

What is culture shock and what can I do to avoid it?

Culture shock can be described as the feelings one experiences after leaving their familiar, home culture to live in another cultural or social environment. Many people associate culture shock only with extreme changes of going from one country to another, but it can also be experienced closer to home, such as when traveling from one city to another within your own country. Even the most open-minded and culturally sensitive among us are not immune to culture shock.

Phases:

Culture shock has three to five phases, depending on which source you read. Also, depending on factors such as how big the cultural difference is between your home and your new location, and how long one is away from home, a person may or may not experience all the phases.

The Honeymoon Phase: This is a fun time. Everything is great, exciting, and new. You love the differences, meeting new people, tasting new foods, seeing different architecture, doing new things, working in your new job. This phase can last days, weeks, or months.

The Honeymoon is Over Phase: During this phase, you're noticing differences, even slight differences, and typically not in a good way. You don't like people's attitudes, you have had enough of the food and just want mom's cooking, you miss your TV program at such-and-such a time, you don't like the water, it's too hot/cold, life is too fast/slow, things are so much "better" at home, they celebrate the wrong holidays, and so forth. There's no set time when this begins — with some people, it can be within days, with others, months. During this phase, a person often feels anxious, angry, frustrated, sad, and/or irritable. A person may withdraw and have difficulty concentrating at their new job.

The Negotiation Phase: As above, there is no set time in which this begins. Essentially, during this phase you decide whether you will succumb to negativity or negotiate past it to make the most of your experience. If you're successful, you regain your sense of perspective, balance, and humour, and move on to the next phase.

The All's Well, or Everything is OK Phase: Those who arrive at this phase feel more at home with the differences in the new culture. Depending on how big a change a person has experienced, the person may feel as if the culture isn't in fact new, but that they belong, or the person may not exactly feel part of the culture, but they're comfortable enough with it to enjoy the differences and challenges. Negative feelings are minimized. The person doesn't have to be in

love with the new country (as in the honeymoon phase), but they can navigate it without unwarranted anxiety, negativity, and criticism.

The Reverse Culture Shock Phase: Sure enough, this can happen! Once a person has become accustomed to the way things are done in a different country, that person can go through the same series of culture shock phases when they return home.

Dealing with Culture Shock

- Learn as much as you can about the new location before you go. This means the good, the bad, and the simply different — from time zones, to what side of the street people drive on, to climate/temperature, to foods, political system, culture, customs and religion(s), to "Can you drink the water?" and "What type of electrical outlets do they have?", and more. If there's a language difference, try to pick up a few simple **phrases**, e.g., hello, thanks, etc.
- Remember there will be people who fit the image you create of the typical "Person from Country X" and those who do not. Clinging to stereotypes won't help you to learn more about a new country and its people.
- Be open-minded and willing to learning. Ask questions. If you are going to a place where people speak a different language, consider taking a few courses in that language.
- *Maintain a sense of humor.* (Perhaps the most important!)
- Knowing that the move will be a challenge, give yourself time. Don't be hard on yourself.
- Don't withdraw! Continue to experience the new culture. Travel within the country, and visit cultural events and locations, such as museums or historic sites.
- Build new friendships.
- Associate with *positive* people.
- Stay active, eat well, and get enough sleep.
- Bring a few touches of home with you, such as photos of favorite locations and family members, your favorite music, or favored knickknacks.
- Keep in touch with people at home by Skype, email, phone, postcards — whatever. This can give you some comfort while away, and it will help you to minimize reverse culture shock when you get back home.