

Cultural Adjustment

Adapted from <https://www.northwestern.edu/abroad/study-abroad/prepare-and-go/cultural-adjustment.html>

Traveling abroad can be one of the most exhilarating learning experiences of your life. It can also be disorienting, frustrating, and leave you feeling homesick. Everyone experiences cultural adjustment differently, with varying emotional and physical reactions to the experience. However, understanding the common stages of cultural adjustment will allow you to recognize that what you are feeling is entirely normal and is part of the cultural learning process.

Your in-country administrators will be the most important resources for helping you to navigate cultural differences and adjustment, but keep in mind a few things:

- “Culture shock” is normal and however you experience it is normal.
- Intercultural adjustment not only varies by individual but also by program.
- Cultural transitions can trigger or exacerbate mental health challenges or conditions. If you have seen a therapist or psychiatrist for anxiety, depression, or any mental health conditions within the past five years, meet with your doctor to discuss your condition in light of travel abroad.
 - If you wish to continue your therapy while abroad, be sure discuss this with your therapist. If you require any special accommodations, be sure to talk to ARISC prior to departure, so that we can work with on-site staff to determine what provisions can be made.
- Be aware of what you are experiencing. If you encounter any difficulties or discomfort which prevent you from being successful, discuss this with your on-site administrators or ARISC.

Managing Expectations Upon Arrival

When living in another culture, everyday occurrences may be distressing. Here are some typical situations that travelers have encountered in the past:

- Your flight has been delayed, your baggage has been lost, or you cannot find the program representatives who are supposed to meet you at the airport.
- Your housing and commute is different from what you’re used to at your home institution. For example, the bed is too hard, there are no top sheets, and the commute to your place of internship is too long.
- You are anxious to explore, but your program requires you to attend a mandatory orientation, much of which seems to repeat some of the things you learned about at your virtual orientation in the US.

- You've studied the host language for many years, but when you try to speak, no one seems to understand you, and sometimes the locals just give up and talk to you in English.
- Your internship seems completely unstructured and somewhat unorganized: there are no clearly defined tasks, the instructions given are vague or confusing.
- Host nationals don't seem to have any interest in making friends with you. You've already been on the program for several weeks, and you haven't made any close friends with host nationals, or even friends to hang out with.

If you encounter any of these issues, think of them as learning experiences. Try not to panic, ask a lot of questions, and address only the issue at hand rather than generalizing about an entire country or group of people.

Common Stages of Cultural Adjustment

The honeymoon -- initial euphoria and excitement

In this stage, you will feel able to handle anything; your experience may be characterized by:

- Excitement about new sights and surroundings.
- Superficial, tourist-like involvement in the host culture.
- Intrigue with both similarities and differences between the new culture and your home culture.
- Lots of interest in learning, very motivated and open-minded.

Culture/travel shock -- irritation and hostility

The novelty of the new culture has worn off. Your feelings in this stage may include:

- A focus on the differences between your new culture and your home culture. Stereotypes and prejudices surface.
- Small issues feel like major catastrophes; you become overly stressed out by small problems and feel helpless and frustrated.
- Homesickness and missing your family and friends from home.

Gradual adjustment -- finding humor and perspective

In this stage, you decide to make the most of your experience. You may also have the following reactions:

- Increased familiarity with the new culture, its logic and values.
- Periodic highs and lows as adjustment gradually takes place.
- The return of your sense of humor and recognition that you like some parts of the new culture better than life in your home culture.

- Deeper learning about life abroad and a questioning of your earlier assumptions about the world.

"Feeling at home"-- adaptation and biculturalism

You now appreciate certain aspects of foreign culture and critique others. Other reactions at this stage include:

- Feeling at home in the "foreign" country.
- No longer negatively affected by differences between the host and home cultures.
- Living and working to your full potential.

Tips for Cultural Adjustment

Take care of yourself physically

An important part of maintaining good health abroad is eating and drinking properly – stay hydrated! Remember that in addition to the cultural and emotional adjustments, your body will be adjusting to a new climate, new time zone, new food, etc. and eating right, exercising and getting rest will help ease that adjustment.

Give yourself permission to feel bad

Negative feelings are normal, and you should process these emotions, rather than just pushing them away and failing to address the issue.

Don't make any big life changes while abroad

It will take time to figure out how your new life experiences fit into your previous culture and life experience.

Be open-minded and curious

Adjusting to a new culture doesn't mean that you have to change your own values and worldview, but it's important to allow yourself to be curious about the way things are perceived and done in the new environment. When you find yourself in an unfamiliar situation, try to think of it as a new adventure and tolerate the ambiguity of not knowing.

Use your observation skills

Since you will be exposed to many new and unfamiliar customs and norms, observing how others are behaving in situations can help you understand what is expected of you and how you could connect with others. Pay attention to both verbal and non-verbal cues of others, in order to get a more complete picture of what is going on.

Recognize that culture is relative

When you are exposed to new customs and ideals, try to avoid labeling them as “good” or “bad” according to what you are used to. Remember that there may be parts of a culture that you disagree with or dislike, but these are part of a broader social system.

Find cultural allies and ask questions

Ask for help when you need it.

Give yourself (and others) permission to make mistakes

Everyone inevitably makes mistakes as they explore a new cultural environment. Try to find humor in these situations and 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 generalized belief about your culture, it may be due to a lack of information. If you are comfortable with doing so, it could be an opportunity to share information about yourself and your culture.

Be patient – don't expect yourself to understand everything immediately

The process of cultural adjustment requires time and most of the time it's a cyclical process. Try to remind yourself to be patient with the new experience, encouraging yourself to stretch your comfort level, and avoid being overly critical of yourself.

Try to establish new friendships

New friendships with host country residents can help explain the reason behind some of the customs/behaviors you might find uncomfortable. This will help you make healthy adjustments abroad.

Common Reactions to Cultural Adjustment, and How to Combat Them!

If you find yourself...

Exhausted or unusually fatigued...

....then consider this:

Be sure you are getting regular sleep! A regimented bedtime and morning alarm will help your body adjust to a new time zone. And be sure you're drinking enough water each day. If the condition continues, be sure let our in-country representative know.

Unusually worried about small health problems...

Try for perspective: is the issue impacting your day-to-day life? Is it in fact something to worry about? Would it help you just to

Increasing your use of alcohol or drugs...	<p>make sure you know where the medical facility is, just in case?</p> <p>Please be careful! Remember, you are more vulnerable in a place that you don't know well. Drugs and alcohol can increase that vulnerability. Try emailing or texting a friend instead of picking up a bottle.</p>
Craving things from home....	<p>Does the local supermarket carry an approximation of a food you miss? If you like Pringles, do the local Kraks do it for you? Or is it a person you miss? Can you email/text/call/video chat with them?</p>
Desiring to interact only with fellow non-locals....	<p>What about a little people-watching? If not interacting, can you pop on some sunglasses and drink some tea at an outdoor cafe to watch the world go by?</p>
Quick to anger and frustration....	<p>Try reminding yourself that <i>everything is harder</i> when you are in a place you don't know well, whether at home or abroad! Everything will take longer/be harder; can you lean on your local resources, or remind yourself to take a deep breath and adjust your expectations?</p>
Feeling rejected, isolated, lonely....	<p>Try hanging out where the tourists gather! Go to the national museum or a cafe on the square; seeing other tourists can be a good reminder that you're never really as alone as you think! Or, call a friend back home and try to remember you'll be back in your "real life" soon enough.</p>