

## Overcoming Culture Shock: Surviving & Thriving ...Don't be shocked if you're shocked...

*What is Culture Shock and who gets it? How do you know if you've got it and how can it be treated? Most people who move to a new country experience some level of Culture Shock. Why is this good news? Well, if you find yourself suffering any symptoms it means that, firstly, you're normal and secondly, you're immersing yourself in the culture of your new home.*

Culture Shock is the physical and emotional discomfort people suffer when they travel to or live in another country or, indeed, any place different from their place of origin.

In today's mobile society with frequent International travel and where multicultural societies provide us with daily exposure to diverse cultures, haven't we become immune to Culture Shock? Not so. Although these experiences help you build intercultural savvy, they won't protect you from Culture Shock. In fact, they can lull you into the delusion that, as a seasoned globetrotter and sophisticated world citizen, you'd automatically have a soft landing if you shifted country.

Cultural Intelligence is the ability to engage in a set of behaviours that use skills (such as language, interpersonal communications and rapport building) and personal qualities (such as flexibility, patience and tolerance for ambiguity) that are tuned to the culture-based values and attitudes of the people with whom you interact.

Perhaps surprisingly, yet strangely reassuring, cultural intelligence does NOT insure you against experiencing Culture Shock. You might be able to understand differences more readily or to communicate more easily between cultures, but you're just as likely to experience discomfort and dislocation.

### The Challenges of Shifting Countries

Let's put Culture Shock aside for a moment, and explore the challenges of moving countries:

- The move itself – Don't underestimate the effort and endless decisions required to sort possessions, sell or protect assets, deal with pets, explain the move to children and relatives, pack your belongings and jump on a plane.
- Finding a new home – The search, negotiating, unpacking and settling in can leave anyone exhausted.
- Starting a new job – You have a new employer, boss, team, colleagues, staff, markets, policies and regulations to get to know.
- Giving up a job – Partners who give up their work to accompany their beloved can suffer a change of personal identity or lost sense of self, and must get used to significant lifestyle shifts.
- New physical environment – Weather, seasons and landscapes can affect our mood and may even become our rudder throughout the year. When these change, our personal rhythm can get disrupted.
- Farewells and dislocation – Saying goodbye to friends and family can be a time of great sadness and loss.
- Making new friends – Sounds good? It is, but it can also be difficult to suddenly start from scratch socially. Walking into a room when

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you know no-one takes some getting used to. It feels like the first day of school all over again.

- Making '*faux pas*' and not being able to make any assumptions. This can leave you embarrassed, uncertain and overly cautious.
- Having domestic help - This mightn't sound like a hardship, but having a 'maid' requires adjustment. It brings managerial responsibilities, a shift of privacy in your own home, and reflection on values and practicalities.
- Creating new routines – So many everyday things are different including transport, work, shopping, exercising, socialising and diet.
- Visiting 'back home'– This can be an unsettling experience. It's great to reconnect ...yet somehow you're a bit different. Saying goodbye could be harder than the first time or perhaps you're strangely relieved to be going back to your new home. You might feel in no-man's land, not quite sure where you really belong.
- Misconceptions or unhelpful comments - When you move country, your life often changes more than that of the people you've left. To them, your life abroad can sound glamorous and easy. You might experience digs, envy or other unhelpful responses. Remember, they're only seeing part of it. Only you have the whole picture.

Together these form a hot pot of potentially unnerving stressors. Then we add cultural differences to boost your disorientation. Voila – you have Culture Shock – a very real and understandable phenomenon.

### What's It All About

What do you need to know about Culture Shock in order to survive and hopefully thrive in

your new environment? Firstly, it's important to repeat that it's a normal and healthy human response. It's an adaptive process through which we learn to adjust to our environment. It's a positive sign that you're getting involved in the 'host' culture at a life level. You're no longer the tourist – you're intrinsically involved and it's affecting you.

Expatriates sometimes proudly announce that they haven't experienced any Culture Shock. While this isn't impossible, it could indicate a soft landing from already knowing people who help orient and ground you, or that you might be somewhat 'protected' in an ivory tower that limits your deeper interaction with the host culture. Culture Shock is nothing to be ashamed of and it's not a competition, so there's no need for bravado.

Culture Shock can be mild, medium or severe. It can vary from an irritation, frustration or discomfort to a feeling of being debilitated.

It can be situational – just arising in particular contexts, intermittent – coming and going, or prevailing – when it stays with you for a long time.

In the majority of cases, Culture Shock is treated by the individual - through increased awareness, self-care and seeking informal support. If you experience severe prevailing symptoms, however, it's best to visit your doctor or consider counselling.

Although Culture Shock tends to follow general patterns, it can happen at any time. Some people feel it immediately when they step out of the airport. Many experience it when they emerge from the 'honeymoon' phase. Others experience it some time down the track, perhaps due to a change in circumstances that plummets them more deeply into the culture, or

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after losing support systems that provided a buffer or sense of belonging. There is no 'right' time or way to experience Culture Shock.

Because of this, family members can suffer from it at different times. Although a unit, you're also individuals, each having different experiences and reactions. A working partner is initially busy with an upward learning curve and a need to hit the ground running. At one level they have to adapt quickly to new bosses, teams, staff, clients and markets. Yet in another way, particularly in multinational corporations, they can be somewhat protected from a deeper immersion for a while.

For a non-working partner managing the family transition, the experience is different. They too are steeped in instant busyness, yet are often plunged into the host culture more swiftly as they deal with everyday necessities getting the home and family up and running. It can be a more isolated and lonely experience, taking longer to connect with potential friends. Children have different challenges again and each child will have their own unique issues.

For singles, it's all happening at once – ensuring a successful first 90 days in the new job, creating a home, and embarking on a new social life. That even sounds exhausting.

### The Four Stages of Culture Shock

There are four stages of Culture Shock, and whilst they tend to be sequential, you might oscillate between stages and revisit earlier stages depending on circumstances. They involve different emotions and the journey can vary from mild ups and downs to a sheer rollercoaster ride:

- Stage 1: Honeymoon – *“this is exciting!”*
- Stage 2: Rejection – *“what have I done!”*

- Stage 3: Recovery – *“it's not so bad”*
- Stage 4: Adjustment – *“This feels normal.”*

### Ten Symptoms to Watch Out For

Culture Shock can creep up on you, so it's important to recognise the symptoms, in yourself and others. It can affect our attitude and behaviour – what we think, feel, see, do and say. Typical symptoms of include:

1. Taking things personally that you'd normally shrug off
2. Loss of sense of humour
3. Tension and conflict in personal relationships
4. Preoccupation with health or feeling ill or 'below par'
5. Feelings of vulnerability, loneliness, isolation, confusion, uncertainty, powerlessness, lost confidence or lacking control
6. Changes in temperament – sadness, resentment, anger, impatience, volatility, aggression
7. Homesickness or idealising your home country
8. Difficulty concentrating or being unable to solve simple problems
9. An excessive need to sleep
10. Developing stereotypes about the host culture.

### Ten Survival Strategies

The good news is that Culture Shock can be managed. Here are some of the ways you can tackle it if it strikes:

1. Accept it and be patient. It's normal. Acknowledge that it takes time, and everyone has their own timeframe. There's no set formula. Stop being so tough on yourself and/or your partner.
2. Remain aware. Observe yourself and those you love. Pay attention to family and friends. They're more important than ever and may be struggling too

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3. Treat differences as mere differences. No culture is superior. Don't disparage local people. Avoid negative expatriates who constantly complain or deride the host culture
  4. Practise extreme self-care - eat well, get enough sleep, exercise, create time for yourself
  5. Start calling your new place 'home'. You have two homes now.
  6. Mind your language. Choose positive, non-judgmental, non-divisive language – in what you say and think. No 'us vs them'
  7. Continue learning about the host country, seeking to understand the reasons behind things – values, traditions, beliefs. Check out local books, newspapers, TV and radio. Attend festivities, catch public transport, eat local foods, talk to 'strangers'
  8. Remain light. If things go wrong, try to laugh, not cry. Yet realise that It's OK to cry – just try not to scream and shout too much!
  9. If you do have a bad experience with someone, don't extrapolate to blame the whole culture.
  10. Get involved in local and expatriate communities. Reach out to people and experiences. If the phone doesn't ring, make some calls yourself. Before long, newcomers will see you as the settled-in expert!
- A diverse global network that will ultimately leave you with friends and contacts all over the world
  - Opportunities for re-invention and personal growth
  - Introduction to 'exotic' hobbies, interests, festivities, customs and languages that will become a rich part of your life and psyche
  - Incredible cultural, travel and community experiences
  - Transformations that helps you view and experience the world from a whole new perspective
  - The realisation and confidence that you can do anything you want to.

When you see it this way, a few twangs of Culture Shock in the first year or so seem like a small price to pay – don't you think?



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### Reaping The Rewards

Despite the challenges of moving to a new culture, there is plenty of upside you will enjoy. Keep an open mind and these benefits can be yours:

- Work, career and business opportunities you might never have considered back 'home'
- Life skills and a mindset that can take you anywhere
- New friends that can become so close they seem like family