



District 5360 Youth Exchange Information Sheet #6 – Cultural Adaptation



Living in a foreign culture is an experience we look forward to with enthusiasm and excitement. However, many of us are often unprepared for the extent of cultural dissimilarity we encounter. Culture shock is a very real phenomenon and all travellers entering a foreign culture are affected by it in some way.

Culture Shock

Culture shock is a term used to describe pronounced reactions to the psychological disorientation most people experience when they are exposed to a culture that is markedly different from their own. For some people, culture shock is brief and hardly noticeable. For others, it can cause intense discomfort, bitterness, homesickness and depression. In some people, culture shock may even be accompanied by physical symptoms.

Culture shock has two distinct features

- ◆ It does not result from a specific event or series of events. It comes instead from the experience of encountering ways of doing, organizing, perceiving or valuing things, which are different from your own. This may threaten your basic, unconscious belief that your encultured customs, assumptions, values and behaviours are “right”.
- ◆ It does not strike suddenly or have a single principal cause. Instead, it is cumulative. It builds up slowly, from a series of small events that are difficult to identify.

Preparing yourself for culture shock

Perhaps the greatest strategy for successful cultural adaptation is the maintenance of a strong sense of personal identity. Ask yourself these questions:

- ◆ How do my personal beliefs and values influence my lifestyle and behaviour?
- ◆ Am I aware of the cultural norms and values of my host country? What will my host country’s expectations for me be?
- ◆ Why am I going on exchange?
- ◆ What am I prepared to attempt? How will I respond to language barriers and non-verbal cues that are unfamiliar? Think seriously about your motives for going on exchange and entering another culture. Be confident in your decision and realize that despite the difficulties you may encounter, your experience will ultimately be rewarding and fulfilling.

Responding to culture shock

- ◆ Realize that culture shock is normal
- ◆ Accept the lesson that culture shock imparts – one’s own culture does not possess the single right way or the best way of providing for human needs and enjoyment
- ◆ Know your host country – do the research
- ◆ Select a few areas of interest in your host country and explore them thoroughly and open-mindedly (music, art, the environment, women’s issues)
- ◆ Look consciously for logical reasons behind everything that seems strange, difficult, confusing or threatening





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- ◆ Examine your experiences from the perspective of your host culture
- ◆ Make a list of all the positive aspects of your present situation. Put the list where you can see it everyday. Keep a journal so you can see your progress
- ◆ Avoid the temptation to spend all of your time with other exchange students – especially if they belittle the host culture. Resist making jokes and disparaging comments
- ◆ Maintain a healthy sense of humour – make sure that you laugh at yourself and the mistakes you make
- ◆ Talk to others who have been through the cultural adaptation process before you go and while you are away – these people can give you perspective on the experience you're having
- ◆ Keep yourself busy and active – keep your mind occupied. Don't sit around feeling sorry for yourself.
- ◆ During the deepest plunges into culture shock – get out of the house, away from the computer – do something fun, go somewhere peaceful, try something new and be open to having good “coming back home feelings” when you come back to the things you have found that make you comfortable in your new house/culture
- ◆ Accept that there will be tough times. Even if you think the message you have heard from past exchanges students is how great everything is exchange, either they chose not to share their challenges because overcoming them is a personal thing, or you don't remember hearing them. Remember culture shock is normal and being homesick means you have good things back home to miss (and that's not a bad thing!)
- ◆ Even during the worst times (especially at the worst times) have faith that you are not the only one experiencing this and you will work your way through to the brighter days that lie ahead. An open mind and these steps will help guide you through your culture shock experience. Successful culture shock adaptation will ensure that the rewards stemming from your exchange experience will be yours to be proud of and relive for the rest of your life.

Stages of Cultural Adjustment

This roller coaster ride is a natural pattern of valleys and peaks where excitement and interest are succeeded by depression, disorientation and frustration. The intensity of the ups and downs depends on the individual, as does the length of time an individual experiences each stage. It is important to realize that this process is both natural necessary for your adjustment and transition into your new culture.

Be prepared for this same process when you return home.





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Stage 1: "The Honeymoon" of Initial Euphoria/Excitement

- ◆ Excitement with new sounds, sights, smells
- ◆ Superficial involvement in the host culture (like a tourist)
- ◆ Intrigue with both similarities and differences between the new culture and your home culture
- ◆ Lots of interest in learning, very motivated & cooperative
- ◆ You feel like you will be able to handle anything--"I am not going to have any problems adjusting!" . .

Stage 2: "Culture Shock!"- Irritation/Hostility

- ◆ The novelty of the new culture has worn off, and you now focus primarily on the differences between the new culture and your home culture
- ◆ Small differences feel like major catastrophes! You become overly concerned with/stressed out by small personal problems and feel helpless and frustrated (you can't make sense of the bus schedule, you don't have hot water in the mornings, you cannot access email from your home, the hours of school are weird, etc...)
- ◆ Stereotypes and prejudices surface: you feel like the host nationals are cold, unhelpful, snobbish, etc.
- ◆ You search out exchange student friends
- ◆ You are homesick (culture shock is a form of homesickness)! You miss your friends and family in Canada and to make matters worse, you hear that your high school football team is doing fantastic and the weather at home is glorious etc...

Stage 3: Gradual Adjustment, Humor, & Perspective

- ◆ You are becoming more familiar with the new culture and its "logic" and values. Cultural cues become easier to read.
- ◆ You feel more comfortable and less isolated, and you even begin to like some parts of the new culture more than Canada
- ◆ You feel like, "As long as I'm here, I'd better make the most of it."
- ◆ You experience periodic personal highs and lows, as adjustment gradually takes place.
- ◆ Your sense of humour returns! You are able to laugh at certain ways of doing things that previously just annoyed you, and even to laugh at yourself from time to time.
- ◆ Since you are past the initial, emotional stages of cultural adjustment, you can now enter a stage of "deeper learning." You begin to see a multitude of approaches to your life abroad and to question some of your assumptions about the world. This can be both exciting and unnerving!





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Stage 4: “Feeling at Home”-- Adaptation and Biculturalism

- ◆ The "new" culture is no longer new; instead, the "foreign" country you live in now feels like another home.
- ◆ The aspects of the culture that are different from Canada no longer affect you in a negative way. You are able to live to your full potential.
- ◆ Just like you do in Canada, you appreciate certain aspects of the foreign culture and critique others.

