

CULTURE

SHOCK!

What it is
How to recognise it
How to beat it
and
How to learn and benefit
from it

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WHAT IS CULTURE SHOCK?

‘One of the paradoxes of this century is that a man can be uprooted from a familiar environment, flown halfway round the world, dropped in another clime and culture, and be expected to function as usual.

The facts are that eventually, to varying degrees, he feels the disorienting effects of culture shock; acceptance or rejection of the visitor by the host country depends on his ability to think, feel and interact in terms of the new culture.’

Culture Shock! By Robert and Nanthapa Cooper

Culture shock, then, is the ‘emotional reaction a person has to living in a foreign country’. Almost everyone experiences it to some degree, though for some it may be so slight that it is hardly recognisable.

There are several distinct phases of culture shock, and an ability to recognise them is half the battle in overcoming it.

1. The idea of going to live and work overseas seems very exciting, emphasised, possibly, by friends who envy what they imagine you will experience—beaches, palm trees, sunshine etc.
2. As your departure draws nearer, excitement is mixed with the stress of packing up, taking decisions, leaving family, friends, pets.
3. But then there’s the excitement of arrival. This *could* be the first let-down, if what you find is far from what you imagine. It is more likely though that you will be buoyed up by a sort of holiday feeling. You may, for example, have to spend your first few weeks in a hotel—something that is normally associated with a holiday. There may be time for most of the family to explore, and the sights, sounds and smells will intrigue and interest you, while, at work, new colleagues will be welcoming.
4. Can it last? These new friends may appear to ‘drop’ you, the hotel menu becomes boring; if there are children with you, they become fractious. This intriguing new country you’ve come to, suddenly looks

RE-ENTRY SHOCK

While you are busily settling into your new environment, especially when you are possibly missing your home and family, it will seem hard to believe that you may suffer another kind of culture shock when you return! Your family and friends will be glad to see you back, whether this is for a short leave or a permanent situation. They will ask about your experiences, and enjoy some of your stories — but *some* is the operative word!

The things to remember are:-

1. In your absence other friends will have been made, and other activities become popular, so it may come like a bolt from the blue for you to realise that, while you were away, the gap that you left has been filled. You have to re-establish your position within your circle of family and friends.
2. This may mean that you need them more than they need you. They will be ready and willing to give some support, but don’t be hurt or surprised if this isn’t quite as much as you hoped for. From their point of view, you’ve been away enjoying an interesting experience, and have come back to familiar surroundings. They may not appreciate the changes that have taken place in your absence — to them, to society as a whole. And YOU will have changed too! Your outlook will be different, perhaps you’ll be more tolerant, have a wider perspective — and this will be difficult for them to understand.
3. Once you have assimilated to a ‘new’ environment, it becomes so familiar that there’s much you take for granted. Your friends and family can’t see this, so if they seem bored or uninterested in your stories, be patient.

Corona Worldwide members know all about these problems. This is why it has friendship groups and branches in various parts of the UK. There is also an officer who should be the first port of call once you have arrived and settled back into life in the UK.

- Be respectful and courteous, and learn and observe the local courtesies.
- Get involved in extra activities gradually and steadily, and find out how you can best use your talents and interests, particularly in a voluntary capacity. Don't rule out too quickly something that, at first, doesn't seem entirely appropriate, because it is through this sort of contact that you are likely to meet new people, and make new friends.
- Find out where things happen, where groups meet etc.
- Make your house your own, with your own favourite pictures, books, arrangements etc.
- Familiarise yourself, without being intrusive, with what makes your new neighbours 'tick'.

iv. As time goes on.....

- Continue with your own hobbies, reading, making, doing...
- Take the opportunity to learn new hobbies, which may not have been available to you before.
- Link with like-minded people to share activities, go out of your way to work—and play—with others, even if you are not, by nature, a 'joiner'.
- Take advice from people, who have been in the country longer than you and whose opinions you respect.
- Explore and get to know the environment, within the common sense boundaries of security and safety.
- Participate and help in local activities with local neighbours.
- Earn the respect of the people in your new environment by demonstrating through your own actions, your respect for their lifestyle and preferences.

And thereafter...

Enjoy all the additional pleasures and privileges of working among the people of another country, and make the most of your chance of a lifetime. Consider keeping a journal of your new life. There are so many things you will see and do, which you think you'll never forget, but once you are back in your home country, some memories will undoubtedly fade. A journal and photographs will keep them alive, not just for you, but also for your family.

dirty, smelly, too hot or too busy; there are restrictions — what you wear, what you can do — which are irksome, and aspects of the country you find quite unacceptable. In addition, there may be other pressures — to find a home, a school, for instance — and suddenly it's not that easy. Things don't happen in the way you are used to. It's more difficult to get organised than you expected and you don't seem to be able to get on top of everything as you would 'at home' — a place that mysteriously acquires a rosy glow!

5. So you take it out on whoever happens to be around — the landlord who seems to be overcharging for rent, the taxi driver who can't understand you, the shopkeeper who seems to be unhelpful, the children, if they enter the equation, who are tiresome beyond belief, and a spouse who appears not to care. Why are things going wrong? Why can't I cope? Is something the matter with me? — these are the thoughts which might go through your head.

None of this is unusual. What has happened is that you've all been removed from familiar patterns of living, lost your usual support system (family and friends etc.) and have to learn to adjust.

6. Gradually, without your realising it, the unfamiliar becomes less strange, you're recognised by people around you, the children stop being fussy about what they eat and begin to talk about new friends at school. Local customs become familiar, and you find you have a wide circle of friends.

7. Now you can enjoy your new environment. New support systems are in place and your new home is just as familiar to you as the one you left back home.

So that's what it's about! What can you do to help things along? Here are some useful tips. They cover:-

- i advance preparations
- ii on arrival
- iii the first few weeks
- iv as time goes on....

i. Advance Preparations

- It will help if you read as much as you can about the country to which you are going.
- Meet and talk to people who know it, both nationals and expatriates.
- Find out all you can through DVDs, watching / listening to programmes about the country.
- Ask friends and family to collect articles about it, and see if you can find out what the living conditions will be like.
- Search the internet extensively for information about the country, and testimonials of those who have lived there.
- Check to see if there are any steps you should take before arrival, e.g. booking a place in the local school, arranging local accommodation, copying birth and marriage certificates etc., making a will.
- Find out from specialist groups in the UK about the possibility of continuing or developing special interests: walking, bird-watching, photography or other hobbies.

SHOP ACCORDINGLY, PACK ACCORDINGLY

If you are likely to be in temporary accommodation, or if it will be some time before heavy baggage reaches you, remember to pack some favourite books, toys and games for children, and books and/or handi-crafts for yourself.

Corona Worldwide can help you, by putting you in touch with someone who is currently living in the country to which you are going, or who has recently returned. Some overseas branches also compile notes for newcomers to their country

- Be ready to release your links at home, ensuring that you will not have to keep worrying about what you have left behind. Complete all arrangements for letting a house, for example, notifying banks etc. of your change of address.

- Set up systems of communication with home so that you can ease your mind more readily. Arrange internet access for your new home, so you can keep in touch by email and Skype, and ensure that mobile phones are compatible with the country you are going to.
- Be positive in your attitude towards getting to know your new environment — avoid prejudging, anticipating, expecting...
- Be ready to respect and enjoy the differences between your own culture and that of your new environment.

ii On arrival

- Look and listen
- Show your genuine interest in your new environment but 'hold your horses' regarding forming opinions, and be circumspect about expressing your views. Listen to other people's advice and views — and take time to form your own.
- Be ready to learn, discuss and meet new challenges
- Be ready to accept the differences, understanding that this does not mean that you will have to compromise your own system of ethics.
- Remember the old adage: 'When in Rome do as the Romans do' — there is much wisdom in this piece of advice.
- Find out about and respect the cultural and religious 'dos and don'ts', and, if in doubt don't!
- Get to know the neighbours, both national and expatriate, and don't be afraid to ask their advice. Far from being impatient at your ignorance, they will respect your sensitivity.
- Be cautious over security matters until you know the local circumstances, but be discreet about it so as not to offend.
- Learn the practical necessities regarding driving, shopping, medical facilities etc.
- Above all else, keep your sense of humour!

iii The first few weeks

- Take time to assess the situation
- Resist jumping to conclusions about rights and wrongs, similarities and differences, and be ready to comply with local restrictions.