

Prepare for the transition to life abroad

When you go abroad, everything is new and different. You're absorbing a huge amount of information in a short amount of time. The cultural cues you normally rely upon have disappeared. Suddenly, you must adapt to new foods, new routines and new rhythms of life. Such immersion is thrilling but can also lead to a process known as "culture shock."

Culture shock refers to the journey of entering a new culture, from first contact to full adaptation. Reactions vary from person to person, but the vast majority of travelers experience some version of the stages below:



Student Stories: Navigating the Four Stages of Culture Shock

The Honeymoon Stage	The Anxiety Stage	The Rejection or Regression Stage	The Adjustment Stage
<i>Every sight, sound and smell is intriguing!</i>	<i>The mundanity of day-to-day life emerges.</i>	<i>Nerves are running high, tension builds</i>	<i>The clouds begin to part!</i>
Student, studied in Barcelona: "Arriving abroad I felt euphoric! I fell in love with absolutely everything about Spanish culture and thought the feeling would last forever. Little did I know, this was just the tourist high!"	Student, interned in Shanghai: "After a month, the shine slowly wore off Shanghai. I started feeling anxiety about the hassle of my daily commute, instead of excitement. I had trouble sleeping, lost interest in exploring my host town and started missing the ease of life at home."	Student, studied in Germany: "I suddenly didn't recognize myself. I felt despondent, even hostile. I didn't feel like meeting locals and almost everything annoyed me! I knew it was culture shock, so I gave myself a few days to indulge in American food, movies and rest before returning to German culture."	Student, worked in Chile: "It took a few months, but I remember waking up one day and suddenly feeling at home. I knew my way around. I knew how to interact with locals. I realized I'd finally adapted! It was an amazing feeling."

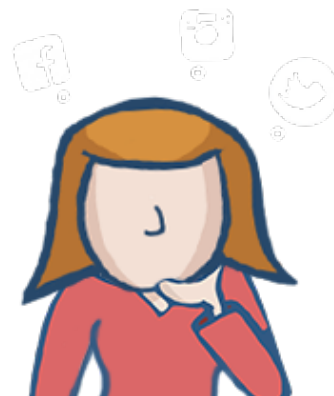
The causes of culture shock are often personal and unique, but generally it's triggered by contrasts in language, fashion, food, routine, privacy, personal space, use of technology, hierarchy, gender norms and/or general worldview.



The Four Stages of Culture Shock

Culture shock is part of a completely natural process of cultural adaptation.

Sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists have divided the culture shock phenomenon into four stages. Almost every traveler will experience these four stages in one form or another. Experts agree that half the battle with culture shock/fatigue is to be aware of the stages and to recognize the symptoms. Let's take a closer look:

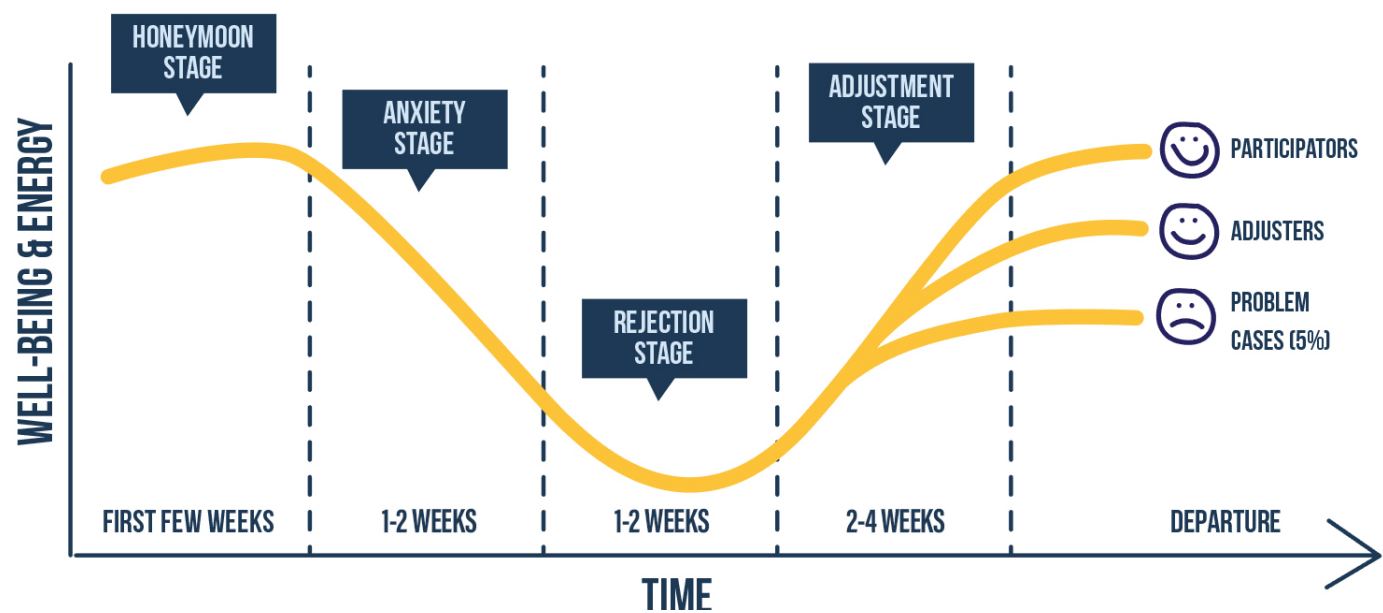


The Honeymoon Stage	The Anxiety Stage	The Rejection or Regression Stage	The Adjustment Stage
<i>You're finally abroad after much preparation and anticipation. You can't wait to experience everything.</i>	<i>Your rose-colored glasses are off. The honeymoon feelings are fading, and you're faced with adapting to new routines and realities.</i>	<i>Your anxiety is compounded by constantly having to face problems you cannot define, and which locals don't recognize as being problems at all.</i>	<i>Your feelings of isolation and hopelessness have decreased markedly. Things seem brighter as you begin to experience biculturalism.</i>
<p>You've landed abroad and it feels like everything you expected and more. The culture is alive and exotic. You're intrigued by all things different and new. Local people seem outgoing (not pushy) and laid back (not inefficient). They seem to enjoy the simple things in life. You admire them!</p> <p>This is the world seen through the honeymooner's eyes. Everything is thrilling, and life abroad is living up to every expectation. Your energy is high and your outlook is overwhelmingly positive. It's often associated with a feeling of euphoria. This period may last from a few weeks to a month, but it eventually comes to an end.</p>	<p>You now need to build a new social structure to replace the one you left behind. The first pangs of homesickness or annoyance may rear their heads. You may react to small difficulties as if they were major catastrophes. You may seek out fellow expats to reinforce an "us vs. them" attitude. For some, this feels like a crisis stage, and any of the following symptoms may occur:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• homesickness• boredom• withdrawal• insomnia or oversleeping• changes in appetite• irritability• chauvinistic or patronizing behavior• negative feelings about host nationals and their culture• loss of ability to work effectively• physical ailments	<p>Things don't work. Government bureaucracy is frustrating. Internet access is sporadic. Using the foreign keyboard is a major daily hassle. Things constantly break down. The streets don't match the maps. Apps that should work don't seem to. You can't communicate properly (can't anyone speak just a few words of English?). Your new friends from the first few weeks have disappeared, carrying on with their lives. Tension builds.</p> <p>You reject the things you enthusiastically embraced in the first few weeks abroad, and you miss the way things are done at home.</p> <p>During this stage, some people manifest antisocial behavior, like rudeness or isolation. Others seek a safe haven, like an expat group. Some never get beyond the regression stage, even if they live overseas for years. Others may return home. There's no shame in this, as long as you gave it your best effort.</p>	<p>You're able to greet people in the local language, hail a taxi and haggle with merchants without struggle.</p> <p>No one expects you to totally assimilate or to approve of questionable moral practices, should they be present. Instead, during this stage you find a middle ground that you're comfortable with.</p> <p>Most people reach this stage. Some even excel, finding their stride in their host culture and feeling at ease. Note that even after this stage, it's possible to "relapse" into anxiety or regression. It's possible to have a second low point, which may even be more intense. But keep in mind that usually you will reach glorious stage four and finally adjust!</p>

The U-Curve of Adjustment

In 1955, Norwegian sociologist Sverre Lysgaard built a visual model showing the stages of cultural adjustment.

The *U-Curve of Adjustment* reveals the progress from the initial euphoria to the anxiety and crisis stages, and finally to adjustment and integration. The model below is our interpretation, geared toward the four-month semester abroad. If you're going abroad for longer, expect the first three stages to have the same duration, but the final adjustment stage to be extended. (NOTE: Timing for each stage varies, see column two next page.)



Stage-by-stage Advice for Anyone Experiencing Culture Shock

The Honeymoon Stage	The Anxiety Stage	The Rejection or Regression Stage	The Adjustment Stage
<i>Experience it</i>	<i>Expect it</i>	<i>Manage it</i>	<i>Enjoy it</i>
Relish your positive feelings in this stage, but don't let euphoria guide you to take risks. Remain focused on your personal and professional outcomes. Less gawking and more observing! This is a thrilling time, so learn as much as you can while you're feeling inquisitive and inspired.	You knew this shift was in the mail. Reconnect with your home culture for a moment of release. Have a night out with US or Canadian friends drinking beer, having pizza and apple pie. Be kind to yourself but try not to disconnect from the reality of your cross-cultural experience.	Understand that this low point is totally normal, and that it will pass. Take time to rest when needed, observe your negative emotions and, if possible, write about them instead of acting on them. Stay focused on your ideal outcome: adjustment.	Finally, you're feeling better. You've begun to understand some of the initially mystifying elements of the host culture. You've made a few friends; you can manage your routine comfortably and you know how to recognize when you need a break. This is the start of biculturalism! Congratulations!

Who Gets Culture Shock?

EVERYONE! Almost every traveler goes through some form of culture shock.

- Some move through the stages quickly, only feeling a mild slump for a week or two, while for others it may last longer and be more of a struggle.
- In rare cases, culture shock may become so intense that the traveler chooses to return home rather than face the prospect of adjusting.
- It's impossible to know what your personal reaction will be until you are immersed abroad.
- Even experienced expats can be hit with unexpectedly marked culture shock.
- Even countries that are very similar at first glance (the US and Canada, for example) can cause culture shock.
- Small differences have a big impact on some travelers, while others experience only limited symptoms.

In short: no matter who you are, expect to navigate culture shock when traveling abroad!

How Long Does It Last?

This answer will be different for every individual.

Some people overcome culture shock within just a few days, experiencing it almost like a passing fever. While most move through the stages at a slower pace, experiencing culture shock for a few weeks or a couple of months. For long-term international expats, while the shock stage disappears, it may take years for adjustment to fully set in.

Make peace with the fact that you will experience culture shock, that your journey through it will be unique and that you're unlikely to adjust overnight.

Success looks different for everybody.

- Some travelers strike a balance between becoming a "practicing member" of their host culture, while holding onto their home country beliefs and traditions.
- Others (usually long-term travelers) dive in fully and try to live like a local as much as possible.
- A small number of travelers feel genuinely unable to adjust, despite their best efforts, and decide to head home. If this is you, don't feel guilty. It doesn't prevent you from living an open-minded, globally oriented life!



How to Deal with Culture Shock

Culture shock is like any ailment; it has symptoms and cures.

As with any challenge, awareness is half the battle. And once you're aware that your symptoms are directly tied to culture shock, you can hone in on activities, practices and mindsets that will move you toward the adjustment stage.



What are the symptoms?

What are the cures?

Mild Culture Shock

(common in the Anxiety Stage)

- homesickness
- boredom
- minor withdrawal
- irritability
- insomnia or fatigue
- changes in appetite
- stereotyping local culture
- minor illnesses and ailments
- some negative feelings about host nationals and culture

Strong Culture Shock

(can happen in the Rejection Stage)

- extreme homesickness
- disorientation
- depression
- major withdrawal
- irritability
- judgmental feelings
- inability to focus
- social avoidance
- major sleep and eating disturbances
- lack of concentration
- feelings of aggression
- feeling easily frustrated
- negative outlook
- risk-taking
- self-doubt and anxiety
- hypochondria
- chauvinistic or patronizing behavior
- strong negative feelings about host nationals and their culture

- **Go with the flow:** If you find yourself being judgmental, try to consciously step back and accept the values and behaviors in your host culture. Rather than judging, aim to understand.
- **Participate:** Instead of sulking at home, go out and try socializing with locals. If you're shy, join a class or group to help the process along. Become engaged, and keep in mind that you're a student of culture. Every experience is an opportunity to learn.
- **Practice tolerance:** Undoubtedly, many things will appear strange to you in the beginning. Don't over-examine the local behaviors and customs. Keep in mind that although they may be different, their culture is neither better nor worse than your own.
- **Learn the language:** It doesn't matter if your grammar and pronunciation are muddled! Your efforts will be appreciated, and they'll help you connect. While language learning alone isn't a cure for culture shock, it will open doors to help you socialize, have new experiences and feel more connected in the moment.
- **Find a sympathetic local:** Other more experienced expats can certainly be helpful, but a host national can also be a great sounding board for your concerns. And what could be better for your overall experience than having a friend who knows your new country inside and out?
- **Gather information:** Never lose your curiosity. It will give you insight into why people behave as they do. An interest in the history, geography, politics, religion and cultural norms will help you appreciate and adjust to your new environment.
- **Identify what stresses you out:** Assess and clearly identify what specific cultural aspects of life abroad are bothering you the most. Through doing this, some expats can identify activities and remedies that help them manage culture shock (e.g. a need for a few hours of alone time each day in a bustling, noisy culture.)
- **Take a break:** Treat yourself to a day off. Bake an apple pie. Take a long, hot bath. Listen to your favorite music. Do something just for yourself, something that is typically North American. For some people, reducing working hours for a week or two is another way to rest and regroup from culture shock.
- **Stay in touch with family and friends:** Stay in touch via text, Zoom or social media to tap into your support networks. That said, try not to use this as a daily crutch. Make sure that you disconnect from your digital life long enough to properly immerse abroad.
- **Don't romanticize life at home:** Although you might feel homesick, don't allow yourself more than a few hours of sulking. Your host country has friends and new networks waiting for you. Try to take the plunge to build new support structures in your host country.
- **Accept that culture shock is a process and it will end:** The most valuable thing you can do is to accept that culture shock is inevitable. Whether mild or strong, you will go through a process of adaptation in your host culture. Understand the stages, recognize the symptoms and move through the process with objectivity and confidence.
- **TOP TIP:** Understand that culture shock is an important part of an international skill set: First-hand experience of the culture shock process is invaluable for anyone working in a cross-cultural or international workplace. Demonstrate your understanding to potential employers; show that you recognize the stages of culture shock, its symptoms and its cures.

Useful Skills for Daily Life Abroad

Cross-cultural experts agree that certain skills play a key role in cultural integration.

Besides the skills for coping with culture shock (open-mindedness, receptivity, flexibility, adaptability, self-knowledge and humor) there are some other useful skills that will help you survive daily life abroad:

- **Sense of humor:** The ability to laugh, particularly at yourself, is your best weapon against despair.
- **Low task-orientation:** North Americans abroad, and their superiors back home, often set goals that are unrealistic. Studies of Americans living abroad show that those who are less goal-oriented or task-driven are more likely to be effective in their work and derive more enjoyment from their experiences.
- **Coping with failure:** It is almost certain you will fail at something abroad. Get used to the idea! Your dinner party may be a disaster when frozen food thaws in a power outage. You may accidentally offend a local colleague. Your final presentation may be canceled when a bus strike prevents you from going to work.
- **Reframing:** Practice reframing disappointments as learning opportunities. Return to the reason you chose to go abroad and approach the issue from a standpoint of curiosity: "What can I learn from this situation?"



We wish you the best of luck on your cross-cultural adventure, and hope you feel the true satisfaction of arriving at the final adjustment stage!

No matter how many books or videos you watch about your host culture, landing on the ground will be a completely different experience. From the first contact with your new surroundings, your cultural adaptation process begins. Motivation, understanding and a sense of humor will be your best friends throughout this process.



EDITOR'S NOTE: While the *U-Curve of Adjustment* model has been around for over half a century, current research shows that the "curve of adjustment" does not describe a universal reality and there is considerable variation in the experiences of individual sojourners. The model continues to be popular, however, and it does help students understand the concept of culture shock.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE: What triggers culture shock?

Read: [The Culture Tree in Action](#) (especially pg.8) to understand what often triggers culture shock and can predict its intensity.



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