



CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT: There and Back Again

Culture Shock

They've picked you up from the airport and you're on your way to the train station. You're exhausted from the long flights but exhilarated to finally be here in this new country. Everything looks strange and exotic. The people are wearing different clothes, people are speaking a different language, and you've just passed an elephant on the road! This place is amazing and you can't wait to take it all in.

You arrive at the train station and pile out of the taxi with two suitcases, a carry-on bag, and a jacket that is useless in this heat. Suddenly you're swarmed by pushy men in red shirts and turbans. They're in your face and shouting something you can't understand while they try to grab your bags. You look down and find a filthy child tugging at your leg and holding out her hand. Suddenly this is a little bit scary. The guy who picked you up at the airport calls to you to ignore them, pick up your bags and follow him. You try to roll your suitcases, but the ground is uneven, with lots of potholes and steps. Cars are honking everywhere. There are more people than you have ever seen in your life. It smells bad. Is that a cow on the tracks? You can't read the signs and you don't know where to go. Your excitement turns to fear as you realize that if you lose your guide, you'll be completely lost and helpless in a foreign country. You hastily gather up your luggage and hurry forward, narrowly missing a cow pie.

This is your first taste of culture shock.

Much of what we do at Home requires little thought or effort. It comes easily because we know the rules. When we enter a new culture, we find that *the rules have changed*, and we don't know what they are. Simple things like bathing, eating, shopping, or chatting with a neighbor suddenly become difficult. It takes more energy just to get through each day. *The emotional and physical stress that results from entering a new environment is called Culture Shock.*

Though everyone experiences Culture Shock differently, there are some common indicators. Interestingly, the number one symptom of Culture Shock is *denial*. When we start to feel bad, we blame ourselves, others, or the weather, instead of calling the stress what it is: Culture Shock. Sometimes the best coping strategy is to be forewarned. Usually when we know something is normal and temporary, we can go through it more easily. Here are a few other classic symptoms:

- *Psychological changes* such as irritability, mood swings, impatience, depression, anxiety, disorientation, fear, crying, loneliness, excessive anger over little things, and a general sense that "I'm just not myself."
- *Physical changes* like weight loss or gain, changes in sleeping and/or eating patterns, nervous stomach, fatigue, and headache.



- *Frustration* because familiar cues about how you and others are supposed to behave are missing or different. Social skills that used to work for you don't anymore.
- *Confusion, frustration or anger* because values you consider good, desirable, beautiful and "normal" are not respected by the host culture.
- *Dissatisfaction* with the new ways.
- A sense that this Culture Shock will never go away. "I'll never feel at home here."

The process is commonly depicted as an upside down bell curve which starts out high, dips down for a time, and then comes back up to normal. Perhaps it is more realistic to think of Culture Shock as a forward-moving spiral with continual ups and downs. In the process of cultural adjustment, we revisit the same issues over and over, on a deeper level each time.

In simplistic terms, there are five basic stages of culture shock.

1. Honeymoon: You experience the curiosity and excitement of a tourist and tend to overlook the negative or difficult aspects of the culture. Strange things are labeled "exotic" and your basic identity remains rooted "back Home."
2. Disorientation: Nothing seems familiar. You are overwhelmed by the requirements of the new culture and bombarded by stimuli in the new environment. You feel lost and experience self-blame and a sense of personal inadequacy.
3. Irritability and hostility: Local ways seem "stupid," "ridiculous," or just plain "bad." There is growing anger and resentment toward the new culture for making life difficult.
4. Adjustment: You increasingly see the bad and the good elements in both cultures, and feel fairly comfortable functioning in the new environment.
5. Bicultural: You are very comfortable in both the old and new cultures. You have learned enough about the cultures to understand them realistically, and have integrated aspects of both into your own personality and behavior.

The very words "Culture Shock" make cultural transition sound unpleasant and undesirable, but the truth is, that it is worth the struggle. Tourists who remain on the surface never really get to experience the depth that a new culture has to offer. They go Home very much the same as they left, assumptions and stereotypes intact. Those who are living for a long period of time in a new culture, though, have a great opportunity to stretch themselves, learn, and change for the better. Most who have gone through Culture Shock and come out on the other side will testify that they are glad they did.

In the meantime, here are some tips for navigating the transition:

- Begin each day by giving it to God. Ask him to direct your interactions, protect you, and give you wisdom.



- Maintain a sense of *humor*. Be able to laugh at yourself and your situation.
- Stay *healthy*. Sleep and eat well. Find some form of regular exercise.
- Keep a *journal* of interesting, exciting, scary and frustrating experiences. Go back and review it from time to time to see how much progress you've made.
- *Meet with a friend* or two regularly and share honestly how you're doing.
- Look for ways to *interact* with the host culture. Fight the urge to withdraw.
- *People-watch*. Record your observations over time and try to figure out what's happening.
- Look for things to be *thankful* for, and resist the urge to complain.
- Make small, realistic *goals*. Remind yourself that all transitions take time and you don't have to be fluent in the new culture all at once.

Reentry/Reverse Culture Shock

So you've reached the end of your stay in your host country and you're ready to go Home. You've adjusted fairly well, had some amazing experiences, and made some good friends. Now that you're returning, it's time to think about what to expect.

Just as you experienced Culture Shock when you traveled to a new country, you are likely to face a period of transition as you readjust to the place you call Home. For many people, this second, or "reverse" Culture Shock is more traumatic than the first because it is unexpected. The returning traveler looks and sounds like everyone else, but inside they feel so different.

While someone is overseas, they often unconsciously believe that their friends and families back Home will remain the same. They expect that when they return, they will be able to pick up right where they left off. Often too, they expect to be something of a celebrity because of their travels and think that everyone will want to hear everything about their trip.

When they get home, reality sets in. People have moved on. Places have changed. Most people are not very interested in hearing the details of the trip.

Not only has Home changed, but the traveler has too. He's developed a broader worldview and sees issues of poverty, justice and relationships in a different perspective. He's learned skills and acquired values that he considers important, but people at Home don't seem to appreciate them when he tries to share. He's adjusted to a different pace of life and way of communicating, and suddenly he finds himself out of step with people that used to be so comfortable. The more he's adjusted to life in another country, the more difficult the transition back to Home will be.

The symptoms and stages of Reentry Shock are essentially the same as Culture Shock. As you go Home, review what you've learned about Culture Shock and think back to how it felt as you adjusted to your host culture. Remind yourself



that after the initial euphoria of being Home, you will probably experience a time of let-down when you start to miss the people and places you've left behind. Allow yourself to grieve the loss of your previous way of life, the sense of adventure that you may have felt, and the feeling of being special because you were seen as interesting and different in your host culture.

Here are some other tips for Reentry:

- Take time to *relearn* your own culture just like you learned about the host culture when you first arrived.
- *Catch up* on what you have missed. Ask family and friends to tell you what's been happening in their lives while you were gone. As you listen to them, they'll be more likely to listen to your stories too.
- *Find an outlet* for expressing what happened on your trip. Not everyone will want to hear everything. Find others who have traveled to the same place and compare experiences. Share in church groups or schools or with others who will be visiting your host country. Keep a journal.
- Make a *scrapbook* or computer presentation of your mementoes and photos.
- *Find people from your host country* to chat with, share meals, and just enjoy the culture.
- *Keep in touch* with your old friends in the host culture. Pray for them.
- *Resist the urge to be critical* and judgmental, just as you did when you were adjusting to your host country. Make a mental note (or journal) your frustrations or critiques of your own culture, but do not share them freely until you've been back for a while and had a chance to adjust.
- Look for things you appreciate about your own culture and express them to God. *Be thankful.*
- *Talk with others who have traveled* and ask them how they have integrated their traveling experiences and values with their own culture. Ask them to pray with you as you do the same.

No Pain, No Gain

Nothing that is worthwhile comes easily. When you do a hard workout, the soreness indicates your strength is increasing. Likewise, see the struggles of Culture Shock and Reentry as part of a growing process. As you become comfortable in multiple cultures and gain a broader perspective, you will have a better understanding of yourself, your own culture, and the world God has created. It's definitely worth the time and effort!