

What is culture shock?

“Culture shock” describes the impact of moving from a familiar culture to one which is unfamiliar. It is an experience described by people who have travelled abroad to work, live or study; it can be felt to a certain extent even when abroad on holiday. It can affect anyone. It includes the shock of a new environment, meeting lots of new people and learning the ways of a different country. It also includes the shock of being separated from the important people in your life, maybe family, friends, and colleagues: people you would normally talk to at times of uncertainty, people who give you support and guidance. When familiar sights, sounds, smells or tastes are no longer there you can miss them very much. If you are tired and jet-lagged when you arrive, small things can be upsetting and out of all proportion to their real significance.

Culture shock has two distinctive features:

- It doesn't result from a specific event or series of events. It comes instead from the experience of encountering ways of doing, organising, perceiving or valuing things which are different from yours and which threaten your basic, unconscious belief that your culture's customs, assumptions, values and behaviours[†] are “right”.
- It doesn't strike suddenly or have a single principal cause. Instead it is cumulative. It builds up slowly, from a series of small events which are difficult to identify.

The following are some of the elements that contribute to culture shock:

Climate Many people find that the change in climate affects them a lot. Try to find out about the weather in the area you are going to be located, to prepare yourself mentally. Clothing is often cheaper in America, so it may be better to buy some of what you need while over there.

Food You may find American food strange. It may taste different, or be cooked differently, or it may seem bland or sweet compared to what you are used to. If you are in self-catering accommodation and unused to cooking for yourself, you may find yourself relying on “fast” food instead of your usual diet. Try to find a supplier of familiar food, and eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Language When going to another English speaking country we tend to assume that the language is more or less the same. So it may come as a shock to find that many of the subtleties of the language are very different. We all make assumptions about other cultures and their way of life, and often we only become aware of these when we meet them face to face – so be prepared for a few surprises. Take your cue from the locals and check out with others whether you are making yourself understood.

Social roles Social behaviours may confuse, surprise or offend you. It may be hard to gauge how friendly people are and what levels of familiarity are appropriate in different situations. You may find the relationships between men and women more formal or less formal than you are used to, as well as differences in same sex social contact and relationships.

‘Rules’ of behaviour As well as the obvious things that hit you immediately when you arrive, such as sights, sounds, smells and tastes, every culture has unspoken rules which affect the way people treat each other. These may be less obvious but sooner or later you will probably encounter them and once again the effect may be disorientating. For example there will be differences in the ways people decide what is important, how tasks are allocated and how time is observed. In business and academic life keeping to time is important. You should always be on time for meetings with staff. If you are going to be late for a meeting do try to let whoever you are meeting know.

Social life and the expectations of others may be different too – particularly around the consumption of alcohol and/or drugs. Check this out with locals if you are unsure.

A model of culture shock

The process of culture shock can be illustrated by a model known as the “W” curve (see diagram on the following page). This model may not relate to your experience or only partially. Sometimes the process is faster or slower. Many people go through different phases of the process of adjustment several times, so parts of the curve in the diagram may repeat themselves.

For instance, at significant times such as important family dates or festivals you may feel distressed or lonely, while at other times you feel quite settled. However, many people have reported that this model has reflected something of their experience and they have found it helpful to realise they are not the only ones to have had these feelings.

The process can be broken down into 5 stages:

1. The “honeymoon” stage

When you first arrive in a new culture, differences are intriguing and you may feel excited, stimulated and curious. At this stage you are still protected by the close memory of your home culture.

2. The “distress” stage

A little later, differences create an impact and you may feel confused, isolated or inadequate as cultural differences intrude and familiar supports (e.g. family or friends) are not immediately available.

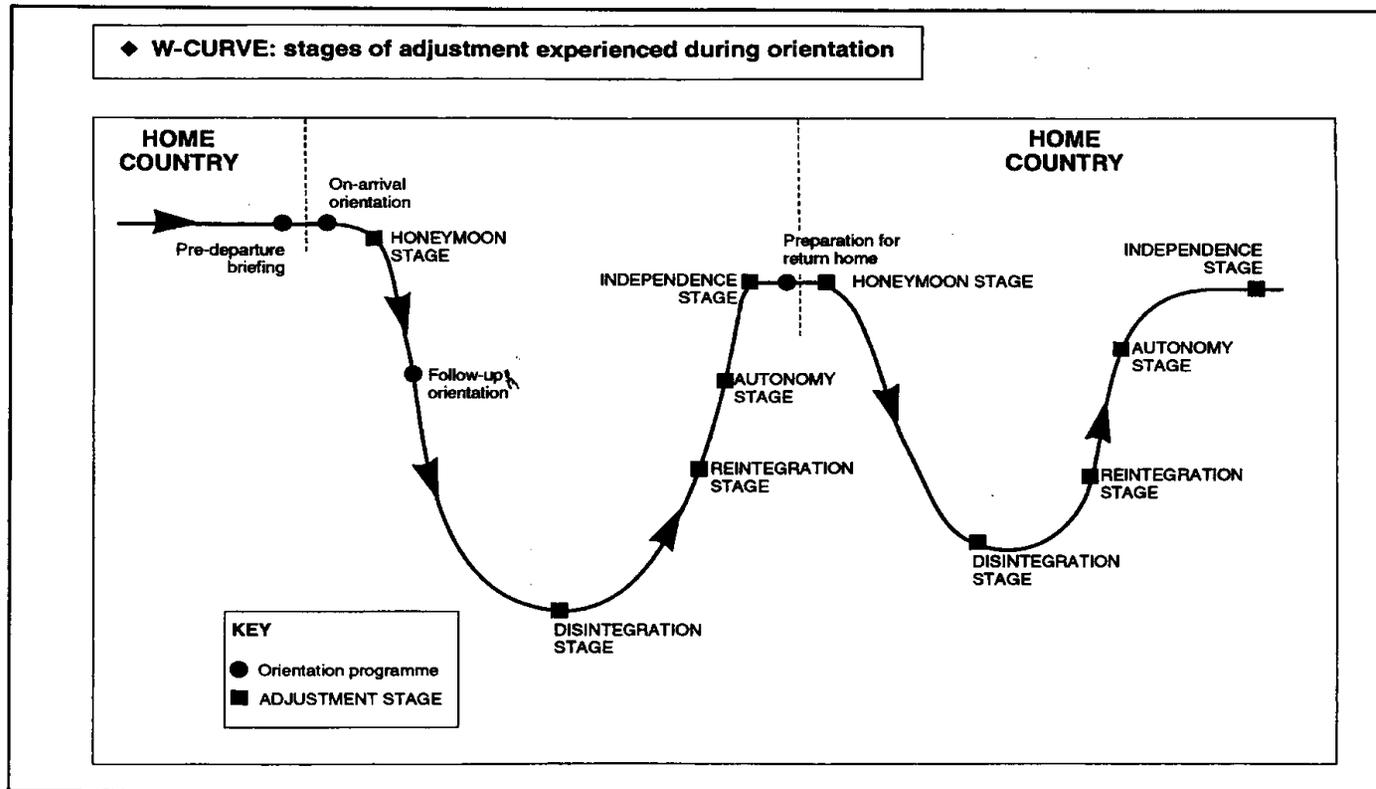
3. “Re-integration” stage

Next you may reject the differences you encounter. You may feel angry or frustrated, or hostile to the new culture. At this stage you may be conscious mainly of how much you dislike it compared to home. Don't worry, as this is quite a healthy reaction. You are reconnecting with what you value about yourself and your own culture.

4. “Autonomy” stage Differences and similarities are accepted. You may feel relaxed, confident, more like an old hand as you become more familiar with situations and feel well able to cope with new situations based on your growing experience.

5. “Independence” stage Differences and similarities are valued and important. You may feel full of potential and able to trust yourself in all kinds of situations. Most situations become enjoyable and you are able to make choices according to your preferences and values.

W-CURVE: stages of adjustment experienced during orientation



Adapted from "Orientated for Success", edited by M Barker, Australian International Development Assistance Bureau, 1990.

Some of the symptoms of culture shock can be worrying. For example, you may find your health is affected and you may get headaches or stomach aches or you may start worrying about your health more than previously. You may find it difficult to concentrate and as a result find it harder to focus on your course work. Other people find they become more irritable or tearful and generally their emotions seem more changeable. All of these effects can in themselves increase your anxiety.

Though culture shock is normally a temporary phase, it is important to know there are things you can do to help so that some of these worrying effects can be minimised. Don't feel "this isn't going to happen to me". Culture shock can hit you whatever culture you come from and however experienced or well-travelled you are.

1. Simply understanding that this is **a normal experience** may in itself be helpful.
2. **Keep in touch with home.** There are several ways you may be able to do this: for example telephone, letter, fax, email. Several telephone companies offer greatly reduced charges for international calls.
3. Have **familiar things** around you that have personal meaning, such as photographs or ornaments.
4. Find a supplier of **familiar food** if you can. Eat a healthy and balanced diet.
5. **Explore** the new culture, keep up with current events, discover how the government works, and find out what you can particularly relate to.
6. Keep a personal **journal**, or scrapbook, as a record of your stay and as an emotional outlet. This could include photographs or newspaper cuttings.
7. **Make friends with international students**, whether from your own culture or from others, as they will understand what you're feeling and, if possible, make friends with the locals so you can learn more about each other's culture.
8. **Use the university or college services**, where there will be professional and experienced staff. For example the health service, the counselling service, the International Office or hall wardens will provide a friendly, listening ear. Even if at home you wouldn't consider such steps, in America it is quite normal and they may help when your familiar helpers are missing.

9. Linking with a **faith community** will put you in touch with a familiar setting, whether it is a church, mosque, synagogue or temple.
10. Be prepared to have your beliefs and values challenged! Maintain a strong sense of self and be proud of yourself and your culture without feeling superior to another's.
11. Investigate the **Students' Union** (ULU) and its societies. There may be an opportunity to learn a new sport or activity or continue an interest from home. A further advantage is that these societies bring together students from different courses and countries with a shared interest. There are often national societies that will celebrate significant occasions such as Chinese New Year.
12. Above all **find someone to talk to** who will listen uncritically and with understanding, rather than isolating yourself.
13. **Finally...** It is important to stress that culture shock is entirely normal, usually unavoidable and not a sign that you have made a mistake or that you won't manage. In fact there are very positive aspects of culture shock. The experience can be a significant learning experience, making you more aware of aspects of your own culture as well as the new culture you have entered. It will give you valuable skills that will serve you in many ways now and in the future and which will be part of the benefit of an international education.