

## Coping with Culture Shock

The term *culture shock* was introduced in 1958 to describe the anxiety produced when a person moves to a completely new environment. This term expresses a lack of direction and uncertainty over what to do or how to do things in a new environment—about what is appropriate or not. The feeling generally sets in after the first few weeks of coming to a new place.

We can describe culture shock as the physical and emotional discomfort one suffers when coming to live in another country or a place different from the place of origin. Often the way that we lived before is not accepted or considered normal in the new place. Everything is different—for example, the language, how to use banking machines, how to use the telephone, and so forth.

Culture shock is related to the anxiety that results from losing all familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. These signs are the thousand and one ways that help us orient ourselves to the situations of daily life: when to shake hands and what to say when we meet people, when and how to tip, how to make purchases, when to accept and when to refuse invitations, when to take statements seriously and when not.

These cues, which may be words, gestures, facial expressions, customs, or norms, are acquired by all of us in the course of growing up. They are as much a part of our culture as the language we speak or the beliefs we hold. All of us depend for our peace of mind and our efficiency on hundreds of these cues, most of which we learned unconsciously.

Entering a strange culture, all or most of these familiar cues are removed. Props have been knocked out from underfoot. People feel like fish out of water, no matter how broad-minded or full of goodwill they may be. This can create frustration and anxiety.

People react to the frustration in much the same way. First they reject the environment that causes the discomfort: the ways of the host country seem bad because they make us feel bad.

All new students' first days are ones of adjustment. For international students, this is even more true. You will experience many different changes when entering college. There are usually four phases.

1. **Honeymoon:** Everything is great, nothing is wrong. You're having a wonderful time. In this first stage, you may feel euphoric and be pleased by all of the new things you encounter. Everything is new and exciting.
2. **Shock:** There are so many differences in this country that you don't know how to deal with them. You didn't think things would be like this. You may encounter some difficult times and crises in daily life. For example, communication difficulties may occur, such as not being understood. In this stage, there may be feelings of discontent, impatience, anger, sadness, and helplessness. This happens when you are trying to adapt to a new culture that is different from your culture of origin.
3. **Negotiation:** You learn to deal with the problems set before you and try to integrate a new way of thinking into your own beliefs. In the third stage comes some understanding of the

new culture. You may experience a new feeling of pleasure and sense of humor. You may start to feel balanced and less lost as you become more familiar with the environment and want to belong. You also begin to think about your values from home versus the values of your new culture.

4. **Acceptance:** You are able to live well in the environment. In this stage, you realize that the new culture has good and bad things to offer. This integration is accompanied by a more solid feeling of belonging.
5. **Reentry:** This occurs when going back to the country of origin. You may find that things are no longer the same, and some of your newly acquired customs and beliefs are not in use in your home culture.

**Symptoms of culture shock may include:**

- Feeling very angry over minor inconveniences
- Withdrawal from people who are different from you
- Extreme homesickness
- Sudden intense feeling of loyalty to own culture
- Overeating or loss of appetite
- Boredom
- Excessive amounts of sleep, or inability to sleep
- Headaches
- Upset stomach
- Physical pain
- Sadness, loneliness, depression
- Loss of ability to work or study effectively
- Unexplainable crying
- Marital or relationship stress
- Exaggerated cleanliness
- Feeling sick much of the time

In order to have culture shock, you need not have every symptom on the list. It is possible that only a few apply to you. These symptoms may also appear at any given time. However, problems such as a headache or upset stomach should be checked by a physician before you decide it's only culture shock. If you want to talk about your experience, you can speak with a personal counselor in the Counseling and Advising Center.

### **Solutions for Culture Shock**

Students from different cultures experience different levels of culture shock. You may not experience the physical or emotional changes, while others around you might. Culture shock is a normal process. Although uncomfortable, it is a normal part of adapting to a new environment—*you need not be ashamed of it.*

**Arrive on campus early.** A period of adjustment is inevitable, but it helps if you can get acquainted with your new home before classes start. Try to arrive at least two weeks beforehand.

Use the time to take care of as many chores as you can—get your driver's license, cell phone, and car. Also, finding housing from abroad can be a challenge, so take advantage of university resources to find a safe and affordable option.

Between these tasks, get to know some of your classmates by attending social events and joining student clubs. If your spouse or partner has made the move with you, this can help them start their own network of friends and avoid feeling alienated. It helps relieve your own feelings of isolation. Once classes begin, the activity and work won't stop—so enjoy the pre-program downtime.

**Read up about the country and its culture before you arrive.** This can help the country and its people seem more familiar.

**Be aware of cultural adjustment.** Realize that it is natural to miss family, friends, and home. Talk about these feelings with someone you feel comfortable with or someone who has experienced and overcome these feelings of culture shock. Find ways to live with the things that don't satisfy you 100 percent.

**Stay in touch** with your family and friends from home. Allow yourself to feel sad about the things that you have left behind: your family, country, friends, etc.

**Keep contact with your ethnic group.** Make friends with people who are from your home country, but try not to spend all your time with fellow citizens. Resist making jokes, stereotypes, and negative comments about the United States and its people. Instead, focus on the positive aspects of the new culture. Find restaurants that serve food from home, or buy ingredients from a local store and make a dish from home.

**Stay busy.** Participate in activities that you did at home or that interest you. Check CampusCruiser ([my.berklee.net](http://my.berklee.net)) or the Student Activities Office for information about clubs, organizations and upcoming events. By getting out of your room or outside your apartment, you will experience firsthand what Americans are doing. If you visit public places, such as a shopping mall or sporting events, you will be able to see how United States customs are practiced. Develop a hobby, and try to build a life outside school and work.

**Keep your self-confidence.** Believe you can do it. Keep in mind the many strengths and advantages you will have when you succeed with your program at Berklee.

**Learn to be constructive.** If you find yourself in an unfavorable situation or environment, don't put yourself in that position again.

**Relaxation and meditation** have proven to be very positive for people who are passing through periods of stress. Back Bay Yoga on Boylston Street offers a free weekly class for Berklee students; visit the Counseling and Advising Center for details.

**Never confuse your ability to speak the new language with your intelligence.** It is easy to feel stupid and get down on yourself, but there is no reason to. It takes everyone some time to adjust

to and become comfortable with a new language. It is much easier to understand a culture when you can understand the language used. Ask about any slang terms you do not understand.

**Learn the language by using it.** Language shapes our perception of reality. It grows from underlying cultural values and is both **verbal** (idioms, grammar, words) and **nonverbal** (physical space between speakers, gestures, touching, etc.). It is not just how a person speaks that tells us how they feel and react. All verbal messages are accompanied by many different kinds of nonverbal signals. Body movements carry as much and **often more** meaning and information than the words spoken.

**Exercise.** Find an activity that you enjoy—it will reduce stress and depression. In the United States, people like to run and walk on paths. They also like organized games. There are several gyms and health clubs close to Berklee, many of which offer discounts to students.

**Listen and observe.** Since there are new rules, norms, and cues that may be unfamiliar, you need to listen and observe nonverbal communication carefully. Try to put it into the proper context.

**Ask questions and be honest.** You cannot assume that you always know what is going on, or that you always understand. Most people will be very helpful if you need an explanation. You may need to rephrase a question, check the meaning of something, or repeat what you have said in order to be clearly understood.

**Be open and curious.** Try new things, and discover how and why certain things are done. The more you explore, the more you'll learn. Don't be afraid to laugh at yourself. It is likely that you will make mistakes as you explore a new culture. Laughing at them will encourage others to respond to you in a friendly manner and help you learn.

**Try not to misjudge.** You will see many things that are different from your own culture. Don't label anything as "good" or "bad" in comparison to your own culture; most customs, habits, and ideas are simply different. You may also misunderstand some things; don't make judgments until you have complete information.

**Make friends with people from the United States.** By having friends you can talk to, you can ask them questions about what you do not understand.

**Introduce yourself to other international students.** Other international students may be experiencing the same problems. By talking to them, you may find out ways they are coping with problems.

**Be patient.** Many international students experience culture shock in some way. Be patient. The act of living in a new culture is a process of adapting to new situations. It takes time. Just recognize the problem and give yourself time to get over it.

**Try to accept frustration.** Learning to function in a new culture is not easy, and it is natural to feel anxious and frustrated at times. Realize that these feelings are a normal part of the

experience. If you need to, keep reminding yourself that these feelings are not permanent.

If culture shock continues, you can speak with a personal counselor in the Counseling and Advising Center, 939 Boylston Street (accessed from the third floor of the Uchida building at 921 Boylston Street), 617 747-2310.

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