

Culture Shock

From "Travelling Well" by Dr Deborah Mills (1997)

What is a "Culture Shock"?

"Culture Shock" is the temporary inability to cope with a different culture. It can be felt with varying degrees of severity. When symptoms are mild, it may be described as "Cultural Fatigue". "Reverse Culture Shock" can also develop on return to one's home country after an extended stay away.

Who is most at risk?

Culture Shock is most common in people going to live and work overseas for several years, even to English speaking countries.

Long term, budget travellers, to multiple countries may also experience it to varying degrees. Those travelling by themselves, and/or to countries where they do not speak the language, are particularly at risk. When couples move overseas, the non-working partner often suffers culture shock more intensely. They do not have a familiar work environment, and work mates to cushion the impact. They also tend to be the one out 'in the thick of it' e.g. trying to do the shopping, work out the transport system etc.

What causes Culture Shock?

(In essence, Culture Shock is due to an excess of novelty, which creates stress.)

Many of the rules you learned in childhood about how things work and how people behave . . . suddenly change. In a different country there are many new things to get used to and worry about; e.g. Time zone shifts, differences in weather, food, language money, tipping, taxes. Worries about avoiding illness, mugging, being ripped off, leaving things behind. Bus, train and air timetables take some figuring out. One often has to worry about where to stay, what to see, how much money this is all costing, and how important it is to have a good time. There are new people to meet, new cultures and costumes to understand. Each of the changes, by themselves is a small challenge and part of the adventure of travel. If they occur simultaneously, it is possible to become overloaded, which leads to stress.

Furthermore, all this change and stress occurs in the absence of the usual social support system of family and friends.

Preparation for departure is usually a major undertaking; e.g. leaving your job, perhaps training your replacement, selling the car and/or house, putting possessions into storage, organising finances, passports, visas, saying goodbye to all the relatives and friends etc. Often one arrives in the new country feeling exhausted and in need of a holiday . . . and instead, one is called on to deal with a dazzling array of new things.

Three stages of adaptation to a new culture . . .

Note that different members of a family may go through the stages at different times.

1. Excitement

Initially there is a great deal of excitement at being away, out of the rut, seeing the world and meeting new people.

2. Disappointment

After the initial excitement of being away from home has settled, it is not unusual to feel lonely. You may also feel extremely disappointed that the experience is 'not what it was cracked up to be'. Other symptoms commonly described are feeling anxious, depressed, tired, lacking in enthusiasm, bored, sleepy, homesick or emotionally on the edge. You may get cravings for 'normal' food or 'normal' behaviour. Culture shock may lead to unexpected crying. You may even decide you want to go home, and start fantasising about going home, explaining your behaviour to your friends etc. This is all fairly normal.

Culture Shock can even make you sick; stress can weaken the immune system and increase your susceptibility to diseases e.g. diarrhoea or the flu. If it is very severe, Culture Shock can make you pack your bags and head for home.

3. Adjustment

The excess of novelty is under control. One can enjoy new challenges and new culture. There is excitement of a different sort. So how do you make the transition from Disappointment to Adjustment? It takes time and patience. Some hints follow . . .

(Incidentally, if you are returning home after a long time overseas, it can take quite a long time to adjust back; this is known as 'reverse culture shock' and the hints to follow are mostly relevant for that too.)

Seven ways to deal with Culture Shock.

1. Be aware of it.

This is the first and most important step. It is *normal* to feel overwhelmed in such circumstances.

2. Get used to things gradually.

Don't expect to see too much or do too much all at once. Give yourself time e.g. months to get used to the many changes. Be patient!

3. Find yourself a mentor.

A mentor will help guide you through 'the system' most efficiently. Other expatriates are a valuable source of information and moral support. They will be able to give you advice on where to shop, who gives a good haircut etc.

4. Have a disaster plan.

It is comforting to know you could find a reliable help if you need medical advice urgently. Do a test run of the emergency procedures. Ring the insurance or assistance company. Know where to go, and if necessary, drive the road you would take. If possible introduce yourself to the doctor, let them know of any important medical history you may have e.g. allergies, medication etc. Find out the doctors hours, alternative arrangements if you get sick in the middle of the night, or injured over the weekend, find out how they charge etc. While you are there, you might want to arrange medical checkups for any employees you have e.g. for Tuberculosis. - the heavier they are, the better it is for you and them.

5. Take care of yourself.

- Get plenty of rest.
- Eat as well as you can.
- Stay fit.
- Plan fun activities or even little holidays, so you can have a laugh and keep your sense of humour. (in some postings, shore leave is a necessity not a luxury.)

6. Keep in touch with friends/support network.

Phone home, write letters, or e-mail.

7. Do not withdraw into yourself.

E.g. Learn some of the language so you can speak to the locals. Talk to other travellers. You will eventually find a balance between going 'feral' and becoming a hermit.