



Culture shock is the process of initial adjustment to an unfamiliar culture.

What Is Culture Shock?

Culture shock is a profoundly personal experience and is not the same for two persons or for the same person during two different occasions. Yet people who have experienced culture shock will recognize most of the elements that we will discuss.

Culture shock is the process of initial adjustment to an unfamiliar culture. It is a more-or-less sudden immersion into a nonspecific state of uncertainty where the individual is not sure what is expected of him or her, nor of what to expect from other people. It can occur in any situation where an individual is forced to adjust to an unfamiliar social system where previous learning no longer applies. This need not necessarily be a new country. It could be a new school, town, organization, or family.

There are at least six indicators that one is experiencing culture shock:

1. Familiar cues about how others are supposed to behave are missing, or the familiar cues now have a different meaning.
2. Values that the person considers good, desirable, beautiful, and worthy are not respected by the host.
3. One feels disoriented, anxious, depressed, or hostile.
4. One is dissatisfied with the new ways.
5. Social skills that used to work do not seem to work any longer.
6. There is a sense that this horrible, nagging culture shock will never go away.

Stages in Culture Shock

Culture shock is frequently described as a series of stages that a person goes through. This stage model does not describe each instance of culture shock accurately, and many versions of the model have been proposed, but it can serve as a reference model. These are the stages:

1. Honeymoon

This is where the newly arrived individual experiences the curiosity and excitement of a tourist, but where the person's basic identity is rooted back home.

2. Disorientation

This stage involves disintegration of almost everything familiar. The individual is overwhelmed by the requirements of the new culture and bombarded by stimuli in the new environment. One feels disoriented and experiences self-blame and a sense of personal inadequacy.

3. Irritability and hostility

One typically experiences anger and resentment toward the new culture for its having caused difficulties and having been less adequate than the old familiar ways.

4. Adjustment and integration

This involves integration of new cues and an increased ability to function in the new culture. One increasingly sees the bad and the good elements in both cultures.

5. Biculturalism

In this stage a person has become fluently comfortable in both the old and the new culture. There is some controversy about whether anyone can really attain this stage.