

FOREIGN STUDENTS IN A NEW CULTURE – PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Leaving home and traveling to study in a new country can be a stressful experience, even though it may be something you have planned and prepared for. Many people are surprised when they experience the impact of **culture shock**.

Culture shock describes the impact of moving from a familiar culture to one that is unfamiliar. Entering new culture is often accompanied by feelings of confusion, stress and disorientation. It includes the shock of a new environment, meeting lots of new people and learning the ways of a new country. It also includes the shock of being separated from the important people in your life, such as family, friends, colleagues, and teachers: people you would talk to at times of uncertainty, people who give you support and guidance.

Generally, several stages that new international students experience during the period of adjusting to a new culture can be distinguished.

The Honeymoon Stage

The honeymoon stage is characterized by exhilaration, anticipation, and excitement. Often recently arrived international students are fascinated with everything new. A student in the honeymoon stage will demonstrate an eagerness to please, a spirit of cooperation, and an active interest when others speak. Responding to the new environment with fascination, an individual will enjoy the differences in fashion, food, social customs, etc.

This period is exhilarating, full of observation and discoveries, lasting a few days to a few weeks. Like most honeymoons, however, this stage eventually ends.

The Hostility/Rejection Stage

The next stage of culture shock is referred to as the period of Hostility/Rejection. This stage is marked by criticism, resentment, and anger. When an individual sets out to study, live or work in a new country, he or she will invariably experience difficulties with language, housing, friends, schoolwork, and understanding the idiosyncrasies of

the local culture, often resulting in frustration. The Rejection period can be triggered by the realization that, as an outsider in a new culture, language or misunderstandings of cultural cues can often make the simplest task seem like a daunting challenge. Furthermore, because the high expectations set during the Honeymoon Period, they appear much farther out of reach and the individual feels disillusioned. Sleep and eating patterns may be disrupted.

There are two probable reactions to the frustrations. One way is to reject the new environment which seems the source of intense personal discomfort. ". The students blame the external environment for their difficulties. The other common reaction is for the students to internalize their pain and withdraw from everyday functioning. Academic problems can be magnified during this stage.

Regression and Isolation

The extreme letdown experienced during the Rejection Period prompts the individual to become critical of his/her new environment-of the people, their culture, and of all the perceived differences with the culture at home. This letdown often propels an individual into the stage of Regression and Isolation. In this stage, the culture from which the individual has come is idealized. The student risks further isolation from the new environment. Symptoms exhibited during this period include intensified sadness, homesickness, emotional swings that manifest themselves in behavior, changes in sleep patterns, compulsive eating and/or drinking, irritability, poor concentration, unexplainable crying etc. The stage of Rejection and Regression is variable in length but can last up to 6-8 weeks.

Adjustment and Adaptation

Gradually the crisis of regression and isolation is resolved allowing the individual to begin recovery in the Adjustment and Adaptation stages. To resolve these feelings, the individual has to employ particular skills and resources essential for adjustment, as described in general pattern of cross cultural adjustment. This may vary depending on a variety of personal characteristics and previous life's experience.

The Home Stage

The home stage occurs when the international student not only retains allegiance to his or her home culture, but also "feels at home" and functions quite well in the new culture. The student has successfully adjusted to the norms and standards of the university and should be commended for the ability to live successfully in both cultures.

Factors that can contribute to culture shock

- *Climate*

Many students find the new climate difficult to adjust. More/less rain, more/less sun, more/less clouds, colder/warmer etc.– depending on the individual preferences and adjustment can be difficult to get used to.

- *Language*

Listening and speaking in a new language is tiring. In class, some international students have trouble understanding the lecture and reading materials. People speak quickly and one may feel embarrassed to ask them to repeat what they said. If the language the student is obliged to use in the new country is not the first language, one may himself/herself miss the home language.

- *Social roles*

Social behaviors may confuse, surprise or offend the newcomer. For example one may find people appear cold, distant or always in a hurry or the other way round –one may feel the people are too open, easy going, relaxed than you got used to. The relationships between men and women may appear more formal or less formal, as well as differences in same sex social contact and relationships.

- *'Rules' of behavior*

As well as the obvious things that hit immediately when you arrive, such as sights, sounds, smells and tastes, every culture has unspoken rules which affect the way people treat each other. These may be less obvious, but sooner or later you will probably encounter them and once again the effect may be disorientating. For

example, there will be differences in the ways people decide what is important, how tasks are allocated and how time is observed.

- *Values*

Although you may first become aware of cultural differences in your physical environment (e.g. food, dress, behavior) you may also come to notice that people from other cultures may have very different views of the world from yours. Cultures are built on deeply embedded sets of values, norms, assumptions and beliefs. It can be surprising and sometimes distressing to find that people do not share some of your most deeply held ideas, as most of us take our core values and beliefs for granted and assume they are universally held.

- *Relationship Stress*

If your spouse or partner has accompanied you to the new country remember that the stress of the transition may cause struggles in your relationship. The transition to a new culture may be very difficult for your partner. Your partner may feel very isolated; he/she has been transplanted from your culture and separated from family and friends. Simple tasks can be stressful due to the language barrier. Often times they do not have opportunities to engage in productive, meaningful activity such as pursuing a degree, and it may be more difficult for them to make new friends.

Strategies that can help you cope with the adjustment process

- **Culture is relative**

As an international student, you will be exposed to many new customs, habits and ideas. Try to avoid labeling them as "good" or "bad" according to the culture you are from. Remember that there may be parts of a culture you dislike or disapprove of, but these are part of a broader social system, and therefore make more sense inside that system.

- **Be open-minded and curious**

Adjusting to a new culture does not mean that you have to change your own values, but it is important to respect those of other people. When you find

yourself in an unfamiliar situation, try to think of it as a new adventure. Allow yourself to be curious about the way things are perceived and done in this new environment.

- **Use your observation skills**

Since you will encounter unfamiliar rules and norms, observing how others are acting in situations can help you understand what behavior is expected of you. Pay attention to both the verbal and nonverbal communication of others in order to get a more complete picture of what is going on.

- **Ask questions**

Ask for help when you need it. Asking for assistance or an explanation is not a sign of weakness. Understanding others and making yourself understood in a new language (or context) requires lots of rephrasing, repeating and clarification.

- **It is ok to experience anxiety**

Learning to function in a new environment is not easy. It is natural to feel anxious or frustrated sometimes. The key is to remind yourself that these feelings are normal and are likely to be situational and temporary.

- **Give yourself (and others) permission to make mistakes**

You will inevitably make mistakes as you explore a new culture. If you can find the humor in these situations and laugh at them, others will likely respond to you with friendliness and support. Keep in mind that others will probably make mistakes, too; when someone makes an inaccurate assumption or a generalized statement about your culture, it may be due to a lack of information. If you're comfortable with doing so, this can be an opportunity to share information with others about yourself and your culture.

- **Take care of your physical health**

Be mindful about keeping a healthy diet and getting enough exercise and rest. Try to find an activity that you enjoy and make it part of your routine. Being physically active can help reduce your stress level.

- **Find a cultural ally**

When you have questions or need a second opinion on something, befriended person can help clarify confusions and provide support as you adjust to your new environment.

- **Seek out support from other international students**

Many international students find it helpful to discuss their concerns with others who are going through similar transitions. Talking with others about their adjustment to the new culture can provide ideas and insights about your own experience.

- **Be patient - don't try to understand everything immediately**

The process of adjusting to a new culture requires time. It may also require a different amount of time for different areas of adjustment. Try to encourage yourself to be patient with this experience and not be overly critical of yourself.

Adapting to a new culture is an ongoing process. It may be challenging at times, but most students who experience culture shock agree that going through this transition helped them to learn more about themselves and to develop greater confidence in their ability to navigate new situations. It can also lead to a renewed appreciation of one's own culture. There are many people in the university community who are available to provide you with support. Keep in mind that you do not have to struggle alone.

WHEN SEARCHING FOR PROFESSIONAL HELP?

Ask your doctor for help or apply for psychiatric consultation or psychotherapy treatment when you experience symptoms every day during the first month of staying

or longer than for 3 months (not necessarily every day), or on any time the symptoms are the source of suffering that you feel you cannot deal with on your own.

The symptoms may include:

- **EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCES:** depressiveness, sadness, mood swings, anxiety, helplessness, worry, feeling of being overwhelmed, lack of enjoyment, crying spells, lower self-esteem, difficulty in getting satisfaction and enjoyment etc.
- **SLEEPING AND EATING HABITS CHANGE:** nightmares, difficulties with falling asleep, early waking up, frequent needs to sleep during the day, lack of appetite, bounds of overeating etc.
- **SEXUAL DIFFICULTIES:** lower sexual drive, difficulty in getting sexual arousal and satisfaction,
- **SUICIDAL THOUGHTS**
- **FUNCTIONING DIFFICULTIES THAT DISTURB EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES:**
- relation difficulties, withdrawal, isolation, avoiding everyday tasks performance etc.

It is possible that you may need psychotherapy treatment or pharmacotherapy support – it is important not to neglect these symptoms!

**DISCUSS IT WITH YOUR PRIMARY CARE PHYSICIAN OR DIRECTLY
CONTACT PSYCHIATRIST OR PSYCHOHERAPIST**

Psychotherapy is an interactive processes between a person or group and a psychotherapist. Its purpose is the exploration of troublesome thoughts, feelings and behavior for the purpose of problem solving, symptoms reduction and achieving higher levels of functioning. It can help you not only deal with problems connected with the adjustment process to a new culture, but also to resolve the problems that were present before and became more visible in the process of life change. Do not hesitate to ask for help! Do not wait! Take care of yourself and your future.

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