

# 2. Culture Shock

## Introduction

Over the years of people relocating to other nations it has been observed that most (but not all) people will encounter culture shock.

*"Culture shock is the anxiety that results from losing all the familiar signs and symbols that help us understand a situation" - Kalvero Oberg*

*"Culture shock is when you experience frustration from not knowing the rules or having the skills for adjusting to a new culture" - Duane Elmer*

Culture shock involves emotional and physical responses to the accumulated stresses and strains that stem from being forced to meet one's everyday needs in unfamiliar ways. It is important to understand that culture shock affects everyone who moves to live in another culture to some degree and there are physical, emotional and spiritual reactions.

## 1) Common Symptoms of Culture Shock

People do not experience culture shock in the same way or at the same time. Some of the common symptoms of culture shock include:

- Feelings of sadness and loneliness,
- Over-concern about your health,
- Headaches, pains, and allergies
- Insomnia or sleeping too much
- Feelings of anger, depression, vulnerability
- Idealizing your own culture
- Trying too hard to adapt by becoming obsessed with the new culture
- Even the smallest problems seeming overwhelming
- Feeling shy or insecure
- Overwhelming sense of homesickness
- Feeling lost or confused
- Questioning your decision to move to this place

## 2) Common Phases of Culture Shock

Culture shock is not an exact step by step process. Adjusting to another culture takes time and goes through phases and there are many factors that can affect an individual's response.

Culture shock tends to come in four distinct phases:

**Honeymoon Phase** - a general feeling of euphoria as you first arrive in a new place. You might have feelings of homesickness but are excited and intrigued by the differences you see around you.

**Distress Phase** - this the 'shock' phase. Things around you no longer feel new or exciting, you feel as though you're walking through treacle. Frustration and anger can easily be manifested as you realise that your familiar support systems are no longer there, and that you have made a long-term move to this new culture. You may find prejudices towards your new culture developing. The traffic, food, climate, language, ways that people relate to you, level of privacy etc can begin to irritate you. You can feel disconnected and tempted to withdraw.

**Adjustment Phase** - you start to accept the differences and cope with them. You start to feel like yourself again. You begin to develop good friendships, improve in language and look at things more positively. There may still be feelings of isolation, but you feel better equipped to deal with them.

**Appreciation Phase** - you have embraced the new culture, not with wide-eyed naivety, but with a realistic attitude to its strengths and weaknesses. You start to feel at home. This should then lead to greater fulfilment and happiness.

Returning home at any point in this cycle can prolong the adjustment and repeating some of the phases.

## 3) What Are Some of the Contributing Factors to Experiencing Culture Shock?

### a) Loss and Grief

When we move to another culture there is excitement, challenge, expectation of promises and call fulfilled but also there is a sense of loss:

- Relationships - family, friends, work colleagues
- Routine and familiar places and journeys
- Cultural signals and cues (e.g. greeting people)
- Language - how to shop!
- Points of reference - these provide affirmation and security in our home culture with out us even realising it.

All of the above happens at once. Also it is mixed in with excitement and a sense of accomplishment that we have finally relocated.

Often it is the excitement and faith for the new situation that we are most aware of on arrival but mixed in with that is a sense of loss which if we are not aware of gets suppressed and not processed well. Faith alone is not enough.

Being aware helps us handle this better. In addition we need to be self aware of how we are really feeling and discuss this with others to help us grieve. This is a process not a one off event.

## **b) Threats**

Threats cause us to feel stress. This is not wrong, stress is the body's natural response to tell us to take action. Being stressed is not wrong, but not taking steps to deal with it is wrong!

A threat is not necessarily something physical, it can be a sense of not coping or a sense of failure - will you ever learn the language, for example.

Possible threats/causes of stress include:

- Learning a new language
- Relationships with team members or neighbours
- Confronted by need, compassion overload
- Contrast with home
- Bureaucracy
- Environment
- Concern for physical health
- Financial pressure
- Not meeting expectations – either your own or others
- Physical danger

Some of the practical steps we will look at in a subsequent session will help us handle the above but again being aware of what causes us to feel stressed is half the solution as we can then take steps to reduce the 'threat'.

## **c) 'Change of Identity'**

With so many changes and challenges happening at once when we relocate, our very being, our self is deeply challenged. How we respond to people and situations and how people respond to us is affected by the culture around us. We have been shaped by cultural cues and signals and learnt the correct way to respond without really thinking about it. These things are not surface level but are deep within us and contribute to who we are.

With a change of culture and all that entails, we ourselves need to change. We have to adapt ourselves as culture won't adapt.

Again this is not a one off or short phase of adaptation but an extended process.

#### **d) Re-entry**

We need to understand that returning to our home culture is not straight forward. This subject needs its own seminar but it is worth noting that all of the points we have made also apply to when we return home. Reverse culture shock should be expected even though we are returning to what we thought was home.

This is caused by similar issues of identity and role with the added factor of people not necessarily understanding what we are facing and thinking we have simply returned home, so we should be happy!

### **4) The Need to be 'Re-socialised'**

*"One's whole life pattern needs reworking because of simultaneously changing multiple life elements. Overnight the person entering cross-cultural ministry changes his or her cultural context, the actual job or role, the place/standing in society. He or she leaves behind all of family, friends, acquaintances. These are profound losses. Even the seemingly superficial things such as climate, clothing and foods, are real and costly in terms of energy. They too press the self to change."*

*"Each of us is shaped by our home culture, which is the larger context in which our family teaches us how and who to be. We become 'fit' for the world in which we are socialized. But in order to become effective in a new reality we have to change who we are. Who we have been is usually no longer sufficient in the new culture's expectations and demands. We have to be re-socialized" - Lois and Larry Dodds*

What are some of the ways we need to be 're-socialized'?

#### **a) Our Roles and Behaviour Patterns**

Cultural Conditioning is the process by which we become 'ethnocentric' by which we regard the way we behave as normal and natural and all other ways as abnormal and unnatural. Most people expect other people, including people from other cultures to behave the same way they do.

Why is this? Because we grow up surrounded by people from the same background, same type, and who think and act the same way. So we don't merely expect people to act the same way, we demand it. People raised in a different way in a different culture are not like us, so our expectations that they will act the same are confounded and we end up confused and frustrated.

*"When we see something different in another society, we are liable to view it as abnormal and inferior ..... A feature of human nature that does lead to problems when we come to operate in different cultures" - Hickson & Pugh*

When we find the actions of people we work with abnormal and unpredictable, relations can quickly deteriorate.

Examples:

- How men and women are perceived in different cultures

- The Western preference for personal space. In many cultures people thrive being with other people – often all of the time!
- The importance of 'being' together as opposed to getting a task done.

## **b) Affirmation**

Affirmation and where and how we get it, is also a significant challenge. In our home cultures we have learned to gain affirmation in certain ways. This is what contributes to us being emotionally full. We learnt the gestures and feedback which communicate we are valued, loved, appreciated, accepted, or approved of.

All of this changes in the new culture when we do not know the signals and in fact often make mistakes which lead to us feeling not accepted, or disapproval - how can we feel valued when we are not understood and are a new comer? All of this drains us emotionally and leaves our emotions low, not full.

## **c) Fulfillment From Success**

Again in hundreds of ways, some of them small, others larger we receive a sense of fulfillment from doing things well. In fact much of our confidence comes from knowing we can do something, whether it is shopping or filling a car up with fuel, we know how do it. But even small things like this can lead to a sense of failure or lack of performing well all of which does not fuel positive emotions.

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Much of self worth comes from feeling valued or/and feeling successful at some things. If these things are not happening then our sense of worth is depleted and this can result in us not liking ourselves, certainly at a subconscious level if not more.

## **d) Expectations**

This can be a big issue. Often when we are sent from our home culture, friends and family are full of admiration for us and make many positive statements about how wonderful we are to take such a faith step. This sense of expectation can continue for many months and in addition an expectation to be fruitful in ministry arises as well. These expectations can

come from others but also from ourselves. Unmet expectations can be a significant cause of failure and sense of depression.

We need to be careful how we define success both for ourselves and to help others have realistic expectations for us and the ministry.

## 5) Consequences

If we don't process these issues well and pay attention to how we are internally it will lead a lack of joy and fulfillment and could result in depression or burn out. If we view our emotions like a fuel tank that helps us function, keep going day to day and also enjoy it - then the tank needs to be full.

However all the issues we have been talking about will drain the fuel tank and if there is not sufficient re-fueling then that leads to burn out. This is a sense of not being able to cope or simply not having enough energy or being constantly frustrated or angry.

## Concluding Thoughts

This document has focused on the emotional challenge of moving to a new culture and the culture shock that most people will experience.

In the second part of the "inner journey" notes we will look at what we can do about it.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Have you ever experienced culture shock? When? What was it like? How did you handle it?
2. If you think ahead to your forthcoming move, which of the factors that cause culture shock do you think are most likely to affect you? Why?
3. Look again at the section of being "re-socialised". Consider some of the following:
4. How do you feel about having less personal space?
  - How do you feel about "being" rather than "doing" and achieving?
  - What are your current expectations about what "success" for your move looks like? To what extent is this realistic?