

## Understanding Cultural Adjustment in Study Abroad

*Students go through cultural adjustment when they spend a period of time studying abroad. It's important for parents to understand these phases and adjustments as they communicate with their son/daughter during the time abroad and when they return back to the home culture.*

### What is Culture Shock?

“**Culture Shock**” is a term used to describe the more pronounced reactions to the psychological disorientation most people experience when they go abroad for an extended period of time into a culture markedly different from their own. In a sense, culture shock is the occupational hazard of overseas living through which one has to be willing to go through in order to have the pleasures of experiencing other countries and cultures in depth. Culture shock comes from being cut off from the cultural cues and patterns that are familiar including the subtle, indirect ways in which one normally has of expressing feelings. Also, having one's values continually brought into question while in a new culture can be challenging.

When a student returns from their time abroad, “**reverse culture shock**” can occur in which the cultural adjustment process happens but from the culture in which the student has spent the time abroad to the home culture. It is usually said that it takes the same amount of time to adjust to the home culture upon returning as the duration of the time abroad.

### Phases of Culture Shock

Culture shock (going and living in a foreign country) often consists of distinct phases. Not everyone moves through the phases and not everyone is in the new culture long enough to pass through all four:

***Honeymoon Phase*** - During this period the differences between the old and new culture are seen in a romantic light, wonderful and new. For example, in moving to a new country, an individual might love the new foods, the pace of the life, the people's habits, the buildings and so on.

***"Everything is awful" phase*** - After a few days, a few weeks, or a few months, minor differences between the old and new culture begin to add up to become tiresome and annoying. One may long for food the way it is prepared "back home," may find the pace of life too fast or slow, may find the people's habits annoying, etc.

***"Everything is OK" phase*** - Again, after a few days, weeks or months, one grows accustomed to the new culture's differences and develops routines. At this point, an individual no longer reacts to the new culture positively or negatively, because it no longer feels like a new culture. An individual becomes concerned with basic living again, as they were in their original culture.

***Reverse Culture Shock*** - Returning to one's home culture after growing accustomed to a new one can produce the same effects as described above.

## **Symptoms of Culture Shock**

Some things you might notice about someone when they are experiencing culture shock:

- Homesickness
- Boredom
- Fatigue
- Illness
- Unexplainable Crying
- Stereotyping of your host culture
- Compulsive eating
- Excessive Sleeping
- Loss of ability to work effectively

## **Coping Strategies for Culture Shock (for students)**

- Be aware of what is happening.
  - Be patient; don't try to understand everything immediately.
  - Talk to your fellow study abroad students.
  - Find fellowship & support in a church/community on-campus.
  - Keep a journal.
  - Keep yourself occupied: Find a new activity to do at school or home.
  - Develop friendships with other students- Choose friends wisely.
  - Take care of yourself by exercising, getting enough sleep, eating proper, and doing things you enjoy.
  - Write a letter home to your family.
  - Reflect on your goals and why you decided to study abroad.
  - Concentrate on your goals for the day/week/month/year.
  - Think about the positive aspects of your host country- Try not to dwell on negative aspects.
  - Keep your sense of humor! Don't take things too seriously.
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