

How to Cope with Culture Shock

By Arthur Gordon

As the world grows smaller, as ever-increasing numbers of people travel, work or study abroad, more attention is being focused on a kind of silent sickness that often afflicts the inexperienced traveler or the unwary expatriate. It's the loss of emotional equilibrium that a person suffers when he moves from a familiar environment where he was learned to function easily and successfully to one where he has not. The term used to describe this malady is "*culture shock*."

The effects of culture shock may range from mild uneasiness or temporary homesickness to acute unhappiness or even, in extreme cases, psychological panic. Irritability, hyper-sensitivity and loss of perspective are common symptoms. Often the victim doesn't know what is the matter with him. He just knows that something is wrong- and he feels miserable.

Not long ago, a New York corporation sent a young employee to a Latin American country on a two-year assignment. Six weeks after his arrival he wrote an emotional letter asking permission to come home. The natives, he said, were anti-American. Their food was odd. Their restaurants were unsanitary. Their business methods were inefficient. No one was ever on time. He added that he had acquired a rash that he feared might mark the onset of some dire disease. His superior in New York, who remembered his own experience under similar circumstances years before, sent him a laconic cable: "Stick it out and be promoted or come home and be fired." The young man stayed.

In a typical year, over eight million Americans leave the borders of their own country and immerse themselves, temporarily at least, in alien cultures. Not all, to be sure, suffer significant emotional disorientation. But a great many do, especially those who have never before been away from home. Nor are Americans the only victims. Anyone is vulnerable who finds himself, as the Bible puts it, "a stranger in a strange land."

Symptoms are the same regardless of nationality. Not long ago in a Midwestern college town, an American family asked a Sudanese student to dinner. During the meal one of the children of the household kept dawdling over his food. His father urged him to clean his plate, adding the well-meant but not very well-chosen remark that no doubt in the far-off Sudan, many children would be glad to have such a meal. Infuriated by what he considered an insult to his country, the guest flung down his napkin and stormed out of the house, leaving everyone bewildered and upset.

In Atlanta last year, an engineering student at Georgia Tech, a native of Calcutta, came to his faculty adviser in despair. His wife, he said, had become so alarmed from reading reports of crime in the streets that she would not venture out of their apartment. She sat there all day weeping and wishing herself back in India. Various people have tried, but no one could console the young woman. The transition to another culture (crime in the streets was only the tip of the iceberg) was too much for her. In the end, her husband gave up and took her home.

Most experts in intercultural communication agree that the basic cause of cultural shock is the abrupt loss of the familiar, which in turn causes a sense of isolation and diminished self-importance. "Cultural shock," says anthropologist Kalvero Oberg, "is brought on by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. These signs or cues include the thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situation of daily life: when to shake hands and what to say when we meet people; when and how to give tips; how to give orders to servants; how to make purchases; when to accept and when to refuse invitations; when to take statements seriously and when not."

According to Dr. Oberg, these cues, which may be words, gestures, facial expressions or customs, are acquired by all of use in the course of growing up and are as much a part of our cultures as the language we speak or the beliefs we accept. All of us depend for our peace of mind on hundreds of these cues, even though we may both be consciously aware of them. "When an individual enters a strange culture," Dr. Oberg says, "all

or most of these familiar cues are removed. He or she is like a fish out of water. No matter how broad-minded or full of good he may be, a series of props has been knocked out from under him.”

Sometimes the transition to an alien culture has an immediate impact. A short-term American visitor to certain Eastern Europe countries may find himself dismayed or depressed by living conditions that seem perfectly normal and acceptable to the people of those country- toilets with no seats, for example, or even more primitive bathroom facilities. It may come as a real shock to a teenager from Texas to find that hamburgers are non-existent, or that local hairdressers never heard of plastic curlers.

More insidious is what might be termed “delayed culture shock.” Often when a person takes up residence in a foreign country, there is a period of excitement and exhilaration when everything seems new and challenging and fascinating. If one has friends or business connections, one may be asked to dinner, taken sightseeing, made much of-at first. Also, in the beginning similarities between cultures are more apparent than differences. Almost everywhere people live in houses, go to work, relax on weekends, shop, and eat three meals a day and so on. All these seem reassuring.

It is not until this honeymoon period ends that the newcomer begins to realize that there are endless subtle differences that leave him facing a host of perplexing problems. Many of these problems never bothered him at home, because they solved themselves almost automatically. Now, to his increasing dismay, he finds that he has language troubles, housing troubles, money troubles, transportation troubles, food troubles, recreation troubles, and perhaps even health troubles. All of these things drain away his reservoir of good humor and equanimity. Having his laundry done may become a major struggle. Making a telephone call may be a small crisis. It may seem to him that people say yes when they mean no and promise to do things which they never do. Time may be regarded quite differently by people among whom he finds himself. So may space; in some countries people like to stand very close together when they converse, in others this violates a deep-rooted sense of privacy.

Underlying all these difficulties is the uncomfortable feeling of not really belonging, of being an outsider. In changing cultures, the newcomer has inevitably changed his own status. At home he was “somebody” or at least his place in society was established and recognized; here he is a relative “nobody.” As a foreigner, he is a member of a minority whose voice counts for little or nothing. He may find that his homeland, which is so important to him, is regarded with suspicion or dismissed as unimportant. In short, as one observer puts it, he finds himself in “circumstances of beleaguered self-esteem.”

A mature, confident person may be able to shrug off these circumstances. But if the newcomer is insecure or sensitive or shy, they may seem overwhelming. Furthermore, as troubles pile up and he begins to look around for help, he may conclude that the natives of the country in which he finds himself are either incapable of understanding his plight or are indifferent to it. This in turn triggers the motion that is one of the surest signs of culture shock: hostility to the new environment. The victim says to himself, “These people don’t seem to know or care what I’m going through. Therefore they must be a selfish, insensitive people. Therefore I don’t like them.”

Inevitably, this reaction tends to increase the isolation of the unhappy visitor because people sense his antagonism and begins to avoid him. When this happens, he may seek out other disgruntled souls, usually expatriates like himself, and find melancholy relief in criticizing all aspects of the host country. These discussions almost never lead to any honest evaluation of the situation or awareness that the difficulty may lie in the attitude of the critics themselves; they are simply gripe sessions in which the virtues of the home country are exaggerated almost as much as the alleged failings of the country being visited. As Dr. Oberg says, “When Americans or other foreigners get together to grouse about the host country and its people, you can be sure they are suffering from culture shock.”

Sometimes the victim of culture shock may go to the other extreme, surrendering his own identity and trying to imitate all the customs and attitudes of the alien culture. He may also try to solve the problems by withdrawing into himself, refusing to learn the native language, making no effort to find friends among the local people,

taking no interest in their history, art, architecture, or any other aspect of the culture. While in this state of mind, he may display a variety of unattractive symptoms. One is the tendency to overreact to minor frustrations or delays or inconveniences with irritation or anger out of all the proportion to the cause. Another is to be unduly suspicious, to think that people are out of cheat of swindle him because he is a foreigner. Yet, another is overcome about cleanliness, an unwarranted conviction that water, food or dishes are unsanitary when in fact they are not. Often the person is unaware of the extent to which he is displaying these symptoms. As anthropologist George M. Foster says, "Culture shock is a mental illness, and as is true of much mental illness, the victim usually does not know that he is afflicted."

He does know, however, that he is miserable and that the casual remedies recommended to him—patience, hard work, mastery of the language and so on—don't seem to do much good. Sometimes he will develop a marked degree of overdependence on people from his own country who have passed through their own period of culture shock and are residing successfully and happily in the host country. If they in turn can display wisdom, patience and understanding of his symptoms, they often are able to shorten the span of his misery.

One reason the unhappy expatriate gravitates toward his own countryman is that in their company he can at least feel sure of being understood. Underlying much of his confusion is the fact that even if he speaks the language of the country there remains endless opportunities for misunderstanding. All experts in communication emphasize the fact that language and voice are by no means our only form of communication; they are supported by hundreds of gesture and facial expressions that are easily misinterpreted.

Professor LaRay M. Barna of Portland State University in Oregon tells of an American girl in an intercultural communication class who asked an Arab student how he would signify non-verbally that he likes her. His response was to smooth back his hair, which to her was a common nervous gesture signifying nothing. She repeated her question three times. The Arab smoothed his hair three times. Finally, realizing that she was not getting the message, he ducked his head and stuck his tongue out slightly, his automatic response to embarrassment. This behavior was noticed by the girl, and she happily interpreted it as the answer to her question.

Fiction may also arise between two persons of different cultures when one or both have little knowledge of the other's background. In his booklet *Glocak Village Conversation*, Dr. Reginald Smart, director of international studies at State University College in Buffalo, NY, tells of such a dialogue between a Kenyan visiting the USA and an American. The American, impressed by the visitor's impeccable Oxonian accent, asked him, "How is it that your English is so good?" He meant the question as a compliment, an acknowledgement that the Kenyan's diction was superior to his own, and he was also expressing a genuine desire to know why this was so. The Kenyan decoded the message as meaning, "I can't understand how someone from such a primitive, backward country could be so well-educated." He answered, very shortly, "Did anyone ever ask you that question? Meaning that he had been brought up in an English-speaking environment and thought such a question not only insulting but stupid. Dr. Smart adds dryly that perhaps it was just as well that the questioner didn't know how to decode the reply.

Yet another stumbling block that compounds the problems of culture shock is the tendency of many people to think of members of other cultures in terms of stereotypes. The excitable Arabs. The amorous Frenchmen. The touchy Indians. The lazy Latins. The volatile Hungarians. The materialistic Americans. Some psychologists think that anxiety-prone people cling to stereotypes because it lessens the threat of the unworn by making the world predictable...and what the victim of culture shock needs desperately is a familiar, predictable world. The trouble with such blanket labeling is that it blocks any realistic or fair-minded appraisal of people's surroundings and delays his emergence from his state of culture shock.

Almost always, fortunately, symptoms of culture shock subside with the passage of time. The first sign of recovery may well be the reappearance of the victim's sense of humor; he begins to smile or even laugh at some of the things that irritated him so much at first. As familiarity with local language and customs increases, his self-confidence and self-esteem begins to return. He comes out of his shell and makes tentative overtures to

the people around him- and as soon as he starts being friendly, they stop being hostile. Slowly he progresses from a grudging acceptance of his surroundings to a genuine fondness for them and then becomes proud of his growing ability to function in them. In the end, he wonders what he was so unhappy about in the beginning.

Is it possible to shorten the duration of culture shock or minimize its impact? The experts think so. There are three suggestions they offer to anyone planning a stay in a foreign land.

First, be aware that such a thing as culture shock exists, that it will probably affect you one way or another, but that it doesn't last forever.

Next, try to remember, if and when you become thoroughly disenchanted with your surroundings, that the problem probably isn't so much in them as it is in you.

Third, accept the idea that while it may be somewhat painful, culture shock can be a very valuable experience, a mind-stretching process that will leave you with broader perspectives, deeper insight into yourself and wider tolerance for other people. A close student of the subject, Peter S. Adler, calls it "a very powerful and personal form of learning." The whole experience, he says, "Is that rare set of situations which forces the individual into experimenting with new forms of attitude and behavior."

In addition to these three main points, the experts offer a handful of common sense do's and don'ts to anyone who may find himself exposed to culture shock. If it happens to you, don't think that you're strange or abnormal. If you had a happy life back home, why shouldn't you miss some aspects of it or feel a sense of loss? You'd be abnormal if you didn't.

If it happens to you, don't sit around being negative and critical; this just prolongs and depends on your gloom. Try to keep busy. Arrange something pleasant to look forward to. Set goals for yourself- learning ten new foreign phrases each day, for example- and stick to them. Observers in the USA have noticed that when foreign students bring their wives with them, the women are more susceptible to culture shock because they have fewer specific goals and less to do.

If it happens to you, try not to be judgmental. Everyone has an ethnocentric tendency to think that his own culture is superior to all others. Actually, any culture is a good culture if it provides an environment that meets basic human needs.

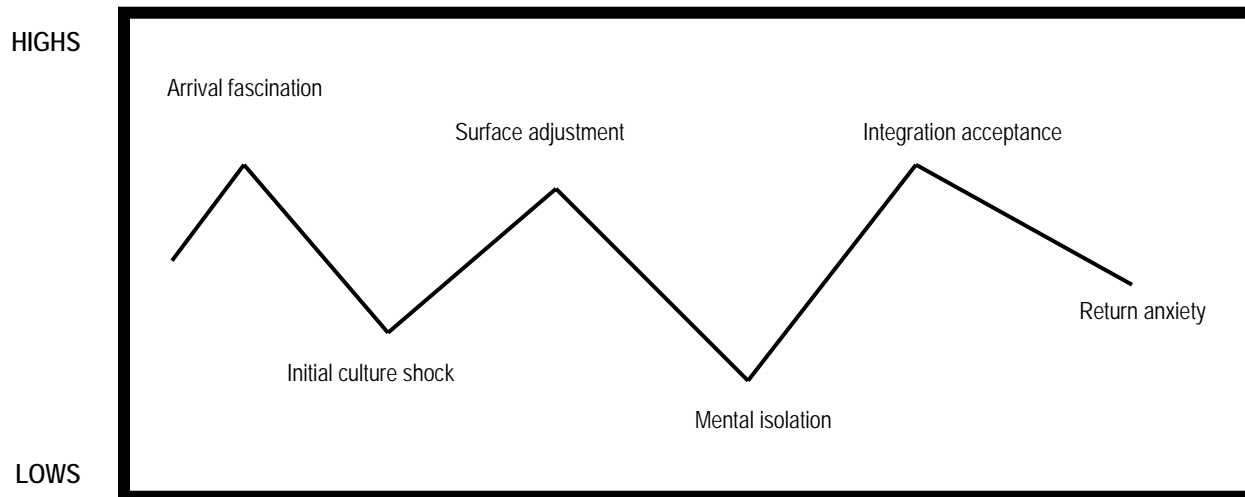
If it happens to you, force yourself to look for the best, not the worst, in your situation. People who go around looking for trouble usually manage to find it. Train yourself to enjoy the diversity of people and cultures, not fear it or shy away from it. Recently in Russia two members of an American tour group at different times during the day bought a candy bar from a booth in a railroad station. Each was given his change in the form of chocolate wafers. One American disturbed by this departure from the familiar felt that he was being victimized and protested vehemently. Charmed by what seemed to him a quaint and delightful custom, regarded it was a novel and refreshing experience and even bragged about it to his fellow tourists. The first American, it seems reasonable to say, was far more a prisoner of his own culture than the second.

In sum, before he leaves home, the visitor to a foreign land should make up his mind neither to resist the culture in which he finds himself nor surrender to it. What he needs to do is fight for grope or inch his way toward a new and flexible personality, a personality that retains its own cultural identity but recognizes the right of members of other cultures to retain theirs.

If the new personality can help him toward a better understanding of himself and of others, if it can enable him to communicate easily and convey warmth and understanding and good will across the culture barricades, then the pain of culture shock will have served its purpose, and the recovered victim will truly have the best of two worlds.

Intercultural Adjustment Cycle

Adapted from Stephen Rhinesmith's *Bring Home the World*



Two periods are of particular importance because of the depression and irritability which accompany them. These are the initial culture shock and the mental isolation periods. These periods of depression and irritability arise from the loss of familiar cues for appropriate behavior that occurs when we move from our own culture where behavior is learned and largely habitual to another culture with different norms and guidelines for behavior. Until one becomes familiar with the new norms, there is discomfort that develops because we want to do what is appropriate but we do not know what is appropriate. The symptoms of culture shock are frustration, mental fatigue, disorientation about how to work with and relate to others, boredom, lack of motivation and some physical discomfort.

The obvious approach to coping with the discomfort that comes from culture shock is to become familiar with the norms that govern daily living in the new culture. One way to do this is to look for the differences. Ask questions like: Are needs met differently here from the way they are met at home? Are things organized differently? (What's the logic or custom behind the naming of streets?) Are there different combinations of foods or other goods in the stores or markets? What goods are displayed most prominently? What does that tell you? What buildings stand out? How do you get a taxi, pay on a bus? What is totally missing that is vital to you? Does this society ignore basic human needs? Or is that need met in a different way from what you are used to? In this way, begin mapping the culture you have entered. The more it begins to make sense to you, the more comfortable you will feel with it. As you become more comfortable, you will find the symptoms of culture shock fading away.

It has been said that "the barriers to communication caused by perceptual variance can best be lowered by a knowledge and understanding of cultural factors that are subject to variance, coupled with an honest and sincere desire to communicate successfully across cultural boundaries." (Porter and Samovar)