

4 Dealing with culture shock

Even though you may be excited about studying abroad, you shouldn't underestimate the adjustment you're going to have to make. Think of the biggest change you have had to make in your life so far—now multiply that by ten. Not only will everything around you change, you too will begin to change, and that can be confusing.

Culture shock

We often use the expression “culture shock” to describe the confusion people feel when they are trying to fit into a new culture. However, this expression can be a bit misleading because it suggests that culture shock is like a sudden, upsetting event. In fact, most people experience culture shock as a process—like the process they might go through when they have to adapt to any life-changing event, such as getting married, or having a baby.

Many people have researched and written about culture shock. Although every individual experiences culture shock in his or her own way, researchers have identified certain “stages” that people who live abroad commonly go through. Here, we'll describe those stages, explain what happens when you “get stuck,” and suggest strategies that you can use to help yourself move on. But remember, this model of culture shock is not a description of what will happen to you—it's a framework to help you understand your own experience of culture shock.

Stage 1: The “honeymoon”

When you arrive and begin exploring your new environment, you may find the experience very enjoyable at first. Everything

may seem fascinating to you: what people eat, the way they move, the sound of their language. Even everyday objects might seem interesting to you because they are so different from what you're used to: the streetlamps, for example, or the look and feel of a bus ticket. All these new impressions can be very exciting—you may even feel “over the moon” at times. This phase of exploration is therefore often called the “honeymoon” stage of culture shock.

Stage 2: The “let down”

For many people, the excitement of the early days wears off after a while. As you start trying to achieve what you set out to do in your new environment, the “high” is often replaced with a “low” of disappointment. Ways of doing things that seemed interesting at first now seem overly complicated and difficult. Maybe it's the way officials speak to you that suddenly seems annoying or rude. Or maybe it's the opening and closing hours of stores that seem so inconvenient. You can't understand why everything has to be so difficult and why it takes so long to get anything done. You may feel frustrated, angry, or sad. You may start comparing everything in this new place with the way things are at home and find that nothing is as good as it ought to be.

Stage 3: The “adjustment”

Over time, and after several highs and lows, you'll most likely begin to adjust to your new environment. You'll learn how things work, and after a while all of those things that seemed so exciting and, later, so annoying, will simply be familiar to you. Everyday tasks such as shopping or getting around on public transportation will become easy. You begin to feel capable again. Your opinions become more balanced: you can see that your new home is neither perfect nor completely awful. You may begin to see the home you left behind in a different way too. Aspects of your culture that you once thought of as “the normal way of doing things”

you may now see as simply things that are particular to your culture. Your mind will have opened up to new possibilities, and ideally you'll realize you have many more choices about how to live your life than you thought you had.

Getting stuck

For most people, the process described is not a smooth or easy journey. There are many difficulties to overcome and it is easy to “get stuck” in one stage or another. Understanding how or why this may happen can help you find a way forward.

Getting stuck at Stage 1: “Going native”

Some people who move abroad never seem to move beyond the honeymoon phase: they seem enchanted with everything around them. They want to dress like a native, speak like a native, act like a native. Every detail of the new culture is important. As they try to transform themselves, they may cut ties with the people and things that remind them of home.

At first glance, this may not seem like a bad thing. Immersing yourself in the new culture in this way can be exciting. But there are also disadvantages. If you try to replace your “old self” with a “new self,” you may in the end not know quite who you are or where you belong. The place you came from may start to seem like a foreign country, but no matter how much you copy the people in your new country, you're still a foreigner. Moreover, when it's time to go home, you may not know which “self” to take with you.

People who tend to “go native” when abroad, sometimes lack confidence in themselves. They may feel that there are parts of themselves that do not “fit” their home culture. When they go abroad they start imitating everything about the foreign culture in order to belong.

If you think you may have this tendency, try to accept yourself as you are. Remember that the parts of you that do

not seem to “fit” in are also valuable. You do not need to be the same as others in order to belong. Remember to keep in touch with people from home. Value all of the aspects of yourself that have developed through your life experiences, both at home and abroad.

Getting stuck at Stage 2: “The Complainer”

Stage 2: The “let down” is a common sticking place. Those who are stuck at Stage 2 complain all the time. Every new day seems to bring new bad experiences, and each bad experience seems to confirm the complainer’s most negative opinions of the host country and the people who live there. Complainers are miserable and hard to be with.

In order to understand why this happens, it’s important to remember that living abroad is very challenging, even if you’re normally an easy-going person. You’ll probably struggle to understand others and make yourself understood. You’ll sometimes misunderstand the “unspoken rules” of your host culture and make some embarrassing mistakes. You may have to rely on others more often than you’re used to. You may feel like a child again. All of these things can make you feel very vulnerable. For people who are used to being good at things, feeling vulnerable may feel like not being good enough. Feeling this way about yourself can be difficult. Without realizing it, you may “project” these unpleasant feelings onto others. For example, rather than simply accepting your own feelings of confusion, you might blame your host country for being “disorganized” and “confusing.”

To prevent this from happening to you, try to have realistic expectations of yourself. Being vulnerable is not the same as being inadequate. Take things slowly and give yourself time to learn. With each small success, give yourself a small reward—do something you particularly enjoy, for example. If you know people who are willing to talk honestly about

their experiences, open up to them and share stories of your mistakes and embarrassing moments. Experiences that were humiliating at the time can seem funny when you share them with someone you trust. Eat well, exercise, and try to go to bed at a regular time. Above all, be kind to yourself. When you're kind to yourself, it's easier to be more generous to others.

Getting stuck at Stage 3: "The Coper"

Now that you've read about Stage 1 and Stage 2, you might decide that you're better off fast forwarding to Stage 3 and be reasonable and "well-adjusted" right from the start. This option might be particularly attractive to you if you're the kind of person who doesn't like making a fuss. You're probably a hard worker and good at coping with most situations. However, jumping ahead to Stage 3 is not often possible and may not even be good for you in the longer term.

Living in another country can be a profound experience, but only if you allow it to affect you deeply. If you choose to avoid the confusion and unhappiness of the earlier stages, you may be cheating yourself. These more difficult feelings often mean that you are allowing your new environment to affect you and that a profound change is taking place. It's important to remember that these feelings are natural, and for most people, not overwhelming. However, pushing them away not only limits your experience but can affect you in other ways. You may, for example, become physically ill, or suddenly very anxious for no obvious reason.

If this sounds like you, try to stay in touch with your feelings. Make sure that there are times in your day when you're not busy. Allow yourself to notice what's happening to you. Consider keeping a journal. Try to open up to people that you trust and remember that you don't always have to be strong and capable for other people to like you.

Will I be homesick?

Whatever your experience of culture shock, homesickness will probably be a part of it. When you move abroad, it's natural to miss home at least some of the time. In fact, some research has found that 85–95% of young people who move away from home report feeling homesick. The good news is that for most people, feelings of homesickness are relatively mild. Although you're more than likely to miss your friends and family at home, you're unlikely to feel worse as time goes on, or to have too much difficulty managing your daily life.

However, for a small percentage of people (around 6–9%), homesickness can be quite severe and difficult to manage without help. People who are severely homesick think about home most of the time. They may become depressed or angry, and avoid spending time with people around them. They may have these feelings right from the start, and feel even worse as time goes on.

There is no way of knowing for certain why some people become more homesick than others—but there are several known risk factors. To see if you might be one of those affected, try the questionnaire below then read the explanation afterward.

Homesickness Questionnaire

Circle the option a, b, or, c that best describes your response to questions 1–9.

1. How much experience do you have of being away from home for an extended period of time? (i.e. longer than 2 weeks)
 - a) a lot of experience
 - b) some experience
 - c) little or no experience
2. How homesick do you expect to be?
 - a) very homewick
 - b) somewhat homesick
 - c) not at all homesick

3. How easy do you think it will be for you to make friends?
 - a) quite easy
 - b) not sure
 - c) very difficult
4. How do you usually feel about trying out new things?
 - a) excited
 - b) curious
 - c) worried
5. How organized do you like your life to be?
 - a) very organized
 - b) somewhat organized
 - c) not very organized
6. When you have a problem, how do you normally deal with it?
 - a) I try to sort it out myself
 - b) I hope that things will get better
 - c) I get help
7. When you are upset, how often can you rely on family members for support?
 - a) always
 - b) it depends
 - c) not usually
8. How does your family feel about you studying abroad?
 - a) excited
 - b) neutral
 - c) worried
9. How involved have you been in making decisions about your study abroad?
 - a) very involved
 - b) somewhat involved
 - c) not really involved

Key

1. a = 1, b = 2, c = 3
2. a = 3, b = 1, c = 2
3. a = 1, b = 2, c = 3
4. a = 1, b = 1, c = 3
5. a = 3, b = 1, c = 2
6. a = 1, b = 3, c = 2
7. a = 1, b = 2, c = 3
8. a = 1, b = 2, c = 3
9. a = 1, b = 2, c = 3

How to interpret your score:

- If you scored 9–13 in total with no 3s, you’re probably at a low risk of being severely homesick.
- If you scored 14–18 in total and one or two 3s, you may have a moderate risk of being severely homesick.
- If you scored 19+ in total and three or more 3s, you may be at a high risk of experiencing severe homesickness.

Risk factors explained

There are many factors that could affect your chances of becoming homesick. These include factors related to your experience, your attitudes, your personality, and your family relationships. Finding out more about these risk factors can help you understand your own vulnerabilities and identify the strategies that are most likely to help you.

Experience

Not surprisingly, your experience of being away from home is an important factor. If you’ve never or rarely been away from home for long periods of time, you’re more likely to feel homesick when you move abroad. Having had bad experiences of being away from home, being in the hospital for example, can also make acute homesickness more likely.

Attitudes

Your attitudes and expectations are also important. If you expect to be very homesick, you’re more likely to be very homesick. Attitudes and expectations tend to be “self-fulfilling” because of the way they influence what you notice and the way you behave. For example, if you don’t expect to make friends, you’re less likely to make friends because you may not notice when people are being friendly toward you. When strangers speak to you, for instance, you might think they are simply giving you information rather than making conversation in order to get to know you.

Personality

People who don't like to try out new things or dislike feeling out of control are more likely to miss the familiarity of home. The tendency to be well-organized can be an advantage when moving abroad, but if you *need* to be organized and in control all of the time, you may be at a real disadvantage. If you don't like the "chaos" of new experiences, you're more likely to yearn for the familiarity of home. The way you cope with unexpected events is also a significant factor. If you tend to respond to difficulties with helplessness, you'll probably also want to be where you're used to being taken care of, that is in your family home.

Family relationships

In order to feel secure and happy abroad, you need to feel you have a secure and happy home to go back to. If your family does not support your decision to go abroad or is very worried about you, you may not have the confidence to go out into the world. If there are difficulties at home that are not being talked about, you're also much more likely to be preoccupied with home. Finally, if the decision to study abroad has been made for you—by your parents, for instance—or if you have not been fully involved in planning your studies abroad, you're less likely to make a success of your venture. All of these factors increase the likelihood that you'll be troubled by homesickness.

Preventing homesickness

There are steps that you can take before you leave home so that you are less likely to suffer homesickness. Taking part in all of the planning and decision making around your study abroad experience can be a major help. Involving friends and family members who are enthusiastic about your journey will also give you the support you need. If possible, try to talk openly about problems among family members

or close friends so that you're not worried about things at home when you're abroad.

To prepare yourself for greater independence, practice doing small, unfamiliar tasks on your own. If you've never cooked a meal for yourself for instance, or washed your own clothes, learn how to do these things. Practice until you feel more confident of your skills. Experiencing yourself as a capable person will give you greater confidence when you're on your own.

What to do when you feel homesick abroad

Of course there will be times when you do feel homesick. But there's plenty you can do to help yourself. Forming at least one good trusting relationship in your new country is key. Sometimes, when people have come abroad with very high expectations, they can find it difficult to talk openly about difficulties and disappointments. If family and friends at home are very worried about you, you may feel pressure to tell them only "good news." Being able to talk to someone about how you *really* feel can be a great relief.

Taking good care of both your body and mind will help: eat well, keep regular hours, exercise, and take care of your health. When you're feeling homesick, distract yourself by getting out of your room and doing something active. It can be difficult at first to take care of yourself when what you're really wanting is someone to take care of you. But once you get started, you'll soon feel not only better, but more self-confident.

How often should I call home?

Staying in touch with people you're close to at home is important. However, it should not be the focus of your life abroad. Having a regularly scheduled phone conversation or Skype session is generally preferable to calling whenever you feel homesick. This is because people generally feel

more secure when they have a regular routine. Knowing that you'll have contact with home at a set time each week, for example, can help you feel more stable. Moreover, when it's not time to call, you're likely to feel free to pay attention to what's going on around you in your new home.

A final word on adjusting to a new culture

When we hear the words “a new culture,” we often think of an outward journey, an adventure in a new land. However, after reading this chapter, you may realize that the process of adjusting to a new culture is very much a journey inside of yourself. You'll meet parts of yourself that may have been hidden or unfamiliar to you. Not only that, as you work through each stage of the process, you'll open up new territories within yourself: new skills and ways of being. It's the fruits of this inward journey that you'll keep and take home with you. You'll need them as you face your next great challenge: readjusting to the culture you left behind. That, however, is the subject of another chapter!