

CULTURE SHOCK & ADJUSTMENT

Working and living overseas can be one of life's truly enriching experiences. For some however, adjustment to the new environment is very difficult. Four distinct stages of adjustment are known to occur and being aware of these stages along with adequate pre-travel preparation will greatly reduce culture shock and help integration into the new environment.



THE PROBLEM.

Culture shock is the failure of an individual to adjust to a new physical and cultural environment. Common symptoms of culture shock include low-level anxiety, depression, lethargy, and lack of enthusiasm, boredom, excessive sleeping, irritability, homesickness and increased susceptibility to disease. These are unpleasant to the individual and can be incredibly costly (20-30% of workers require premature repatriation). It is not only the worker who is affected, but also the family and often it is the inability of the family to adjust that result in early repatriation. Culture shock can also occur on return to the original culture, especially after prolonged stays in foreign countries.



WHY DOES CULTURE SHOCK OCCUR?

Modern living in our home environment produces stresses to which most of us adapt. Working in a new environment produces a whole range of new stresses (as shown below).

Categories of new stresses in the overseas work environment.

The Country	The Job or Position	The Community	The Culture
Jet lag	Need for new skills	Transportation	Customs
Weather	New responsibilities	Communication	Social behaviour
Food	New colleagues	Shops and services	Values and attitudes
Language			
Absence of family & friends			

Excessive stress can produce psychological problems and impaired immune function leading to susceptibility to various diseases or worsening of chronic illness.



STAGES OF ADJUSTMENT.

People usually go through distinct stages of adjustment during their time overseas. Understanding these can help reduce culture shock.

Stage One: Enthusiasm and Excitement.

Over the first week or so the new environment appears very exotic and we feel very positive. There is generally little interaction with the new environment at this stage.

Stage Two: Withdrawal and Loneliness.

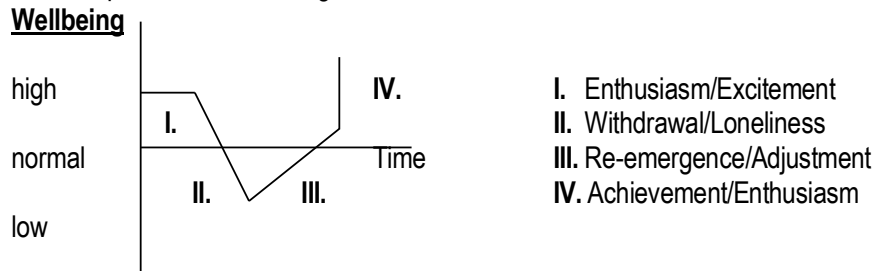
In this stage, the individual begins to interact with the culture, but may find the behaviour of the people unusual and unpredictable, which triggers reaction and dislike of the culture. This reaction can cause anxiety, stress and withdrawal. The individual may begin to criticise the culture, the people and may want to go home. This stress combined with incomplete physical adaptation to the new environment predisposes to illness. This stage often occurs 2-4 weeks after arrival. Staying stuck in this stage is a major cause of early home repatriation, especially in the non-working partner. Support through this phase along with an awareness of its temporary nature is vital.

Stage Three: Re-emergence and Adjustment.

In this stage, the individual begins to understand the behaviour of the people and feels more comfortable with the culture. The individual feels less isolated as the customs and conditions become more familiar. They learn to get around the community and country, and regain a sense of humour. This stage generally occurs in the second month.

Stage Four: Achievement and Enthusiasm.

In the final stage, the individual enjoys being in the culture and they function easily. Positive aspects of the new culture are perceived and a sense of belonging begins. The stages of adjustment are represented in the diagram below:



TECHNIQUES FOR ENHANCING CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

A number of techniques can minimise culture shock and speed adjustment. Everyone suffers from a degree of culture shock. Just knowing this will help adjustment.

1. Try to cultivate a positive attitude by recognising that it is normal to feel overwhelmed. Remember that you have survived and grown from transitions in the past and this will not be different.
2. Confide in a mentor or a national from the host country that understands the locals and who will answer questions.
3. Make an effort to socialise with others, rather than withdrawing from social contact. Keep in touch with family and friends back home.
4. Make an effort to learn the local language, even minimally as this is always appreciated by local people.
5. Reach out beyond the expatriate community to enrich your own experience of the host country's people.
6. Maintain good physical care including plenty of rest, proper nutrition and regular aerobic exercise.
7. Reduce stress by using breathing and relaxation techniques.
8. List pleasurable activities and hobbies enjoyed at home and maintain these where possible in the new location.
9. Limit your expectations. Getting even small errands done may take all day. This is normal!
10. Avoid coping by using alcohol and drugs – these are short-term fixes that will worsen the situation in the long term.
11. Maintain your sense of humour, especially in difficult situations.

PRE DEPARTURE ORIENTATION.

Pre departure preparation can greatly reduce culture shock. This orientation should include:

1. Involvement of spouses and children in pre travel preparation.
2. Use of organisations specialising in all aspects of re-locating.
3. Research into the country of destination.
4. Information on one's own culture as a basis for comparison on the new culture.
5. Discussion with former expatriates.
6. A discussion of culture shock and the stages of adjustment.
7. Pre-travel assessment to identify potential health problems.

