

Four Common Stages of Cultural Adjustment*

STAGE 1: “The Honeymoon”—Initial Euphoria/Excitement

- Excitement with new sounds, sights, smells.
- Superficial involvement in the host culture (like a tourist).
- Intrigue with both similarities and differences between the new culture and your home culture.
- Lots of interest in learning, very motivated and cooperative.
- You feel as if you will be able to handle anything—“I am not going to have any problems adjusting!”

STAGE 2: “Culture Shock”—Irritation/Hostility

- The novelty of the new culture has worn off, and you now focus primarily on the *differences* between the new culture and your home culture.
- Small differences feel like major catastrophes. You become overly concerned with and stressed out by problems and feel helpless and frustrated (the elevator in your dorm is constantly broken; you do not have hot water in the morning; you cannot access e-mail from your apartment/dorm, registering for classes feels like an unstructured nightmare, etc.).
- Stereotypes and prejudices surface: you feel as if the host nationals are cold, unhelpful, snobbish.
- You search out American friends.
- You are homesick. You miss your friends and family in the U.S.—and to make matters worse, you hear that the weather in Princeton is glorious.

STAGE 3: Gradual Adjustment, Humor, and Perspective

- You are becoming more familiar with the new culture and its “logic” and values. Cultural cues become easier to read.
- You feel more comfortable and less isolated, and you even begin to prefer some aspects of the new culture to your home culture.
- You feel like “As long as I am here, I should make the most of it.”
- You experience periodic personal highs and lows, as adjustment gradually takes place.
- Your sense of humor returns. You are able to laugh at certain ways of doing things that previously just annoyed you and even to laugh at yourself from time to time.
- Since you are past the initial, emotional stages of cultural adjustment, you can now enter a stage of “deeper learning.” You begin to see a multitude of approaches to your life abroad and to question some of your assumptions about the world. This can be both exciting and unnerving.

STAGE 4: “Feeling at Home”—Adaptation and Biculturalism

- The “new” culture is no longer new; instead, the “foreign” country you live in now feels like another home.
- The aspects of the culture that are different from the U.S. no longer affect you in a negative way. You are able to live and work to your full potential.
- Just like you do in the U.S., you appreciate certain aspects of the foreign culture and are critical of others.

*Originally conceptualized by anthropologist Kalervo Oberg in a talk to the Women’s Club of Rio de Janeiro in 1954.

Strategies for Coping with Cultural Stress

Personal Supports: Ways of Thinking and Feeling

- Understand the stages of cultural adjustment.
- Analyze your situations and reactions; be flexible; tolerate ambiguity; expect things to be different.
- Be patient; don't try to understand everything immediately; identify what helps you manage stress.
- Identify ways of thinking positively; foster your sense of humor; don't take things too seriously; give yourself permission to fail.
- Investigate facts.

Social Supports

- Identify your sources of support (program staff, other participants, friends and family at home, academic advisers, etc.) and *the types of support that each can best offer*.
- Plan in advance how you will keep in contact with family and friends in the U.S.
- Don't isolate yourself! Seek out friends and groups that share your interests and can facilitate your participation in social circles.

Physical Supports

- Eat in a healthy way and get plenty of rest.
- Identify any problems (e.g. excessive consumption of alcohol, binge eating) and make plans to manage them.
- Find safe and fun ways to exercise on a regular basis.
- Bring a sufficient supply of necessary medications from the U.S.
- Don't forget to bring "can't live without" toiletries with you!