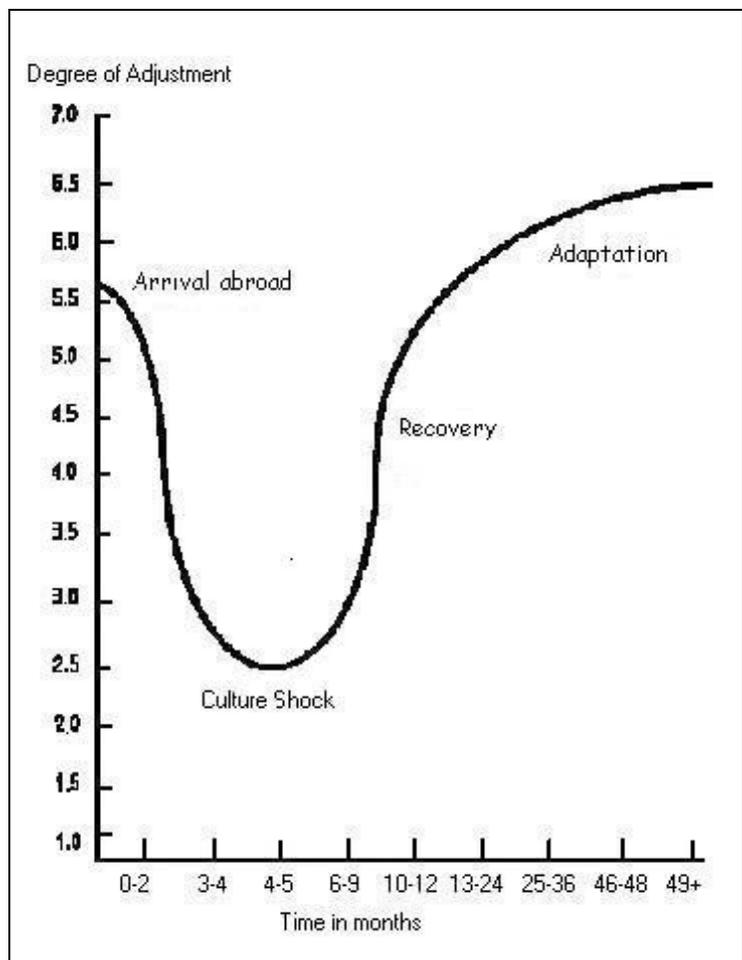


Culture Abroad: Handling Culture Shock

First introduced in 1954, the term “culture shock” describes the anxiety and feelings of surprise, disorientation, and confusion felt when people have to operate within an entirely different cultural or social environment, such as a foreign country. Culture shock grows out of the challenges students may face in adjusting to a new culture. The different stages of culture shock are outlined below with several coping strategies discussed on the next page. It’s important to note that while culture shock is common among many students and international travelers, it is typically mild and lasts only for a brief time. Knowing more about culture shock and various ways to handle it can better prepare you to cope effectively if you should experience similar challenges while abroad.

Stages of Culture Shock

- **Arrival** - Many students find that their initial arrival to a foreign country is filled with excitement and elation. In this so-called “honeymoon phase,” students typically focus on similarities between their host and home cultures, rather than on differences. Students may describe their surroundings and experiences as “new” or “interesting.”
- **Deepening Culture Shock** - After the initial “honeymoon phase”, students’ experiences become deeper and more complex, often including confusing or challenging situations. Many students go through a mild and brief period of “culture shock” based on this deepening of experiences - a period which usually lasts only a few weeks and may include feelings of homesickness, disorientation, isolation and hyper-irritability.
- **Recovery** - This stage occurs when students begin to move on from “culture shock” and become more deeply engaged with the local culture. Students may become more comfortable in speaking a foreign language and become more at ease with local customs and culture.
- **Adaptation** - Eventually, many students feel more “at home” abroad. They have settled into a new life and are able to confront previously frustrating situations with a degree of humor and humility.



Source: ¹Wikipedia.com; School of International Studies, University of the Pacific, <http://sis.pacific.edu/culture/index.htm>;

Strategies for Dealing with Culture-Shock

(1) Research Where You're Going.

Make efforts to learn about your host country's history, culture and current events so you'll have a good understanding of where you're going even before you get there. Learn about local customs, traditional cuisine, art and architecture, etc. When you arrive, perhaps you'll be less "shocked" about what you see and more excited to appreciate what you've already learned.

(2) Prepare to Understand.

If possible, learn something about the way people communicate in your host country. Ask a native or other student who has studied abroad how your host culture receives and gives information. Are there important local customs you should know related to body language? Use of silence? Pace of words? Understanding something about the way people communicate in your host country can better prepare you to communicate effectively within that culture once you're there.

(3) Learn the Language.

Obviously being fluent in your host country's language is advantageous. At the very least, however, you should know how to give proper greetings, how to make requests and how to ask for directions. Also, try to learn about local sayings or colloquialisms—even if you're studying abroad in an English speaking country.

(4) Arrange Logistics Before You Go.

Make sure that all logistics (such as where you'll live, how you'll get meals, etc.) are confirmed before you leave. If your program doesn't provide something such as a meal plan, you'll need to plan for this before going abroad. Learn about local grocery stores, transportation networks, phone systems and currency, so there are few unwanted surprises when you arrive.

(5) Find a Mentor.

Once abroad, look for a local mentor who is willing to listen and discuss any problems you're having. Many students have found that homestay parents, local teachers, classmates or even internship supervisors can offer guidance.

(5) Anticipate Culture-Shock and Stay Curious.

Keep in mind the different stages of culture-shock so that you can recognize them in yourself or others. Bad days happen, but if you find that you're having trouble adjusting for an extended period of time, seek help through one of the various strategies suggested. Also, once you've established a daily routine, make sure not to lose your curiosity. Continue to explore, try new things, take tours and visit new places. Participating in a variety of activities can assist in your adjustment process.

(7) Keep a Journal.

Journaling can be therapeutic and help you express yourself and your experiences honestly. It's not only a log of your journey, but a tool by which you can see patterns in yourself that may not be as noticeable on a day to day basis. A great resource for journaling is "Charting a Hero's Journey" by Linda Chisholm.

(5) Stay Calm.

More than anything, your attitude matters. Try to keep a sense of humor about you. Stay flexible. Don't be too hard on yourself when things aren't perfect, but do recognize when they aren't going well and try to address why.