

## **Culture Shock**

Many people have heard of the term culture shock, but few really understand what culture shock actually consists of. Culture shock is discomfort and stress resulting from losing one's sense of when and how to behave in the context of a new environment. It generally occurs when people enter an environment that is different from what they are accustomed. For example, individuals who choose to attend a college in a different country may experience culture shock because their new surroundings are unlike the country that they left behind. People that they meet act differently than the people back home, and they are unsure how to interact. All of the rules have changed. Everything from the way people eat to the holidays that they celebrate is unfamiliar.

Two important things to know about culture shock is that it is a normal process and that everyone who enters a foreign environment experiences culture shock to some degree. Culture shock tends to progress in a series of stages, although not everyone follows the stages exactly or experiences all of the stages. Generally, there are four stages: the **Honeymoon Stage**, the **Hostility Stage**, the **Humor Stage**, and the **Home Stage**.

### **The Honeymoon Stage**

This stage is characterized by a fascination with the new environment. People in this stage are eager to cooperate with and please the people they meet. One problem with their enthusiasm is that it is often misunderstood for understanding. They may nod their heads or smile even if they do not comprehend what is being said. Even though they do not understand their new environment, they enjoy the novelty of their experiences.

### **The Hostility Stage**

When the novelty wears off and the misunderstandings become overwhelming, the Hostility Stage sets in. This stage is characterized by frustration, anger, and sometimes sadness. They blame these feelings on their new environment, and they develop negative attitudes towards the people of that culture. Their enthusiasm for participating in the culture is replaced by a lack of interest and motivation, and in extreme cases, they completely withdraw.

### **The Humor Stage**

Eventually these individuals begin to relax in the new situation, and they begin to accept and laugh at the differences that had upset them in the past. They learn to adapt by making new friends and learning the social rules of the culture. By finding the humor of their situation, they regain their enthusiasm for experiencing the culture.

### **The Home Stage**

In this stage, people become relaxed in their new environment and start to feel at home. People maintain pride and allegiance to their home culture, as well as enjoy their new culture. They now know two sets of rules, and they can live comfortably in both cultures.

Usually people react to culture shock with a variety of symptoms. Recognizing these symptoms can help identify the source of their problems. Knowing that their symptoms are normal reactions to culture shock can help them feel better about themselves. Common symptoms include:

Homesickness  
Boredom  
Withdrawal  
Problems sleeping and eating  
Alcohol use  
Irritability  
Social isolation  
Communication difficulties  
Family tensions  
Fatigue  
Episodes of crying and fearfulness  
Physical illness

There are several things people can do to cope with culture shock. First, it helps to recognize the problem as culture shock. It is important to remember that those who suffer from symptoms of culture shock are not alone and that the experience is quite common. Second, being patient and realizing that it takes time to work through this process makes culture shock tolerable. In addition, in order to get the most out of our experiences, we need to be careful not to blame culture for our difficulties. When we learn about the culture and meet new people, we enhance our own experiences in the new environment. Those who commit to working on communication skills and who are not afraid to ask for help have an easier time adjusting. It is also helpful to find other people that are going through similar situations. They can provide support and share things that have been helpful for coping. If you still feel like you are struggling with this adjustment contact CAPS at 674-8050 to discuss this with a counselor.