

# Culture Shock

Culture shock is the name given to the physical and emotional upset that comes from having our familiar environment or boundaries greatly changed. Culture shock is a serious problem that affects almost everyone who becomes involved with a new culture. For many people, culture shock is a foreign idea.

## Culture shock comes from:

- being cut off from the cultural signs and known patterns that we could formerly depend on, especially the subtle ways we normally have of expressing feelings. We are suddenly deprived of all the familiar clues and messages that we understand instinctively.
- living and/or working over an extended period of time in a situation that is unclear.
- having our own cultural values (formerly considered positive and acceptable) brought into question.
- being continually put into positions in which we are expected to function with maximum skill and speed but where the rules have not been adequately explained.

The following symptoms of culture shock can greatly affect family relations, including the development of secure attachment:

- Homesickness
- Boredom
- Withdrawal
- Isolation
- Need for excessive amounts of sleep
- Feelings of helplessness
- Compulsive eating
- Compulsive drinking
- Irritability
- Anger
- Exaggerated cleanliness
- Marital stress
- Family tension and conflict
- Exaggerated cultural pride
- Stereotyping of the new country and its citizens
- Hostility towards the citizens of the new country
- Loss of ability to work effectively
- Unexplainable fits of weeping
- Physical ailments (psychosomatic illnesses)

## Stages of Culture Shock

1. Physical ailments (psychosomatic illnesses)
  - Everything is new, interesting and exciting

- This can be a very positive time
- It can also be a difficult time, particularly for parents - children are excited, and want to try all new things (including potentially harmful behaviours such as smoking, drinking, taking drugs) while parents want to discourage these behaviours

## 2. Survival Stage

- The initial excitement has passed
- Cultural differences become enlarged, causing stress
- Stress can also come from not being familiar with the rules of the new culture

## 3. Gradual Integration

- Living in both cultures gets easier as things in the new culture become familiar
- People learn the language and are able to participate actively in the adopted society
- People who integrate can often give very good support to others who are affected by culture shock based on their own experience

Culture shock affects people differently depending on the person's gender, religious beliefs, social class, age, etc.

People who have been forced to leave their homeland (refugees) are likely to have greater difficulties integrating than those who have chosen to immigrate.

The effect of culture shock may be felt more than once, with different intensity. Although most of us adjust and are able to function in the new culture, this is a very difficult process for some people (especially older immigrants) who, in some cases, are never able to integrate.

### **On a positive note...**

Culture shock is not a totally negative experience. Living in a new culture can be enriching. Culture shock offers a unique opportunity for learning. It demands reflection and self-examination. It forces a re-evaluation of all personal relationships. It allows for explorations of new attitudes and behaviours. It allows learning in an environment not available to culturally isolated individuals.