

THE CULTURE SHOCK CYCLE

Culture shock is the anxiety resulting from losing familiar cultural signs and symbols of communicating as we know it. Cultural signs and symbols are the thousand and one ways that we orient ourselves to daily living: what do we say when we meet people, when to shake hands, how to accept and refuse invitations, how to make purchases, when do we take a statement seriously and when is it unimportant?

In culture shock a person is trying to make sense out of words, gestures, facial expressions, customs, without the familiar communication cues acquired while growing up. It affects everyone who travels to some degree. With a good sense of humor we can call culture shock the situational “disease” of people who are transplanted out of their usual regional or national comfort zone. The full culture shock cycle has three stages and takes a full year to complete.

Stage one, the honeymoon, can last from two weeks to six months depending on the person and the circumstances. The honeymoon is characterized by excitement, romanticizing the novel cultural experiences and glowing good will about the new environment and people. Tourists and brief educational and business travelers often do not move beyond the honeymoon stage because they receive special treatment and do not stay long enough to cope with the conditions of real life.

The second stage of culture shock with the symptoms below begins at 1-3 months and dissipates slowly in waves over the first year in a new culture. In the third stage, the cultural adjustment stage, a person can operate with some language in the cultural milieu with minimal anxiety. He/she has a grasp of the cues of social intercourse, and not only accepts the foods, drinks, habits and customs of the country but enjoys them. The culture shock cycle, called re-entry culture shock, will begin when a person returns to the home culture. Once again, the three stages take a full year for cultural integration.

CULTURE SHOCK SYMPTOMS

All of the following culture shock symptoms normally occur at some point for most people. A suggestion is to review the culture shock symptoms below periodically after entering a new culture and rate yourself on a “coping” scale of 1-10 for each item. Proactive awareness can prevent serious problems. Be sure to seek extra support, perhaps counseling, if you score consistently high for several weeks.

- Feeling anxious, uptight, edgy
- Feeling homesick
- Bored, bored, bored
- Tired all the time
- Feeling unable to cope, sad, depressed
- Crying for no particular reason
- New physical ailments or re-occurrence of old ones
- Impatient with local people, family, co-workers
- Delay or difficulty learning new language
- Distaste or disgust with local food and customs
- Eating more than usual
- Sleeping more than usual
- Drinking more than usual