Culture Shock

Studying abroad is challenging in a very personal way. You will find yourself examining your own assumptions and your own way of life frequently as you immerse yourself in something new and different. Change is inherent in studying abroad. In fact, adapting to change is one of the skills you will gain from your experience. However, change can sometimes be uncomfortable and overwhelming. These feelings are normal and are shared by most people who have traveled and lived abroad. We call these feelings Culture Shock.

Culture Shock is not something that you catch and then quickly get over; it is a cycle of readjustment that may take quite a while. The cycle is marked by four basic phases and most people experience at least two low periods during their stay abroad. The length and severity of these low periods vary greatly for different individuals and it is important for both students abroad and their parents at home to be aware of these phases. The four basic phases of culture shock are:

EUPHORIA

This is the initial phase or tourist phase. You are excited about living in a new place, and at first glance it strikes you that the people and their way of life are not that different from what you are used to. Cultural differences are viewed as "charming."

IRRITATION AND HOSTILITY

After the initial excitement is over, you start noticing more and more dissimilarities between life in the foreign country and life at home. Your initial curiosity and enthusiasm turns into irritation, frustration, anger, and depression. Minor nuisances and inconveniences lead to catastrophic upsets. Symptoms experienced during this phase include:

Homesickness

Boredom

Withdrawal (e.g., spending excessive amounts of time reading, only seeing other Americans, avoiding contact with local people)

Need for excessive amounts of sleep

Compulsive eating or drinking

Irritability

Exaggerated cleanliness

Stereotyping of or hostility toward local people

Loss of ability to work effectively

Unexplainable fits of weeping

Physical ailments (psychosomatic illness)

This second phase of culture shock is the most difficult period. Many people only experience a few of these symptoms, but it is helpful to be aware of these symptoms so that you can understand what is happening to you or your friends, and can take steps to counteract them. Remember, culture shock is normal even among the most experienced travelers.

GRADUAL ADJUSTMENT

Over time you gradually will change your perspective and will adapt to the new culture. Once you begin to orient yourself and are able to interpret some of the subtle cultural clues and cues, the culture will seem more familiar and more comfortable. You feel less isolated and your self-confidence returns.

ADAPTION

Full recovery has occurred when you are able to function in two cultures with confidence. At that time you will find that you enjoy some of the very customs, ways of doing and saying things, and personal attitudes that bothered you so much in phase two. You may not realize how well you have adjusted to the new culture until you return to the U.S., at which point you may well experience REVERSE culture shock.

HOW TO COPE WITH CULTURE SHOCK

Since culture shock is a cycle of readjustment, people who make the eff ort to learn as much as possible about their temporary home country before they leave, and who arrive abroad with an open mind, often find it much easier to adjust. To make the transition easier, remember not to wait for people around you to make the first move, but start reaching out right away: buy a map of the city and become familiar with your own neighborhood; find out where the closest bank, post office, telephone, and grocery store are located. Your next step might be to familiarize yourself with some of the basic names and phrases which appear on signs, menus, etc. Even most English-speaking countries use many phrases which are unfamiliar in the U.S. A British passer-by will not know that you are looking for a chemist when you are asking for a drug store. Some other ways of coping with culture shock are:

- Listen carefully to people and remember that they most likely are not making the same assumptions as you are. If you are not sure of what they mean, ask.
- Speak the host language as often as possible.
- If you have certain hobbies or are involved in sports at home, try to do the same abroad. This is the best way to make friends.
- Set time aside each day to do something special. Then do it. Keep active.
- Find a place where you feel comfortable and spend time there.
- Talk to (new) friends or your program directors if you feel that you have problems coping; try to look at your problems one at a time, and set out to solve them, one at a time. Do not let the combination of problems overwhelm you.

If you feel depressed, ask yourself, "What did I expect?" "Were my expectations reasonable given the national culture and local situation?" "If so, what can I do to make them come true?" "If not, how can I make the best use of my time?" If you develop physical problems, such as headaches, stomachs aches, or have trouble sleeping, realize that these may be signs of stress, rather than physical problems. Discuss your symptoms with your director or the international office of your host university, and try to deal with the stress.

UNDERSTANDING YOURSELF AND YOUR CULTURE

Adjusting to a new culture requires a good amount of examination of your own values and outlook. Many students come back more appreciative of their own customs and culture, as well as of those of the host country. One way to prepare yourself for living in a new culture, and for dealing with culture shock, is to have a clear idea of your own goals and your possible contribution abroad. What do you hope to do or learn abroad? What are you personal values and how might they be viewed in the foreign culture? What can you bring to the foreign culture? It also may be helpful for you to realize how people in foreign countries tend to view Americans and why.

Before going abroad, take a look at the recent historical and political developments in the countries you will be visiting, and ask yourself how, if you were in their shoes, you would most likely perceive Americans. You will find that Americans are no longer the heroes of World War II, and have not always endeared themselves to people in other countries. In fact, due to anti-Americanism abroad, people may not want to get to know you at first.

Some stereotypes you may encounter abroad are beliefs that Americans are:

Outgoing, friendly
Informal, disrespectful of authority
Loud, rude, boastful, immature
Hard working
Extravagant, wasteful
Confident that they have all the answers
Lacking in class consciousness
Racially prejudiced
Ignorant of other countries
Wealthy, generous
Always in a hurry, selfish

It is also commonly believed that:

All American women are promiscuous

American students abroad are looking only to party

Given the content of American movies and television shows, and the behavior of some Americans abroad, you probably have a good idea of how some of these perceptions may have arisen. Before you decide to unpack and stay home, however, there are a few things you may want to keep in mind. First of all, not all foreigners believe that all Americans are this way, and there are several things you can do to counteract these perceptions. Second, some of these perceptions are based on cultural differences. For example, in several countries, people speak in a softer voice than in the U.S.; hence people in these countries perceive Americans as speaking loudly. Similarly in many other countries, people are not used to calling acquaintances by first names and they consider Americans to be disrespectful or informal. Cultural differences may also mean that while most Americans perceive some of the above-mentioned traits as positive (i.e. "lacking in class consciousness"), people in other countries see them as negative. You may also find that people in other countries place less emphasis upon individual

achievement and results, and are less task-oriented. They also frequently place less emphasis upon being self-reliant and are more willing to depend upon others. To Americans, people in other cultures frequently seem too relaxed or even lazy, and not concerned enough about meeting schedules and deadlines. Again, the best way of coping with certain preconceptions is to keep an open mind, and to try to understand why people feel, think, or behave in a certain way. Logic, arguments, and denials will not convince people that you are different from what they previously thought.