

Coping with a New Culture

It is a challenging, stimulating, and sometimes difficult process to leave home and live in a different country and culture. You not only leave family and friends, but also familiar foods, climate, customs, attitudes, and languages. As every culture has different rules about appropriate behavior, social norms, and expectations, you may feel overwhelmed when you attempt to adjust to many new and different things all at the same time.

As you settle into your life here at Penn, bear in mind that new international students and scholars often go through a series of reactions to their new environment. These reactions are referred to as the "adjustment cycle." In the initial phase, you start off feeling very excited about being in a new place and a new culture, but then find yourself getting homesick once the initial "high" has passed. Then you go on another emotional upswing as you make new friends, begin your classes and start exploring Philadelphia.

The adjustment cycle and its symptoms can be as short as a few days or can cover even years often depending on your length of stay and your strategies for coping.

Remember that no two "adjustment cycles" are alike, that no two people have the same experience! Living abroad is invariably an exciting and satisfying experience, but it also takes effort, patience, and perseverance on your part. Don't feel you are in any way "abnormal" if you experience highs and lows during your time here or if you find yourself longing for the familiarity of "home." These are all natural responses. If at any time you sense that you are stuck in a psychological low-whether for academic or personal adjustment reasons-do not hesitate to make use of the many resource services available on campus. You can speak with a counselor at the Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), an ISSS advisor, a residential advisor, a peer counselor, or your academic advisor. Just make sure that you talk with someone about your feelings.

Services

Advisors and peers you can talk to:

Counseling & Psychological Services

133 S. 36th St., 2nd Fl.

Mellon Bldg.

Tel: 215-898-7021

Web: <http://www.vpul.upenn.edu/caps/>

REACH-A-PEER LINE

is a confidential helpline run by Penn student volunteers. They even have online peers!

Tel: 215-573-2RAP or 215-573-2727, Sunday-Thursday, 9pm - 2am

Web: <http://dolphin.upenn.edu/~rap-line/>

How Do I Adjust?

The following are some suggestions that other international students and scholars have found helpful:

1. Look and listen. A word, phrase or gesture that means something in your home country may mean something very different in the US Watch people's reactions in their conversations with you or with others:

How close do people stand when they talk? How do people greet each other? Do people tend to agree with you or do they express dissenting opinions freely? What makes you feel dissatisfied or uncomfortable when communicating with someone? How do Americans change their communication styles when talking with a professor? a student? a friend? a family member? a stranger?

2. Ask questions.

3. Try not to be judgmental. It is important to avoid labeling everything in the US as good or bad in comparison with your own culture. Try to assess and understand others' opinions before making a judgement.

4. Show openness and curiosity. To experience a new culture and to learn from it, it is important to be open to new experiences, try new things, and be curious about the way things are done.

5. Use your sense of humor. It is likely that you will make mistakes as you explore a new culture. If you can laugh at your mistakes, learning will be easier.

6. Develop a support network. One of the hardest things about being abroad is that you are separated from the network of support you have developed over many years. Such closeness cannot be instantly replaced. Nonetheless, you should make an effort to meet people so that new friendships can develop.

7. Get involved with various programs and activities on and off campus. The more you put into an experience, the more you will learn from it.

Getting Involved

Penn offers a wide array of clubs and organizations representing many interests. Refer to the [Practical Penn](#) and [Graduate Student Center](#) for descriptions of the numerous campus organizations. Information about the many international and national clubs on campus can be found at: <http://www.vpul.upenn.edu/osl/orgmain.html>.

Campus Life

You may find fellow students and scholars with similar interests in your department, classes, or laboratory. In addition, the [Office of Student Life](#) maintains a list of several categories of organizations including academic, performing arts, religious, community service and international. Some clubs and organizations are oriented toward undergraduate students, while many welcome graduate students and visiting scholars.

Family

If your family is with you here in Philadelphia, you may find that your social life revolves around your family and their activities. Some students and scholars live on campus, and this arrangement can develop into a close community of people in similar situations. You may trade baby-sitting chores or participate in activities with other families that give you the chance to develop friendships.