



Can all exchange students easily fit into any family in any country or culture? Not all students leave their own home country and easily fit into the host country's way of life. Each student is a product of his or her own culture and carries, sometimes unconsciously, a set of home culture values, attitudes, beliefs and ideas into the new country. Over a period of time, these values can come into conflict with the new culture. The extreme difficulty of getting along with the new culture is called "culture shock," and it is a serious part of the adjustment process that happens to almost every person who lives in a foreign culture. Surprisingly, culture shock occurs no matter how many times someone has lived in another culture.

Understanding what culture shock is, why culture shock happens, what the symptoms are, and how to overcome it, will help both students and natural and host families cope with it.

A DEFINITION OF CULTURE SHOCK

Culture shock is your mind and body's reaction to being disoriented and feeling overwhelmed by a culture that is not familiar to you. It can cause psychological and physical discomfort.

In your own culture, you know the language, the ways of doing everything, non-verbal behaviors, people's values and ways of reasoning. You do many things automatically and understand what is happening around you without having to think about it. For example, when you meet someone on the street, you know what to say and do. When you pick up the telephone, you answer without wondering what to say or having to struggle to find out what the other person is saying to you. If you are invited to a party, you know when you should arrive, what you should take, how you should dress.

In a foreign culture, you do not know all of these things at first. You may have to think about how to do each and every thing. This can become very tiring and frustrating.

CULTURE SHOCK HAS SEVERAL IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS

First, it does not come from one single event. It comes after you encounter different ways of doing, thinking about, or valuing things that are different from your own culture.

The second idea about culture shock is that it does not strike suddenly or have only one cause. It builds up slowly, from a series of small events which are sometimes hard to identify. It does provide you with an opportunity to learn. Because feeling uncomfortable or unhappy is not satisfying, most students find that their efforts to feel better cause them to learn more about themselves, the host culture and the language, than if everything were easy. This is the positive aspect of experiencing culture shock.

The problem with culture shock is that it is not easy to know why you feel unhappy, or why you don't want to participate in activities with your host friends, or why you don't want to speak the local language. Exchange students who do not understand culture shock often do not know how to make themselves feel better. This is why it is so important to be aware and be prepared to take positive steps to becoming active and involved with your host culture again.

SOME COMMON SYMPTOMS

In a letter home, one exchange student wrote: "Please send me some newspapers and magazines in Spanish. I can't stand English anymore. I also seem to be very tired lately, so I like to stay in my room and read or sleep." This student shows typical symptoms of culture shock. These symptoms can include:

Physical Symptoms

- Too much sleep or too little sleep · Eating too much or no appetite
- Frequent minor illnesses
- Upset stomach
- Headaches

Psychological Symptoms

- Loneliness or boredom
- Homesickness and idealizing home
- Feeling helpless, being over-dependent
- Irritability or even hostility
- Social withdrawal
- Great concern for health and security
- Rebellion against rules
- Crying
- Stereotyping of host country people

As you can see, many of these symptoms do not seem too strange. This is why it is not always easy to recognize when one has culture shock. Not everyone will experience all of these symptoms. Some people have larger or smaller reactions.

Frequently, exchange students experiencing culture shock become negative toward the host culture and start noticing all of the differences rather than the similarities between cultures. Often they don't participate as much as before. They may spend more time alone or only spend time with other exchange students. Spending time with others who are not happy or well adjusted in the host culture is not always helpful. All too often, the conversation will be: "Isn't it awful the way they eat?" or "How can they be so mindless of time?" or "Nothing works here, but back home..." People sometimes unconsciously encourage each others' unhappiness, which is not healthy.

OVERCOMING CULTURE SHOCK

Getting over culture shock and moving on to better adjustment in the host culture is going to depend upon you. You can get help in identifying why you are unhappy, or withdrawn, or don't feel well, from your host family or YFU staff. You have to take some positive steps to feel better, and the sooner you take them, the better.

First, you should remember that culture shock is a normal part of adjustment, that you will have some of the symptoms, and that some of your reactions will be emotional and not too rational. Still, experiencing culture shock can be positive because you will learn a lot as you work your way through it.

Second, try to objectively analyze the differences you are finding between your home and host cultures. Look for the reasons your host culture does things differently. Remember, host customs are logical to them, just as your home customs are logical to you.

Third, set some goals for yourself to re-develop your own sense of control of your life. These should be small tasks that you can accomplish each day. For example, if you don't feel like leaving your room, plan a short activity each day that will get you out. Go to the post office or store to buy something, ride a bus to the park or museum, or accept an invitation to attend a party or meeting. If you feel that language is your problem, set some goals to learn more: study fifteen minutes a day; learn five new words each day; learn one new expression each day, or watch a TV program or read something in that language for thirty minutes a day. Each successful encounter you have with your host culture will give you more and more self-confidence that you can cope.

Fourth, find local friends or acquaintances who are sympathetic and understanding.

Talk to them about your feelings and specific situations. They can help you understand ideas from their cultural point of view.

Finally, remember that you became a YFU student to live in another culture and learn about it. Develop the attitude that you can live with the differences and confusions and still learn and enjoy yourself. You do not need to worry about losing your own cultural values or identity just because you might feel comfortable in another culture.

YOUR ADJUSTMENT AND GROWTH

There are few experiences in life that can give so much satisfaction and self confidence as getting along successfully in a foreign culture. By overcoming the culture shock stage in your adjustment to your host culture, you will gain confidence in your own abilities to overcome very real and difficult obstacles to communication. You will appreciate a different way of looking at life and behaving. You will have figure out how to get along in a foreign environment.