

**A Traveler's Guide
To Culture Shock**

**DON'T
PANIC**



The Dynamic of Culture Shock

Culture Shock is the term used to describe the negative emotional and physical side effects of operating in a different culture. Living and working in a new environment is tiring and creates stress because the behaviors and attitudes which have been used successfully in one's own culture often don't work in the new context.

Typical Reactions to Cultural Differences

- We over-value our own culture, thinking of it in positive, even glowing, moral terms: civilized, rational, well-organized, clean, advanced
- We under-value the new culture, highlight its "deficiencies," and see it in negative moral terms: backwards, inconsiderate, dirty, lazy, immoral
- We assume we're right and they're wrong.

Symptoms

- Blame
- Confusion
- Disorientation
- Embarrassment
- Fatigue/
exhaustion
- Frustration
- Irritability
- Surprise
- Tension
- A sense of
uprootedness
- Not knowing what
is going on
- apathy
- compulsive
eating or drinking
- decline in
efficiency
- depression
- emptiness
- exaggerated
homesickness
- negative
stereotyping of
nationals
- recurrent minor
illness
- spend unusual
amount of time
alone

Strategies to Minimize Culture Shock

Be Prepared

- Find out about the history and culture of your destination before you go to give you a framework for understanding what you see and experiences. Find out about the values of the society. Understand what they take seriously and why.
- Learn some phrases in the local language, starting with greetings and “thank you.” This shows the local people that you value them and it give you the chance to engage with them.
- Research cultural tips that are specific to your destination about things like taboos and ways to show good will or gratitude.
- Start a journal for your observations, thoughts, feelings, and what God is teaching you. Writing things down will help you keep them in perspective and make the most of what you’re learning.

Remember...

- Having an initial reaction to a stressful cross-cultural encounter is normal. How those you chose to deal with those reactions will make the difference between understanding and alienation.
- Life in a new culture will not be the same as it is at home, if it were, you should have stayed home.
- To enjoy the wide variety of new sights, sounds and experiences. You’re on an adventure - a wonderful opportunity to grow and learn.
- You are a guest in the host country. A customer may demand that their desires be met but a gracious guest receives with gratitude what their host offers them.
- Other people have thought patterns and values which are very different than yours, not necessarily better or worse, just different.
- Don’t judge the people of a country by the one person with whom you have a negative

experience. There are good and bad people in every culture, even your own.

- Your ability to communicate in a new context is no reflection on your IQ. It is easy to feel stupid and get down on yourself, but there is no reason. A five year old might speak the new language better than you do, but he or she has been working on it for...five years.
- Don't make offers or promises to local, new friends that you cannot implement or carry through. Be especially wary of giving them things like clothing or shoes or offering them a place to stay when they visit the US (unless you mean for them to take you up on it and are willing to be responsible for their need while they are your guests.)
- To take care of your basic physical needs: get enough rest; get some exercise; stay hydrated; eat your vegetables; etc.

Ongoing Conscious Efforts

- Do travel in a spirit of humility. Fight the tendency to pass judgment based on your cultural values. Instead, start out assuming that they know what they are doing and their behavior is based in their experience in the way things work in their context and their belief system. Try to discover the reasons behind the issue.
- Be a good ambassador for your country, your church, and the Kingdom.
- Do meet and talk with local people. Making friends will help you get the most out of your experience.
- Look for the positive things around you. Try to find something of value in every new experience and challenge you come across.
- Keep your sense of humor. Be able to laugh at yourself.
- Cultivate the habit of listening and observing, rather than merely seeing and hearing.
- Break the "ugly American" stereotype. American media and some tourists have fostered the idea around the world that Americans are loud,

arrogant, rude, impatient, selfish, insensitive, immodest, and overly sexual. Try not to live up to their expectations.

- Don't make comparisons between the host country and yours in front of local people. They will feel belittled when you talk about things back home that are bigger, better, faster, etc. You may think you are just pointing out differences but it is easy for your comments to come across as boastful.

When You're Feeling the Effects of Culture Shock...

- If you are struggling, tell someone! Although your teammates may be supportive, it will probably be most helpful to talk with someone experienced in managing cross cultural stress like a team leader, a missionary, an ex-pat, etc.
- Step back from a given event that has bothered you to get some perspective. Talk it through with a cultural interpreter, someone who has insight into the differences and can help you get a clearer perspective on the issues. Ask them how they would have handled the situation. Search for an appropriate explanation and response.
- Do a self check to try to identify something you need to do to get yourself in a better place physically or emotionally: get some exercise, get some alone time, get some sleep, etc.
- Identify similarities and differences between your home and host culture. Identifying similarities will be of a comfort to you. Identifying differences will help you to pinpoint sources of stress and possible strategies for relieving some the stress.
- Talk with a native of the culture about what they love about their home. This will help you see the positive part of the culture and will help you reengage with the people.
- Don't lose sight of your goal. When things get tough, remind yourself why you're there.