

COPING WITH CULTURE SHOCK

CULTURE SHOCK AND ITS STAGES

Culture shock is a label for the disorientation and related feelings of anxiety and stress an individual experiences when moving from one culture to another. It has become an important area of study as society becomes increasingly globally mobile. Those who move from culture to culture will feel some degree of culture shock. Therefore, it is important to understand its dynamics in order to best support yourself and your family towards successful adjustment to your new environment. What are the stages, or symptoms, of culture shock? What does culture shock look like?

Symptoms fall into four general categories.

Stage one, often called the honeymoon stage, is marked by excited anticipation. During this stage, you experience pleasant symptoms of excitement at being in a new place with interesting and new things to do and see. Some people never progress past this initial stage of exhilaration in being abroad. These people spend their entire stay in a state of mild euphoria, behaving like permanent tourists: traveling to new and wonderful places, forming friendships exclusively with other expatriates, and maintaining their old lifestyle. For most, however, the honeymoon period passes and they move on to the second and most problematic stage of culture shock.

Stage two is marked by discouragement, doubt, apathy, and a generally negative attitude toward England. Your conversations during this stage tend to concentrate on the things you can't buy, the things you have to do without, and all the things the British do "wrong" (which means "differently"). This can be thought of as the flight stage because one often thinks about leaving England during this time.

Stage three of culture shock is a stage of immersion. With perseverance you will arrive at it by the end of the first year. You are now learning the cues of English culture and seldom experience that old sense of disorientation. You have met and socialized with English neighbors or co-workers, might have taken a course in English history, and discover British vocabulary and pronunciation creeping into your speech. You are becoming immersed in the English way of life, rather than standing on the outside, critically looking in.

Stage four or the final stage of cultural adjustment is marked by full participation in the English way of life. Now you rarely find yourself thinking in categories of "them" and "us". This is the final stage of adjustment. You are now functionally and emotionally adjusted to life in England and are living with the ease you experienced before the move.

TREATMENT

The treatment of culture shock applies to stage two – the flight stage, which is the most uncomfortable part of adjustment. The coping behaviors you choose during this period may determine the tone of the rest of your stay in England.

Crisis experts say that an individual undergoing stress following a change, such as a move to another culture, will seek to resolve their state of unbalance within a four to six week period – the average length of time one will tolerate this anxiety. It is not uncommon for people to react with negative coping behaviors that do not serve them well in the long run. Examples would be social withdrawal, chronic complaining, or even alcoholism. It is therefore critical to take inventory of your consciously or unconsciously chosen coping mechanisms and select those that promote a positive, long-term lifestyle.

One of the first and easiest steps in the treatment of culture shock can begin before you arrive, but certainly any time subsequent. Get as much information as you can about England, its customs, history, climate and so on. Also, acquire basic information before you need it: contact a doctor and dentist before the need arises; familiarize yourself with emergency medical procedures; plan the steps to take if your car breaks down; learn

about public transportation. This step is called “doing your homework”. By doing homework on England in general and preparing for specific family emergencies, you begin to build basic confidence in your ability to function here.

Secondly, try to fend off feelings of depression by taking concrete measures to adapt. For example, familiarize yourself with your surroundings. Keep your explorations local and leave the rest of London and England until later. Buy maps of your locality and trace some of the routes on foot; read local newspapers, clip addresses, file some away, and visit others. Familiarize yourself with your surroundings in an emotional sense too. Chat with a local shopkeeper; have a cup of tea at the local coffee shop to do some subtle people watching; become a regular reader of the notice board at your local library and join one of the activities listed there. This goes beyond the intellectual task of “homework” and requires “doing”, which further builds up your self-image as one who competently negotiates British daily life. Local explorations can also be made into fun outings for the family to enjoy.

Another way to get the better of “down” feelings is to establish a goal and take steps to achieve it. Have you ever wanted to study art, learn a second language, develop a green thumb, hike regularly in the countryside, and collect antiques? A constructive activity is like a reward for more frustrating aspects of cultural adjustment.

Eventually, you will develop a workable philosophy about your stay in England. Hopefully it will include enthusiasm (“It’s a wonderful country and I’m lucky to be here.”) and opportunism (“I’m going to take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime chance!”). You want to do more than survive – you can choose to thrive!

FAMILY CULTURE SHOCK

Moving away from home, familiar surroundings, and the support network of family and friends puts the entire family into a state of imbalance. The roles in a marriage often change, especially if one spouse leaves work to follow another’s career advancement. There is often realignment on parental responsibilities as well, which may initially result in feelings of resentment or anger.

It is especially important during this first year to practice open and ongoing communication between all family members. It is important, also, that children be allowed to talk about uncomfortable emotions such as anger, frustration, and resentment, to minimize any inappropriate acting out and displacement of these feelings outside of the home.

CHILDREN

Children live in the here and now. Until about age 12 children aren’t able to “distance” themselves from their environment as adults can. Children need to appreciate and like their environment for healthy self-development. Therefore, try not to share with them your negative reactions to the new culture. This will only serve to alienate children in the sole world they feel they occupy; it will inhibit their unfolding self-identity that requires identifying with the culture they are in now. A child needs to love his world and himself in it during early stages of personal development.

PRESCHOOL AGE

Be aware that although adult life includes what goes on outside the home, a preschooler’s life centers on what’s going on inside the home. S/he is very affected by a parent’s mood and the changes in behavior of other family members. This is a good time to keep a “stiff upper lip” and contain your own depression and frustration to a time when little ones are asleep or otherwise occupied. The preschooler’s culture is in the home, where cultural cues come from YOU.

SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN/TEENAGERS

School age children often share the “honeymoon” stage with the parents but will progress to the next stage of culture shock once differences become frustrating. They too are

impacted by the atmosphere at home, but less so as they live within a school environment as well.

It is not unusual for teenagers to be initially angry about and rebel against the move. They are more rooted in life with their peers and social life in high school than their younger siblings. You may observe teenagers retreating into their rooms with headphones on as a way of withdrawing from their new environment. However, over time and with appropriate parental support, open communication, and patience, they will soon be bragging to their friends “back home” about their new life in England.

GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS

The good news is that there is an end to family culture shock; the bad news is that the only way past it is to go through it. As a parent, be prepared for a tough six months. The following are suggestions for parents to help ease the way for their children:

- Practice patience, patience, and patience; listen to and communicate with children much more than before.
- Do explain culture shock and its stages to them whatever their age – adults often underestimate children’s understanding.
- Make it “safe” for your children to express their anger or other so called negative feelings so their unhappiness won’t be displaced in inappropriate places outside the home (such as acting out in school when before your child had no history of this type of behavior).
- Be available as much as possible. Be careful not to leave your children with a sitter too often until they become used to their new environment and caregivers.
- Do not deny the existence of culture shock. If you are a perfectionist whose ideal does not allow for an adjustment period, then you may set your family up for being “stuck” in a problematic stage of culture shock. Although some children seem to sail through changes, others do not, and denying their sensitivity to these changes could actually prolong the “flight” stage.
- Create as much stability as possible. Routines are important, and as soon as possible establish another family life rhythm. Again, be available to talk to your children about what’s new and different in their environment and answer any questions. Do stick with your child-rearing values and be sure to establish a foothold with them from the beginning.
- Do help your children create friendships whenever possible by organizing play dates and outings that will bring children together.
- If you feel your child, children, or family are not adjusting to the new environment over a reasonable time period, do not hesitate to find professional help. There is no shame or stigma to seeking outside counseling; often much can be accomplished within relatively few hours with an objective, trained professional. There is no reason you have to unnecessarily experience ongoing stress – seek relief! Remember the school counselors are there to help also.
- Don’t expect yourself to be the perfect parent during this time.
- Do your best, remain flexible, and keep a sense of humor.

IN CONCLUSION

Every move comes with challenges and benefits. Keep an open mind and try to see things as not “bad” or “good” but as “different”. Listen to your other family members, learn from each other and support each other. Talking, reading and investigating websites will help you understand and adjust to your new home.

Within the expat community, everyone has been a newcomer and we are more than willing to answer your questions, offer advice, and help you and your family settle in to your new life here. Your neighborhood and the Thames Valley American Women's Club have much to offer in terms of newcomer support for you and your family so don't be shy about asking questions (no question is stupid or silly), or asking for help. This is the beginning of a new adventure for you and your family - and we wish you every success.

Culture Shock Resources:

www.expatexpert.com. is the home of Robin Pascoe, a wonderful writer and speaker on expat joys and challenges. She has also published several books.

CITIZENS ADVICE BUREAU

The Citizens Advice Bureau website: www.adviceguide.org.uk, offers a wide range of information on life and the laws in the United Kingdom.