggle the mind if you have just arrived from a country with limited supplies and/or selection of goods.
- **High-speed pace of life** – America (for the most part) is a fast-paced place. People seem to always be in a hurry. While this "fast-paced existence" may be true in many cities around the world, if you come home from a "laid-back" culture to the land of fast food, 24/7 connectivity, and non-stop activities, it takes some time to get used to.
- **Values/Attitudes** – The values and attitudes of some of your family and friends may surprise you, especially if you have adopted new ways of thinking about the world from your experience living abroad.

## NEW ATTITUDES & VALUES OF SOJOURNERS

Americans often develop new attitudes, values and perceptions as a result of their travels. These can often cause stress on reentry.

- I see America through a sharper lens, both its strengths and weaknesses. I no longer take this country for granted and I really resent unbalanced criticism by Americans who haven't experienced the rest of the world.
- I see the validity of at least one other culture. That makes me realize that the American way is not always "right" or "best." I am impatient with people who criticize other countries and blindly accept everything American causing them to never question anything.
- I have an unclear concept of home now.
- I place more value on relationships than other Americans seem to. People here are too busy for one another.
- Everyone in America is always so stressed and frantic. They never relax. I feel like I can't relate to others.



### 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 your daily experiences in order to deepen your understanding of your experiences.

### **GOING GLOBAL COUNTRY CAREER GUIDES**

Check out the goingglobal website via the Moose under Career Services. The website is a good resource for not only students seeking jobs and careers abroad but also to gauge the cost of living there as well.

### **CULTURAL IMMERSION THROUGH HOMESTAYS**

If you have the opportunity to participate in a homestay in your host country, it can be an eye-opening experience. Remember that families come in all shapes and sizes -- no matter where you are in the world.

Your experience will depend as much on your cooperation, good will and courtesy as it does on the family's. While your family may be paid a small stipend for your room and board, no amount of money can adequately compensate them if they receive a "bad" student. You are a guest, even a boarder, and they will probably appreciate it if you: Bring a gift. Something that represents your home institution, your hometown or state is almost always well received. See the section on gifts in the Packing section. Help out with daily household tasks, such as washing the dishes. Ask permission to use the telephone and pay adequately for your calls. Remember that many host country telephone systems charge per "click" for telephone usage. This is very different, and more expensive, than the USA method of a monthly charge that covers local calls. Do not raid the refrigerator without express permission. Do not use excessive amounts of hot water. Water is a precious and expensive commodity in many countries and cultures. Be receptive to activities planned by your host family. Your homestay family and program leaders may well make arrangements to show you interesting sites in the area, but this may not always be possible during their work week. You should relax and be yourself. Try to be flexible and fit in with the family's routine. If you are unsure, try to take your cues from the family and ask polite questions. By all means, feel free to write or call your homestay family after your homestay is over. They will be interested in hearing about your studies and further adventures.

Keep these thoughts in mind as you travel to your host country(ies). The culture(s) to which you are going are different from the one(s) you know for some very good reasons, regardless of whether they are immediately visible to you or not. Moreover, it is for precisely this reason -- to study the differences between the two cultures -- which you are going abroad. So go there with an open mind, be prepared to change, and make the most of this experience!