

Adjusting to Life in the United States

It is normal and expected for a person who has just entered a new culture or community to feel overwhelmed, excited, nervous, sad, frustrated, happy etc. all at once. Moving away from friends, family, and the familiarity of home is both positively and negatively challenging. Do not be alarmed or surprised if you find yourself feeling confused or frustrated as you make the big move and adjustment to life in the United States. Remember that you are not alone. There are several places on campus where you can seek help and support if you are feeling overwhelmed. You are encouraged to contact ISSS and/or the Psychological and Counseling Center with any questions or concerns you have regarding your or your spouse's or dependents' transition to life in the United States. Remember, ISSS and the Psychological and Counseling Center are here to help students with this adjustment, so please use these services!

ISSS

322.2753

www.vanderbilt.edu/iss

Psychological and Counseling Services

322.2571

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/pcc/>

CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT STAGES

Adapting to a new culture is a continual process that lasts throughout one's stay. It is important to hold on to one's basic values, while inevitably assimilating to some new cultural values as well. Understanding the adjustment process helps both international students and U.S. citizens accept cultural differences and the occasional feelings of alienation and frustration that come with it. Common adjustment stages are outlined below:

HONEYMOON: Exhilaration and anticipation characterize the "Honeymoon Stage" when individuals are generally fascinated with all that is new and are open to meeting new people. However, in an enthusiasm to please, they may nod or smile to indicate understanding when in fact, they may not truly understand what is being said or done. When misunderstandings build, they are likely to experience the second stage of cultural adjustment.

HOSTILITY: Frustration, anger, anxiety, and sometimes depression take over during the "Hostility Stage". The initial excitement is replaced by frustration with bureaucracy and the weariness of speaking and listening in English. At this point, people may display hostility toward people of the new culture and minor frustrations may manifest into fear, mistrust, and lack of interest in the new culture.

HUMOR: The “Humor Stage” follows when the individual begins to relax in the new culture and to laugh at the minor mistakes and misunderstandings that previously caused headaches. This often occurs after the individual has gained friends and is able to manage the new environment.

HOME: The “Home Stage” occurs when the individual “feels at home” in the new culture yet retains allegiance to his or her home culture - gaining the ability to live successfully in two cultures.

U.S. CULTURE & CUSTOMS

GREETING PEOPLE

“Informal” often describes social and even professional life in the U.S. First names are often used. However, initial introductions, and in formal or business situations, it is better to address someone as Dr., Mr., Mrs., or Ms., then by first name if invited to do so. Students in the U.S. generally use first names with peers and last names with professors. “Hello” and “How are you?” are common greetings. “How are you?” is more a social convention than a genuine desire to hear about another person’s well-being. In addition to a verbal “Hello” or “Nice to meet you,” a handshake is a standard form of greeting for both men and women.

PERSONAL SPACE & ETIQUETTE

In the U.S., people lend considerable space between themselves and others. If a person backs away during a close conversation, the person is likely trying to reestablish a comfortable personal distance. People in the U.S. are concerned with personal cleanliness, bathing frequently and using a lot of soap and deodorant, but rarely cologne. Although this might seem exaggerated by other cultural standpoints, attention to personal hygiene is important for business and social success in the U.S.

TIME ORIENTATION

Despite an emphasis on informality, **punctuality is valued**. Meetings, social functions, classes, and other organized activities start within minutes of the established time. This applies to professional appointments as well as dinner with friends.

SOCIAL INTERACTION & VISITS

Casual acquaintances are easily made and easily lost. Closer **friendships** result from repeated interaction between people and the sharing of mutual interests and activities. The key is to participate in informal conversations, without letting insecurities

of language ability prevent an attempt at friendship. Informal social invitations can be easily misunderstood. People will occasionally say “Stop by sometime” or “Let’s get together” as a polite way of saying “Good-bye.” This is more a form of speech than an invitation. However, either individual may initiate a closer friendship by calling to arrange a get-together.

Host gifts, such as flowers or a memento from one’s home country, are appreciated but are not necessary. The host should be informed in advance of any dietary restrictions. It is acceptable to ask if anything contains ingredients that one cannot eat.

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