

Cultural Transition & Adjustment

What is Culture Shock?

By now, you may have already heard of the concept of 'culture shock'. While living and/or traveling abroad, chances are, you will encounter situations in your new environment that significantly differ from your own cultural background and lifestyle. Being in a new and unfamiliar place can be challenging, even for the experienced traveler, and feelings of isolation and frustration can occur. This is totally normal and is often described as culture shock.

Culture shock is:

[The] collective impact of unfamiliar experiences that an individual encounters while traveling or living in a different culture.

- Zhou et.al. 2008, 63

Anxiety that results from losing all of our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse.

- Oberg, 1960, 77

Culture shock is not an anomaly, or unusual experience. It is a natural, psychological reaction to the stress of living in a different environment (Bennett 2016, 62).

Common Signs & Symptoms

Symptoms can be both physical and psychological. Some of them include:

- Excessive homesickness
- Disliking the new culture or feeling resentful/hostility toward your new environment
- Stress and anxiety
- Frequent crying, or feeling like crying
- Changes in appetite or energy levels, like sleeping too little or too much
- Lasting feeling of sadness, irritability, or depression
- Self-doubt, imposter syndrome, sense of failure
- Headaches, stomachaches, or recurring illnesses
- Writing or calling home very frequently
- Reluctance to associate with new people or to speak English

Culture shock can happen gradually or all at once, and it can make enjoying your new situation much more difficult. If you find yourself feeling out of place or sad, try to determine what the cultural differences are that are making you feel this way and consider different ways to overcome these feelings. Recognize that you'll only feel this way for a limited amount of time and that you play a role in how long these feelings last. By overcoming culture shock, you'll be better able to make the most of your experience at Yale.

Who Experiences Culture Shock?

EVERYONE!

One does not have to be an international student or scholar to experience culture shock. Most people who have, at one point in their lives, had to immerse themselves in a new cultural environment have experienced some level of culture shock.

Ways to Deal With Culture Shock

Expectations & Attitude

- **Realize that what you are going through is normal.** Remember that the unpleasant feelings are temporary, natural, and common to any transition that a person makes during their life. Be patient and give yourself time to work through the process.
- **Keep an open mind and a sense of humor.** While people in the U.S. may do or say things that people in your home country would not, that doesn't mean they're strange or unapproachable. Americans like to talk, laugh, and make jokes. Speak with your friends and your employer. They will be understanding and supportive. Try new things and try to appreciate the cultural differences you encounter!
- **Stay positive!** Remember why you wanted to come to Yale in the first place. You came here to learn and experience new things! This may be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, so put yourself out there. If English is not your first language, try to speak it as much as possible. It might be difficult at first, but with regular practice you will learn more. As you learn, you will become more confident about interacting with your surroundings. Everything will get easier with time and practice.
- **Embrace the process.** It's okay to feel your feelings! Acknowledge if you're sad, scared, or lonely, and remember that these emotions are normal, and you don't need to be ashamed. Resolve to make an action plan using these strategies.

Be Curious

- **Ask questions.** Did an American or fellow participant from a different country do or say something that you don't understand? Ask them to explain that part of their culture to you! You get to learn, could make a new friend, and will feel more comfortable in your environment.

When we are curious about our surroundings, our assumptions about it are suspended, and value judgments become less. We are then able to develop various perspectives about an issue, and we are able to move from a passive to an active role in our new environment.

- Bennett, 2016, p. 48

Stress Management

- **Take care of yourself.** Relax when you feel stressed by listening to music, taking a long walk, reading a book, or enjoying a hot shower. Get plenty of sleep. Eat a healthy diet and exercise regularly. Take vitamins to stay healthy, and wash your hands often. Consider writing in a journal to remember the best experiences and work through the difficult ones. Had a bad day? Take some 'me time' to watch your favorite show, read a book in the park, or indulge in a tasty snack. It's okay to do things that make you feel comfortable and safe so you can regain your energy for the next day. If your symptoms persist or are more severe than the symptoms listed, ask your doctor or health care professional for advice. [More resources for staying healthy are available on our site](#) [1].

Social Networks

- **Stay busy.** Add social events to your calendar in addition to work-related obligations. OISS has [lots of programming and events](#) [2] for you to try new things and meet new people. Ask a new friend out to coffee, attend an event in your town, or consider taking up a new hobby. A good rule of thumb is to always say 'yes' when you get invited out.
- **Improve your English skills.** Cultural adaptation is greatly enhanced by perfecting your English skills. Not being able to clearly communicate can create isolation and loneliness. The worst mistake you can make is to keep silent. Keeping quiet or sticking to your native language can further isolate and alienate you from

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your surroundings. Make a point to join activities that give you the opportunity to share in conversation and express your identity. To practice and gain experience in a safe and welcoming environment, join one of the [English Conversation Groups](#) [3] at OISS.

- **Talk to Someone.** When you're feeling the stress of culture shock, it often helps to talk about these feelings. Sharing your feelings can help you process them. A friend, fellow international, or colleague can help ease your worries just by listening. [More mental health resources are available on our site](#) [4].

As always, whenever you need assistance, [OISS advisers](#) [5] are here to provide advice and support.

References & Sources

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[6] <http://www.interexchange.org>