

# Culture Shock

## What Is It?

Culture shock isn't a clinical term or medical condition. It's simply a common way to describe the confusing and nervous feelings a person may have after leaving a familiar culture to live in a new and different culture. When you move to a new place, you're bound to face a lot of changes. That can be exciting and stimulating, but it can also be overwhelming. You may feel sad, anxious, frustrated, and want to go home.

It's natural to have difficulty adjusting to a new culture. People from other cultures (whom you'll be hanging out with and going to school with) may have grown up with values and beliefs that differ from yours. Because of these differences, the things they talk about, the ways they express themselves, and the importance of various ideas may be very different from what you are used to. But the good news is that culture shock is temporary.



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## What Causes Culture Shock?

To understand culture shock, it helps to understand what culture is. You may know that genes determine a big part of how you look and act. What you might not know is that your environment — your surroundings — has a big effect on your appearance and behavior as well.

Your environment isn't just the air you breathe and the food you eat, though; a big part of your environment is culture. Culture is made up of the common things that members of a community learn from family, friends, media, literature, and even strangers. These are the things that influence how they look, act, and communicate. Often, you don't even know you're learning these things because they become second-nature to you — for instance, the way you shake hands with someone when meeting them, when you eat your meals each day, the kind of things you find funny, or how you view religion.

When you go to a new place, such as a new country or even a new city, you often enter a culture that is different from the one you left. Sometimes your culture and the new culture are similar. Other times, they can be very different, and even contradictory. What might be perfectly normal in one culture — for instance, spending hours eating a meal with your family — might be unusual in a culture that values a more fast-paced lifestyle.

The differences between cultures can make it very difficult to adjust to the new surroundings. You may encounter unfamiliar clothes, weather, and food as well as different people, schools, and values. You may find yourself struggling to do things in your new surroundings that were easy back home. Dealing with the differences can be very unsettling; those feelings are part of adjusting to a new culture.

## **How Does It Feel?**

One person's adjustment to a new culture is not necessarily like another's. In some situations, people are excited about their move. Though they may feel a little sad about leaving important people and places behind, they think of the move as a new adventure, or they've heard great things about the place that will become their new home. Some people stay this way. But difficulties adjusting often don't show up right away. In some people, the excitement gives way to frustration as time goes on and they still have trouble understanding their new surroundings.

On the other hand, there are people who never wanted to move in the first place. Their frustration starts the day they realize that they have to move to a new place, when they're perfectly happy where they are. It continues as they find out just how unfamiliar their new home is.

Though people experience culture shock in different ways, these feelings are common:

- not wanting to be around people who are different from you
- sadness
- loneliness
- anxiety
- trouble concentrating
- feeling left out or misunderstood
- developing negative and simplistic views of the new culture
- frustration
- extreme homesickness

These difficult feelings may tempt you to isolate yourself from your new surroundings and dismiss the new culture. It's best not to withdraw like this. If you stay calm, observe and learn, and keep things in perspective, you'll probably find that your difficulties will pass. But if you're feeling depressed and you aren't able to function normally even after the first few months in your new environment, you should talk to a parent or trusted adult about whether to seek help from a physician or mental health professional.

So how do you deal with the frustration and fears you may be having? How can you begin to feel comfortable in your new surroundings?

## **Learning the Language**

Depending on where you come from and where you are now, you may or may not have trouble with the native language. It's a good idea to become comfortable with the language as soon as you can. Not being able to understand what people are saying is almost as frustrating as not knowing how to make people understand what you are saying.

Lots of good resources are around to help you practice. Many schools with a good number of students new to the country have language classes. If your school doesn't offer one, check out some of the community centers and libraries in your area. In addition, books make good resources too, and even some websites.

Whatever method you choose, practice is really important. A lot of people are worried about speaking a language they aren't completely comfortable with and think that people who speak the

language well will tease them when they stumble over words. This might tempt you to practice the language with someone who is at the same comfort level as you, but it's also important to practice with people who have mastered the language, so that you know when you make a mistake and learn from it.

It might make you uncomfortable when it takes you twice as long to say the same thing as a native speaker, or use the wrong word, but remember that you have nothing to be ashamed of. Even if you're familiar with the new language spoken around you, chances are you don't know a lot of the slang — casual speech that doesn't make it into translation dictionaries (or most dictionaries, for that matter). This is one of the many reasons why it's a good idea to do some studying on the culture you are immersed in.

## **Knowing What to Expect**

A lot of the anxiety that comes with moving to a new place has to do with not knowing what to expect in your new environment. Learning things about your new environment will help you become more comfortable.

School is a great place to do this. Watch and learn from the people around you — see how the students interact with teachers and each other. Find out what your classmates do for fun and what kinds of things are important to them.

You can also get some insight from television and movies, but be careful — not everything you see on the screen is meant to be realistic. But these media do help if you're still trying to learn the language or catch up on some slang, and at the very least, give you something to talk about when you're trying to make a new friend.

You don't have to love everything you find out about the culture, or start acting the way that others do, but when you gain knowledge of what people mean when they say certain phrases or why they dress a certain way, you do begin to feel better.

## **Coping With Teasing**

Your accent might be different from everybody else's. Your clothes may also be very different from those around you. Sometimes it can be really difficult being different, especially when compared to the other kids at school. But some people at your school will want to get to know you because your differences seem really cool. Other people, though, might try to give you a hard time.

Some of the people who may try to tease you might do so because of stereotypes. Stereotypes are simplified ideas, often exaggerated or distorted in a negative way, that one group of people holds about another. An example of a stereotype would be everyone with curly hair is lazy. Like this example, stereotypes are often wrong, and they can be hurtful.

If someone harasses you, walk away — don't give the person the satisfaction of seeing that his or her comments bother you. If you can't shake off the comments, talk about it with good friends, siblings, or parents. The people who love you and know that you're a great person can often help you understand that the bully has no idea what he or she is talking about. It also helps to find people at school to hang out with who are cool enough not to care what the bully says.

As much as you would hate to be boxed into a certain type, try and get away from doing the same to others. These characterizations are just as unfair as the ones people might use to describe you. And beliefs in these can get in the way of making some good friends.

## **Your Family**

It's important to realize that some people have an easier time adjusting to a new culture than others. Sometimes, if members in your family are having an easy transition, they'll be a great source of support — a group of people who are going through something very much like what you're going through. In addition, your family can be a big part of keeping ties to home.

But sometimes, members of your family might want to keep your ties to home too tight. Your parents might not expect the changes that may happen as you begin to learn more about your new culture. Or, they might need your help as they try and learn the new culture, especially if you have a better grasp on the language. Be patient with them; chances are they're trying to manage their culture shock — just like you.

## **Help If You Need It**

You can do a lot to help yourself adjust to a new culture. But don't forget that you aren't alone — there are people you can go to who can help:

- **Family and friends.** Find someone who has experience with culture shock — maybe an older relative who moved to the area before you did. Find out how they handled the newness of their surroundings.
- **Counselors.** If you don't know someone who has been through what you're going through, try talking to counselors and teachers at your new school. They've been trained to help all students deal with a wide variety of concerns. Although they may not have personal experience with culture shock, they do have experience with helping people deal with rough times.
- **New friends.** Making friends who aren't new to the culture may help you understand the culture better and have someone to talk to when you're feeling down.

Rather than giving up your culture so you can fit in, keep your mind open to new ways of doing and thinking about things. Notice things that are the same and things that are different.

Appreciating that variety is what makes people so interesting.

## **Maintaining Your Culture**

Everyone feels the pressure to fit in at one time or another — whether they've lived in the area for days or years. But don't feel like you need to change everything about yourself so you can stand out less. All of your experiences before you came to your new home are part of you, and what makes you special.

Here are a few tips for making sure your new culture doesn't overpower the old:

- **Educate people about your culture.** Just because you're the one entering the new culture doesn't mean you should be the one doing all the learning. Take the opportunity to teach classmates and new friends about your culture; they may know little about it. It will also help them to learn more about you in the process. Invite them over for traditional dishes from your culture, or show them how you celebrate your holidays.
- **Find a support group.** Find kids in your class or neighborhood who recently moved, too. You can share experiences, cheer each other up when things get rough, and introduce each other to the new friends you've made.
- **Keep in touch with home.** You probably left behind good friends and family when you moved. If it's going to be a long time until your next visit, keep in touch. Write letters, emails, and — if your parents are OK with it — make an occasional phone call so you can stay up-to-date on the things happening there, and talk about your new experiences. You've not only left behind people, but also other things — like your favorite spot to hang out. Keep pictures around to remind you of home.

Remember, the key to getting over your culture shock is understanding the new culture and finding a way to live comfortably within it while keeping true to the parts of your culture that you value.

It's important to be yourself. Try not to force yourself to change too fast or to change too many things all at once. You will have your own pace of adjusting. Everyone goes through changes in their life, and it may seem that you are going through more changes than the average person — but as long as you hold on to what's important to you and find a good combination between old and new, you'll be fine.

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Date reviewed: August 2009



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