CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

Studying abroad is often an exciting and challenging experience, and it means making big changes in your daily life. You will go through some sort of “cultural adjustment,” or transition into a new culture. Some researchers describe four stages of cultural adjustment; others believe it is a six-step process; still others believe it is an ongoing process including time before and after your stay abroad. Not everyone experiences exact stages but most travelers will go through highs and lows – the positive as well as the negative aspects of living in a new culture. Most people experience “culture shock” as part of this process. The general stages of cultural adaptation most people experience are described below.

**A Curve of Cultural Adjustment**

![Curve of Cultural Adjustment Diagram](image)

**Pre-departure Anxiety**
There are a lot of preparations to make before living in another country. It can be nerve-wracking to say goodbye to your friends and family. People often get overwhelmed with the details of their preparations.

**The Honeymoon**
This stage is characterized by **exhilaration, anticipation and excitement**. Just like the beginning of many new relationships, the first reaction to a new culture is often euphoric. You have finally arrived in the U.S. after months or even years of planning! The differences in scenery, food, language, or customs can be exhilarating! During this period you may show extreme eagerness in pleasing people and cooperating with others. In your eagerness to please, you may forget to tell people when you do not understand something. When experiencing some difficulties with simple things like, for instance, making telephone calls, or using public transport, you tend to down-play negative emotions.
**Initial Culture Shock**
This is when the differences that first were so exciting to you are now frustrating. For many, the shock can come at the first meal when familiar foods are nowhere to be found. For others, it is the realization that speaking a second language all day is not only exhausting; it’s frustrating to feel limited in your communication. For others, the initial shock is an accumulation of many factors, including the lack of familiar faces and cultural cues.

**Surface Adjustment**
This can occur when you have settled into a new routine. Maybe you have successfully registered and made it to your classes. Perhaps you’ve met some people in your classes that seem like they will become friends.

**Culture Shock**
This stage is characterized by frustration, anger, anxiety and sometimes depression. There may be unresolved cultural conflicts in the classroom, with friends, or with the society in general. You may find yourself frustrated with the college bureaucracy and tired of speaking and listening in English every day. You may feel upset because although you have studied English, you do not feel as though you understand those around you. You may begin to blame the external environment for your uncomfortable feelings. You may feel isolated and become withdrawn from life around you. You seek security in the familiar. Many academic problems begin at this stage.

**True Cultural Learning**
Moving out of culture shock and into adaptation and adjustment is not simply a matter of feeling better. Rather, it requires understanding the reasons behind culture shock and developing personal strategies for dealing with cultural differences. Most sojourners cannot do this process alone: get help from others with international experience or from International Center staff to understand U.S. culture and appropriate coping strategies.

**Adaptation and Adjustment**
It takes time to adapt and adjust to your new environment, but adjustments will lead to an easing of tense feelings, relaxation and openness. Skills you developed in previous transitions will help you when you encounter future intercultural challenges. Adjusting and adapting to a new culture requires the ability to know yourself well and to know the ways of the culture and its expectations of you. At this time you begin to relax in your new situation and are even able to laugh at minor mistakes and misunderstandings, which previously would have caused major headaches in other stages. You will become more relaxed after you have made some friends and are able to manage the size and complexity of the University. You begin to feel more comfortable with your studies and do well taking tests.

Further adaptation is characterized by greater comfort levels in the U.S. and an appreciation for the home country. During this stage, you not only retain allegiance to your home culture, but you also feel at home in the U.S. You have made a significant adjustment to the norms and standards of the University and the new community and environment in which you now live, and your self-esteem grows. You can accept the negative differences and tolerate them.

**Re-entry shock or adjustment**
The challenges of going home can be many – the most significant can be that you did not expect it to be hard to come home. It can be difficult, no matter how excited you are to see family and friends. Moreover, it can be hard to make sense of your experiences in the U.S., especially if you have to immediately find a job or return to your studies. With reentry, the goal is not to jump right back into everything exactly as it was before your time in the U.S. - otherwise, why did you leave? You want to put your new found skills to good use: seeing things from another point of view, speaking another language, and learning of another area of the world. Staying connected with other international alumni is one strategy that can lessen the shock of reentry.
CULTURE SHOCK
Let’s discuss culture shock a bit more in depth, as this can be the most distressing part of your cultural adaptation. As you embark upon an exciting journey of studying abroad in the U.S. you may experience some confusion, discomfort, and disorientation while trying to adapt to a new culture. This discomfort, as you are “culturally adapting,” is known as culture shock. Some people are affected by culture shock more than others, but rest assured culture shock is a very normal process in which nearly everyone goes through.

Some possible indicators of culture shock include:

- Feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, irritability, loneliness
- Homesickness
- Sleeping more than usual
- Feeling depressed
- Getting angry easily
- Stereotyping of host country/culture
- Increase in physical ailments or pains
- Compulsive eating or lack of appetite
- Boredom or fatigue
- Extreme cleanliness
- Unexplainable crying
- Emotional & intellectual withdrawal

MINIMIZING THE IMPACT OF CULTURE SHOCK

- Be aware of the existence of cultural adjustment. Realize it is natural to miss your family, friends and home. Talk about these feelings with someone you feel comfortable with.
- Find friends from your home country to talk with. However, try not to spend all of your time with fellow nationals. Resist making jokes, stereotypes and negative comments about Americans and the U.S. Try, instead, to focus on the positive aspects of this new culture.
- Find an American to be a “cultural informant” in order for you to gain a proper prospective. Be curious and don’t be afraid to ask questions and get genuine feedback about your interpretation of American customs, values and behavior. People will enjoy responding to your interest in understanding Americans.
- Maintain your sense of humor. Be able to talk & laugh about your mistakes.
- Set realistic goals to avoid disappointment. It will take you longer to accomplish tasks in a new culture, academic environment and in a new language.
- Have an ability to accept failure. Those who study abroad are successful people in their own culture, and therefore are not used to being unsuccessful. When living in a new culture it is natural to experience difficulties and occasional failures.
- Remain flexible in your attitudes. Look for the logical explanations for host behavior and values.
NOT EVERYONE EXPERIENCES CULTURE SHOCK

What if you immediately feel at home in the U.S and experience no problems in settling in? Research has shown that the more practiced at absorbing, accepting and adapting you are, the more easily you overcome culture shock. If you are confident from speaking the language and possess a thorough knowledge of your new home, you can feel settled after a relatively short period. If you have adjusted well to your new environment, you perform competently the roles that each social context requires and thus avoid the frustrations resulting from socially inappropriate behavior.

Some individuals do not seek cultural adjustment, either because they do not agree with the values and behavior prevalent in the new country, or because they fear losing their own cultural identity. Living in a cultural vacuum may not be easy and can lead to feeling, and being treated, like an outsider.

Others deny or even reject their own culture and unquestioningly embrace everything new. While living in the U.S., this may seem a viable course of action but on returning home can lead to re-integration problems.

Those who neither completely reject their own culture or that of the new country tend to be most successful at overcoming culture shock. They will attempt to mix and merge aspects of both cultures and thus become bicultural.

Information drawn and adapted from the following resources:

http://www.intstudy.com/articles/ec184a13.htm


http://www.isss.umn.edu/publications/HandBook/HandBook.html