



Study Abroad Cultural Adjustment “Culture Shock”

Study Abroad Office • Rockhurst University

Symptoms of Culture Shock

The symptoms of culture shock are quite varied and can be easily misunderstood or even overlooked because they are similar to reactions that can occur in everyday life. The link between culture shock and what you are feeling at a given moment may be difficult to see. It is very common for people experiencing culture shock not only to deny the possibility that culture shock might be the problem, but also to shift the focus, attributing their stress wholly to the behavior or values of the people around them.

Common symptoms of culture shock:

- Extreme homesickness
- Feelings of helplessness/dependency
- Disorientation and isolation
- Depression and sadness
- Hyper-irritability, may include inappropriate anger and hostility
- Sleep and eating disturbances (too little or too much)
- Loss of focus and ability to complete tasks
- Excessive critical reactions to host culture/stereotyping
- Hypochondria
- Excessive drinking
- Recreational drug dependency
- Extreme concerns over sanitation, safety, (even paranoia), and being taken advantage of

It is important to understand that “culture shock” has a wide range of symptoms and that many people experience only mild annoyances and temporary dissatisfaction in the process of adjusting to life in other cultures. These reactions are probably better characterized as “item irritation” (a cultural practice or attitude that “drives you nuts” when you encounter it) or “culture fatigue” (a temporary frustration). However, for a few, culture shock can be a profoundly disorienting experience, particularly if those in the midst of the experience are unaware of the sources of the problem and have no idea how to counteract it.

Prescription for Culture Shock

- Understand symptoms and recognize signs of “culture shock.”
- Realize that some degree of discomfort and stress is natural in a cross-cultural experience.
- Recognize that your reactions are often emotional and not always (or easily) subject to rational control.
- Gather information so at least the cultural differences will seem understandable, if not natural. Look below the surface.
- Look for logical reasons behind the host culture patterns. They “fit” the culture. Discover why!
- Relax your grip on your normal culture and try to cheerfully adapt to new rules and roles.
- Don’t give in to the temptation to disparage what you do not like or understand.
- Identify a support network among host nationals, teachers, fellow students, etc. Use it, but don’t rely upon it exclusively.
- Understand that any “cultural clash” will likely be temporary.
- Give yourself “quiet time,” some private space, and don’t be too hard on yourself when things are not going perfectly.

Returning Home

The reality is that returning home after a significant overseas experience is not without its stresses. There are many reasons why this is so, but the major contributing factors seem to be:

It is largely unexpected: Few people prepare for the return because they expect it to be easy and are surprised when it is not.

The ideal of home differs from reality: When you are abroad, images of home life can become idealized or romanticized. It is easy to forget or minimize the problems or issues that once were sources of stress in your everyday life. Re-encountering them can be disconcerting.

Change has occurred to everyone: However major or subtle, things are different. You, the people around you, and your culture have changed. Sometimes this is obvious and immediately observable; sometimes it is “hidden” and only comes out under certain circumstances that are usually unpredictable and therefore unsettling.

People may react to returnees in ways they consider inappropriate: People generally expect you to be the same person you were when you left and usually attempt to treat you that way. They often have little patience for a returnee who seems to be significantly “different” or who exhibits behaviors or attitudes that, to them, seem odd or uncharacteristic of that person.

Reverse culture shock is neither recognized nor understood at home: Few people in the home culture are likely to be familiar with the concept of reverse culture shock. Therefore, people often respond to returnees having difficulty readjusting by bluntly suggesting they “get over it,” as though it were a conscious act on their part or that they could control their emotions if they wanted to. Unlike undergoing culture shock while abroad where program directors and fellow students are likely to be at least sympathetic, upon reentry the pressure to conform quickly and substantially can be intense and tolerance can be in short supply.

Thus, although there are always lots of reasons for looking forward to going home, reentry into your home culture can seem both as challenging and as frustrating as living overseas. Contrary to the expectation that going “home” is a simple matter of resuming your earlier routines and reestablishing prior relationships, reentry has its own set of special social and psychological adjustments.

Just as initial Culture Shock has definable stages and a relatively predictable progression, so does Reverse Culture Shock. The initial euphoria, or at least relief at being home, is often present for some period, followed by some degree of irritation and alienation, with an eventual readjustment.

The initial period of coming home can be a time of relief, but it can also be a time of anxiety. Often there is too much to do in too short a time. The simple logistics of getting settled in at home or school can be daunting and time consuming. Although you may think about the recent overseas adventure constantly and want to discuss it with anyone willing to listen, eventually the daily reality of home life begins to set in and just keeping up with class and/or work schedules, laundry, friendships, and impending graduation and job searches is difficult enough. The overseas experience can fade over time.

One common result is the tendency to “shoebox” the experience. This can have two related meanings. One is to literally put your mementos (letters, ticket stubs, photos, brochures, etc.) in a box and put it away to be taken out and looked at when you feel the need to reconnect with or relive your experience. The other meaning is to mentally compartmentalize the experience as a completely or largely separate part of your college experience. You might draw upon it at a party as a conversation starter or perhaps in an academic setting when it seems relevant, but in general you don’t really know how to integrate the experience into your ongoing life so you don’t even try.