13-14 Culture Shock; Responses and Advice

Adapted from the Fulbright Newsletter, 1988

Typical Responses

Pre-departure Phase:
Time: Pre-Departure
General Attitude: Anticipation
Events: Planning, packing, processing, partying, orientation
Emotional Response: Excitement, enthusiasm, some trepidation of unknown, concern about leaving family, friends, lovers, familiar environment, desire to escape problems
Behavioral Response: Anticipation, loss of interest in current responsibilities
Physical Response: Tiredness, generally normal health
Verbal Response: “I just can’t wait to . . .”

Honeymoon or Spectator Phase:
Time: Weeks 1–4
General Attitude: Exhilaration, euphoria
Events: Red carpet welcome, new homestay or dorm, new classes and teachers, exploration of sights and shops
Emotional Response: Tourist enthusiasm, sense of adventure
Behavioral Response: Outward curiosity about host nationals, avoidance of negative stereotypes, enthusiasm for studies and site, passive observer of culture
Physical Response: Intestinal disturbances, minor insomnia
Verbal Response: “How quaint; this place and these people are a lot like home.”

Increasing Participation Phase:
Time: Weeks 5–8
General Attitude: Bewilderment, disenchantment, restlessness, impatience
Events: Classes, homework, everyday life, responsibilities in homestay or dorm, unfamiliar food, manners, language, customs, cost of living
Emotional Response: Qualms, uncertainty, irritability, loss of enthusiasm, skepticism, frustration, questioning of values of self and others
Behavioral Response: Search for security in familiar activities (e.g. surfing the internet for long periods of time, watching DVDs or reading books in English), increased alcohol and/or food consumption, withdrawal
Physical Response: Colds, headaches, tiredness
Verbal Response: “Why do they have to do it like that? Why can’t they just . . .?”
Crisis Phase:
Time: Weeks 9–12
General Attitude: Hostility, irritation, aggression
Events: Uneven work performance, confrontation with differences
Emotional Response: Discouragement, lethargy, depression, suspicion, boredom, homesickness, anger, extreme sensitivity and irritability, loneliness
Behavioral Response: Withdrawal, avoiding contact with host nationals, excessive sleep, fits of weeping, loss of concentration, tension and conflict with others
Physical Response: Minor illnesses, headaches, preoccupation with personal cleanliness
Verbal Response: “This place s—s! I hate it here. This place and these people are stupid.” Use of stereotypes, chauvinism, nationalism. “We” excludes host nationals.

Adaptation Phase:
Time: Weeks 13–20+
General Attitude: Recovery
Events: Work performance improves, able to interpret cultural clues, can laugh at and tell jokes
Emotional Response: Sense of comfort with surroundings, sense of belonging, sense of shared fate, biculturalism
Behavioral Response: Ability to see things from perspective of host nationals, empathy
Physical Response: Normal health
Verbal Response: “Home” is homestay or dorm. “We” includes host nationals

Reintegration Phase: (shares many of the same attributes as the previous phases)
Time: Return from host country
General Attitude: Ambivalence
Events: Wanting to tell others about experience and finding others generally not very interested
Emotional Response: Mixed-up, disconnected, disoriented, irritability, depression, homesickness for overseas site, uncertainty about “home”
Behavioral Response: Criticism of home and friends, lethargy, keen interest in foreign affairs and news
Physical Response: Colds, headaches
Verbal Response: “I never realized…”

Typical Responses – An Alternative View

Collected by Dr. Robert Grossman, Kalamazoo College

I think of our responses to stress as falling into four types.

1. Critical or anger released reactions — magnifying the negative aspects of the experience, belittling others, minimizing the positive.

2. Anxious or fear-aroused reactions — catastrophic thoughts, physical reactions, desire to avoid any situations that increase the fear which can result in only spending time with other “K” students.
3. Depressive or low self-esteem reactions — desire to withdraw, self-critical thoughts, low motivation, lack of interest and strong desire to return home and, in the worst cases, self-destructive thoughts.

4. Denial of the stress — the tendency to totally ignore risks or problems. Men especially are trained in this style of response and many think it results in the high degree of stress-related cardiovascular problems they have in our society. There is some evidence to indicate that high-achieving women are also steeped in this tradition. Overseas it often results in serious illness in both males and females from eating food that is not recommended. In some cases this has led to going off on personal adventures without appropriate backup and safeguards. This style often results in obliviousness to serious cross-cultural problems. Worst of all, the person comes back from the overseas experience with prejudices and stereotypes unchanged. Such people often remain ethnocentric and miss out on the opportunity to be bicultural or even multicultural.

Culture Shock: Advice

From L. Robert Kohl’s Survival Kit for Overseas Living, Chapter 19 “Responding to Culture Shock,” pp. 97-103.

Ways to Cope with Adaption Stress (Culture Shock)

1. Pursue information gathering diligently. Kohl suggests looking at areas such as your host culture’s history, basic facts, Do’s & Don’ts, current politics and problems, national heroes/heroines, and identifying intercultural ‘flashpoints.’ He also recommends orienting yourself to the city (through the internet, travel books, and/or maps); identify sights, monuments, scenic areas, etc. See the “Research” section in this handbook for further suggestions.

2. Look for logical reasons behind everything in the host culture that seem strange, difficult, confusing, or threatening. Use the DIEVA technique: Describe, Interpret, Evaluate, Validate and then Act.

3. Try to trace every “strange” action you observe in your new culture to its underlying value or values. Keeping a journal or blog is a good place to synthesize situations that you have experienced.

4. Don’t succumb to the temptation to disparage the host culture.

5. Identify a host national who is sympathetic and understanding and talk with that person about specific situations and your feelings related to them.

6. Have faith in yourself.

I suggest you look for the kernel of truth and of exaggeration in every disparaging thought that occurs to you rather than trying to suppress your desire to criticize the host culture. This is the best way to handle all emotionally driven thought. Writing helps in this process. Consider keeping a journal of your study abroad experience.
Questions to Ask Yourself:

What are some of the tools you use to cope with uncomfortable transitions? How may this be important to you when you study abroad? Have you experienced a “culture shock” already? What did you learn that you may be able to apply to study abroad?