

Adapting to a New Country

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While you were preparing for your studies abroad you went through a series of steps trying to ensure that your transition will be smooth. For example, you might have made sure you're academically prepared, you have the necessary funds, you've said goodbye to your friends and family, you've arranged your travel plans and you've acquainted yourself with the language or customs of the country you will be studying in. Given the amount of preparation, you expect your adjustment to the new country will be uneventful. This is rarely the case though. Most people who move between different cultures go through an adjustment phase as they become more familiar with their new surroundings.

The adjustment period might be accompanied by some disturbances such as anxiety, headaches, digestion problems or sleep disorders or more subtle changes such as feeling unease or agitation. Most people who spend a significant length of time away from their country experience cultural adjustment in similar ways, which resemble going through a valley. The image of the valley appropriately describes this transition because people start out at a high point of optimism and enthusiasm, experience a drop or depression in which they might feel stuck for a little while after which they begin to recover, returning to a point of balance similar to the one they started out in. Visually this process would look like this:

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If you are experiencing difficulties transitioning to a new country it's important to keep in mind that you are not alone but rather you are sharing a similar experience with many others who have changed the cultural setting they live in.

Despite the similarities of the cultural adjustment experience you might not experience it in the same way as your classmates. Each person's experience is shaped by his/her unique personality and outlook on life. The speed in which you will go through the stages of adjustment and the intensity of the experience for you are very personal.

Cultural adaptation stages

The honeymoon stage

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Thoughts at this stage usually include: I'm so excited! I can't wait to share this with my friends back home! Everything here is so wonderful!

Characteristics of this stage: You are busy settling in, you are observing the new culture and adjusting to your new setting, you are meeting helpful and polite people, you are seeing new things and enjoying a new world.

The conflict stage

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Thoughts at this stage usually include: This would never happen in my country. Why don't they do things like they should? These people are so strange. I can't wait to go home.

Characteristics of this stage:

- You seek out people from your country and wish to spend time with them
- You feel you don't have the time or opportunity to make new friends
- You feel isolated
- You might feel tired, sick, angry, anxious or depressed
- You realize the behaviors of your cultural group might not be acceptable in your host country and you might stop or modify some of your behaviors
- You feel your expectations you had of your host country are unfulfilled
- You blame your host country for all your problems
- You spend lots of time with people from your cultural background complaining about the host country

- You face difficulties with the subtleties of the language of your host country

The critical stage

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Thoughts at this stage usually include: Why don't they say/do this? We say/do this too but differently.

Characteristics of this stage: You decide to explore the new culture, accept the challenge of self-observation, assume responsibility for your cultural adjustment.

The recovery stage

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Thoughts at this stage usually include: You don't understand them like I do. I'm starting to like it here.

Characteristics of this stage:

- Improvement of your use of the language
- Starting to understand the behavior of the people in the host country
- Finally making friends with some natives and feeling part of the community
- Becoming more tolerant of things you think are strange of different
- Becoming a mediator between the two cultures
- Feeling proud you can communicate and understand the native.

How to encourage cultural adjustment

- **Ask questions-** Ask practical questions, like “Where is the nearest bank?” but also questions about peoples’ experiences and their opinion on a variety of topics. Maybe this will lead to some of your stereotypes being challenged/
- **Learn and practice the language-** Watch local TV, listen to local radio and read the local press. Talk to people as much as you can.
- **Notice social interactions-** Watch what people say and how they say it in different social circumstances such as greeting someone, introducing a stranger, saying goodbye to a friend or someone they just met. Try to understand the differences related to gender, age and social circumstance.
- **Go on field-trips-** Go out with the intention to observe what is going on. Whether in someone’s house, the grocery store, the bus or the university you can learn a lot just by observing.
- **Talk to more experienced foreign students-** Other foreign students’ experience might be valuable to you. Talk to foreign students from different backgrounds as well as your own and learn about their adjustment experience.
- **Keep a journal-** Writing about your experience will help you observe and think about what you’re experiencing.
- **Read-** There are many valuable resources concerning your host country. Newspapers, magazines, libraries and the internet are all sources of information that will help you understand and adjust to your host culture.
- **See yourself as a teacher-** You can share aspects of your culture with the natives of your host culture. Thinking of yourself as a teacher will give you more patience and help you not feel angry when someone asks you a question you feel is stupid.
- **Reflect-** An important part of your cultural adjustment is making the time to think about what you are experiencing. Ask yourself questions such as “What did I expect from my studies abroad?” And “How does reality match up to my expectations?” “What can I do for my experience to be more productive and interesting?” and “In what way is this experience preparing me for my future goals?”