

COPING WITH CULTURE SHOCK

(from University of Nebraska International Student Services)

<http://www.jyu.fi/mclinic/cis/coping.html>

Culture shock is a type of homesickness. The term refers to the stresses and strains which accumulate from being forced to meet one's everyday needs (e.g. language, climate, food, cleanliness, companionship) in unfamiliar ways. Some symptoms of culture shock are: frustration, mental fatigue, disorientation about how to work with and relate to others, boredom, lack of motivation, and sometimes physical discomfort.

When you leave home and all the things that are familiar, you encounter many new and confusing situations. These situations naturally create stress; the reaction to this stress is called "culture shock."

Some of the differences between life at home and life in a new place are obvious:

- language
- climate
- religion
- food
- educational system
- absence of family and close ties

Other differences are not as obvious:

- how students relate to teachers
- how people make decisions
- how people spend their leisure time
- how people resolve conflicts
- how people express feelings and emotions meanings of hand, face and body movements

These differences cause feelings of uncertainty and anxiety:

- "Am I speaking properly?"
- "Will I be a successful student?"
- "Will I find friends?"
- "Should I discuss my personal beliefs or my political opinions?"
- "What does it mean when someone looks directly into my eyes?"
- "Should I trust this friendly stranger?"

All of these uncertainties . . . and more . . . are confusing. You may also feel that you don't know what to do in certain situations. Probably you did not think about these things at home because you knew what to do and what to expect. You also knew how other people acted and

thought. In other words, you understood "the rules" and "the signs." Life was easier at home.

Your body and your mind may react in unusual ways to the stress and confusion of living in a new culture. Some of the reactions you experience may be:

- feeling isolated or alone
- sleeping too much or tiring easily
- finding it difficult to sleep
- suffering body pains, especially in the head, neck, back and stomach
- wanting to return home feeling angry toward local people

These reactions are normal. You are not ill. It is a temporary situation for people who are adjusting to life in a new environment.

How can you adjust to your new environment? How can you make a successful transition to living in a new culture?

- **First**, understand that there are and there will continue to be uncertainties and confusion. Imagine how a local resident might react to living in your country.
- **Second**, observe how people in your new environment act in situations that are confusing to you. Try to understand what they believe and why they behave as they do. Avoid judging things as either right or wrong; regard them as being merely different.
- **Third**, remember the ways you have been able to reduce stress in difficult situations in the past and apply those methods in your present circumstances. For example, you might take a long walk, go to a movie theater, or write a letter to a close friend or relative. Try to see the humor in confusing situations that you encounter; laughter is often the best "medicine."
- **Fourth**, accept the difficult challenge of learning to study and live in a new cultural setting. Believe that you can learn the skills to make a satisfactory transition. Gradually try to apply some of the skills you are learning.
- **Fifth**, recognize the advantages of having lived in two different cultures. Your life will be enriched by meeting people whose cultural backgrounds are not the same as yours. Share your time with many different people. Avoid having friends only from your country but maintain strong personal ties to your culture while you are away from home. Think about how you can help local residents learn how people from your country believe and act.
- **Sixth**, acknowledge your progress in adjusting to the new culture. Think of all that you have learned since the day you arrived. Recognize that, like other people who have lived in an unfamiliar country, you can and will make a successful adjustment to the other culture.