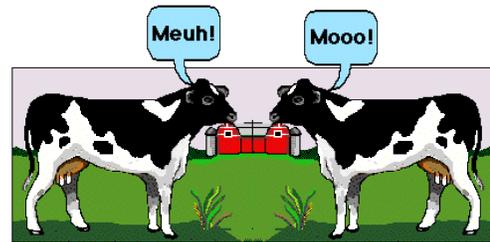


# CULTURE SHOCK

## WHAT IS CULTURE SHOCK?

“I hate this place. When is the next flight to Ottawa?”

The tourist’s glamour may not be the resident’s reality. It is common for people to suffer from some form of culture shock after arriving in a foreign setting. This normal reaction to a new environment occurs while you are outside of your comfort zone. When adapting to a foreign culture, you could experience a range of emotions from euphoria to yearning for home. Culture shock is a term used to describe what people experience when they are overwhelmed by unfamiliar surroundings and conditions, resulting in a sense of isolation.



## STAGES OF CULTURE SHOCK

As an exchange student, you may experience some or all of the following stages of culture shock:

1. **Initial Anxiety:** Before departing, is common for exchange students to feel anxious about their upcoming journey. You may even question your decision to go on exchange.
2. **Initial Elation:** At this stage, you have just arrived in the new country and are observing the culture through a tourist’s idealistic eyes. Everything is fantastic! And so much fun! This is also referred to as “the honeymoon period”. In this phase, you are positive and curious. You are looking forward to new adventures with anticipation, and you may even idealize the host culture.
3. **Initial Culture Shock:** Irritability and hostility are both symptoms of culture shock. It is at this stage that it is important to realise that there is a fine line between saying that people do things in a different way and that they do things in a stupid way. It’s also common to blame the new culture for one’s frustrations and emotions, rather than the process of acculturation.

4. **Initial Adaptation:** Next, there will be a period of acceptance, during which you gradually adapt to the new culture and no longer nurture feelings of anxiety or resentment. During this adjustment, you will begin to feel more comfortable and to develop a balanced, objective view of your experiences. However, the frustration may return, and you may experience feelings of sadness again.
5. **Acceptance of Host Culture:** Now you will begin to integrate your host culture into your everyday life. During this phase, you may develop a sense of belonging to your host culture or even a soft spot for certain customs.
6. **Return Anxiety:** This phase is similar to the initial anxiety period and occurs before you return to your home country. You may feel anxious about leaving your new community and readjusting to your life in Canada. At the same time, you will also feel a sense of relief and accomplishment after having successfully completed your stay abroad.
7. **Reverse Culture Shock:** Many students overlook reverse culture shock. After having assimilated the host country's culture, it may be challenging for you to return home; you may have to overcome cultural differences for a second time. Moreover, reverse culture shock can be more intense because it is often unexpected. You may require time to settle back into a routine and to readjust to life in Canada.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF CULTURE SHOCK?

"I don't know why I'm always so tired."

Culture shock can manifest itself in various ways including:

- Social withdrawal (ex. spending excessive amounts of time reading and avoiding contact with local people)
- Feeling isolated or helpless
- Boredom
- Sleeping a lot or tiring easily
- Irritation over delays and other minor frustrations
- Various body pains and aches
- Longing to be back home
- Unduly criticizing local customs

## COPING WITH CULTURE SHOCK

“Before I left for Japan, a past exchange student warned me that blowing one’s nose in public is considered to be very impolite there. I am so glad I spoke to her.”

Your international experience will most likely present you with a few hurdles. It may be helpful to keep these coping strategies in the back of your mind:

- Plan outings with your new friends. Contact the service responsible for tourism in your host city for inspiration.
- Bring a couple of objects to remind you of home, for example, a book, photos or decorative items.
- Interact with the local people and other exchange students.
- Make a list of things you want to accomplish while you are abroad and follow through with them!
- Remember that you chose to travel because you wanted to experience a new culture and see the world from a new perspective. Don’t let this opportunity pass you by!
- Keep open mind and avoid passing judgement.
- Take up a hobby that permits you to learn more about your host culture, for example, a traditional sport or art form.
- Get involved in the community by volunteering. You can practice the local language while giving back to your host community.
- Be patient and don’t be too hard on yourself.