

What You Might Experience Coming to a New Place and Culture

Whenever you come to a new place, whether it is a new country or a new place of employment, you will face both the challenges of new cultural surroundings and the feelings of loss of a familiar cultural environment. Dealing with change is stressful. Facing the "Unknown" can be anxiety producing and fear provoking. We do not know what is going to happen. As a result, you can experience the simultaneous stimulation of learning new things, feelings of loss of familiar cultural cues and confusion, or even impotence, from different social rules. This has been called "Cultural shock and adaptation." This is a common process for anyone who comes to a new place and new culture. We all go through phases as we are adapting to a new culture. We hope that the following information will provide you some understanding about what you might experience.

1. *The honeymoon or tourist phase.* The first phase is the typical experience of people who enter other cultures for honeymoons, vacations, or brief business trips. It is characterized by interest, excitement, euphoria, sleeplessness, positive expectations, and idealizations about the new culture. The differences are exciting and interesting. Although there may be anxiety and stress, these tend to be interpreted positively.
2. *The crisis phase.* The crisis phase may emerge immediately upon arrival or be delayed but generally emerges within a few weeks to a month. A sense of lack of control of one's life may lead to depression, isolation, anger, or hostility. Excessive emotionality and fatigue may be accompanied by physical or psychosomatic illness. It may start with a full-blown crisis or as a series of escalating problems, negative experiences, and reactions. Culture shock may start immediately for some individuals when they enter the Airport or City. For others it develops over time. Although individual reactions vary, there are typical features of cultural shock. As things start to go wrong, minor issues may feel like major problems and cultural differences become irritating. One experiences increasing disappointments, frustrations, impatience, and tension. One may feel helpless, confused, disliked by others, or treated like a child due to language deficits. Feeling as if one is being taken advantage of or being cheated is typical. Becoming overly sensitive, suspicious, and paranoid with fears of being robbed or assaulted are also typical reactions. One may find innumerable reasons to dislike and to criticize the culture. Homesickness is common at this phase. Plans for learning the language may be postponed, problems escalate, and depression may become serious; one generally wants to go home, back to the familiar!
3. *The adjustment and orientation phase.* The third phase is concerned with learning how to adjust effectively to the new cultural environment. Resolution of cultural shock lies in learning how to make an acceptable adaptation to the new culture. A variety of adjustments will be achieved during cyclical and individually unique adjustment phases. There may be an adjustment without adaptation, such as flight or isolation. Many people who go to foreign countries do not adjust to achieve effective adaptation; instead, they opt to return home during the crisis phase. Others use various forms of isolation, for example, living in an ethnic enclave and

- avoiding substantial learning about the new culture, a typical lifetime reaction of many first-generation immigrants. If one desires to function effectively it is necessary to adjust and adapt. One develops problem-solving skills for dealing with the culture and begins to accept the cultural differences with a positive attitude. The culture begins to make sense, and negative reactions and responses to the culture are reduced as one recognizes that problems are due to the inability to understand, accept, and adapt. An appreciation of the other culture begins to emerge and learning about it becomes a fun challenge. During the adjustment phase the problems do not end, but one develops a positive attitude toward meeting the challenge of resolving the issues necessary to function in the new culture. Adjustment is slow, involving recurrent crises and readjustments.
4. *The adaptation, resolution, or acculturation stage.* The fourth stage is achieved as one develops stable adaptations being successful at resolving problems and managing the new culture. There are many different adaptation options, especially given diverse individual characteristics and goals. Although full assimilation is difficult, if not impossible, one will acculturate and may undergo substantial personal changes through cultural adaptation and the development of a bicultural identity. It is important to recognize and accept the fact that an effective adaptation will necessarily change the individual, leading to the development of a bicultural identity and the integration of new cultural aspects into one's previous self-concept. Reaching this stage requires a constructive response to cultural shock with effective means of adaptation.

The phases are both sequential and cyclical. The shift from crisis to adjustment and adaptation can repeat as one encounter new crises, requiring additional adjustments. One may become effectively bicultural and the adaptation phase becomes permanent.

If you need further understanding about what you are experiencing and what you can do about it, call Work/Life Connections-EAP Office at (615) 936-1327 to schedule an appointment, our experienced counselor will help you in every way we can to make your experiences in Vanderbilt a good one.

Adapted and modified by Helena Guo and edited by Jim Kendall from Winkelman, Michael (1994) Cultural shock and adaptation. Journal of Counseling and Development, 73, 121-133