

TWU Counseling Center

Cultural Differences: International Students Coping with Culture Shock

All new students' first days are ones of adjustment. However, for international students this is even truer. You will be experiencing many different changes when entering college. There are usually four phases that you may experience.

Honeymoon: Everything is great, nothing is wrong; you're having a wonderful time.

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.

Negotiation: You learn to deal with the problems set before you and try to integrate them with your own beliefs.

Acceptance: You are able to live well in the environment with the differences you are experiencing.

Some cultural differences you may experience due to change in customs are:

1. **Friendship:** Most people you will come in contact with will be friendly. They will talk about current events, politics, hobbies, and sports. However, personal matters are often not spoken about such as financial or family problems.
2. **Dress:** The attire worn is usually informal, unless otherwise told to wear formal clothing. It is not necessary to wear Western-style clothing. Clothing you have brought from home is acceptable.
3. **Greetings:** When Americans greet each other, whether male or female, a handshake is generally the custom. Spatial distance is a very important aspect of nonverbal communication. Most Americans stand 3 feet apart when talking.
4. **Schedules:** Americans place a high priority on being punctual. The phrase "time is money" is very common. You will be expected to be on time to events that have specific starting times, such as class, dinner arrangements, appointments, etc.
5. **Professors:** The relationship between student and professor is usually open and informal. Most professors want their students to talk directly to them about any questions they have, in order to resolve them quickly.

Symptoms of Culture Shock

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| 1. Feeling very angry over minor inconveniences | 9. Headaches |
| 2. Irritability | 10. Upset stomach |
| 3. Withdrawal from people who are different from you | 11. Small pains really hurt |
| 4. Extreme homesickness | 12. Depression |
| 5. Sudden intense feeling of loyalty to own culture | 13. Loss of ability to work or study effectively |
| 6. Overeating or loss of appetite | 14. Unexplainable crying |
| 7. Boredom | 15. Marital or relationship stress |
| 8. A need for excessive sleep | 16. Exaggerated cleanliness |
| | 17. 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 may apply to you. These symptoms may also appear at any given time. However, those such as headache and upset stomach should be checked by a physician before you decide it's only culture shock

Solutions for Culture Shock

Even though some people may not be able to eliminate culture shock, there are ways to ease the stress. Some of these activities are listed below:

1. **Keep Active.** By getting out of your room or outside of your apartment, you are able to experience first-hand what Americans are doing. If you visit public places, such as a shopping mall or sporting events, you will be able to watch and learn how American customs are practiced.
2. **Make American Friends.** By having friends you can talk to, you are able to ask them questions about what you do not understand.
3. **Read.** Accessing the Internet for websites that describe or represent the US culture can be helpful in understanding the culture better. For example, reading the opinion pages of major US newspapers can give you a glimpse into current cultural issues. All students have free access to the Internet on campus.
4. **Exercise.** By finding an activity that you can enjoy, you will be able to reduce stress and depression. Americans like to run and walk on paths. They also like organized games. By contacting the Wellness Center at 898-2900, you will be able to find out what programs are available.
5. **Community Activities.** Talk with your host family, Resident Assistant, or other Americans about community activities, religious services, or volunteer opportunities to help you become a member of the community while you are here.
6. **Work on Your English.** This is an extremely important concept. It is much easier to understand a culture when you can understand the language being used. Ask about any slang terms that you do not understand.
7. **Introduce Yourself to Other International Students.** Other international students may be experiencing the same problems that you are. By talking to them, you may be able to find out ways they are coping with problems.
8. **BE PATIENT.** Many international students experience culture shock in some way while they are here. Just recognize the problem and give yourself time to get over it. If you need to, keep reminding yourself that this is not permanent.

*Information provided by University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Counseling Services
www.uwec.edu/counsel/pubs/shock.htm*

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