

## **AJDUSTING TO AMERICAN CULTURE**

Adjusting to a new culture can be a time of experiencing new customs, values, and beliefs, as you are literally immersed in a new culture and possibly a new language as well. It can also be a time of confusion as you try to learn how to respond appropriately to cues that can seem foreign, and to "do the right thing" culturally.

People may not respond the way they did back home, transportation is different, and you have to learn a variety of new things, from how to set up a bank account, to figuring out how to act at work. Many people dealing with these new stressors feel some anxiety, which is normal and has been called "culture shock."

The symptoms of culture shock will be different for each person, and can include feeling lonely or mildly depressed. Feeling stressed or irritable, and wanting to isolate from others are other common symptoms. You may feel overwhelmed trying to absorb all of the new aspects of living in this country. At times you may feel homesick and think longingly about your native country. You may even feel unsure of yourself as you try to figure out how things are done here. There are stages to adjusting to a new culture which are normal and that most people pass through (it doesn't last forever, it just feels that way at times). These include:

### **Everything is Just Great**

This is the wonderful "honeymoon phase" when everything looks wonderful and the newness of the new country is exciting and pleasant. You may feel excited about being here, and the new opportunities that are waiting for you. When you go to the stores and visit, you may be impressed by how big everything is, and by how things are done here. If people ask you questions, you will smile.

### **Hostility**

Problems may start occurring because of language and communication difficulties, or because of differences between your native culture and those here in the United States. At this point, you may start to feel impatient, irritable, frustrated, anxious, sad, or discontent, and to think that this new country may not be so wonderful after all. Americans may seem abrupt, rude, or too different from the people from your native land, and our culture may seem a mass of new rules that are difficult to learn. You may also feel homesick for you home country.

### **Understanding**

At this stage, you will begin to feel more "at home" and able to get around, both physically, with the language, and emotionally. Things are starting to make sense now, and you don't feel as lost or bewildered by the way things are done here. At this point many people start comparing their old culture with our new one, and deciding which practices seem better. You start to regain your sense of humor, and you may even laugh at some of the misunderstandings that you have had.

### **Acceptance**

At this point, you will have a better understanding of our culture and realize that it is neither all good or all bad. You also start to feel that "You belong here". You will have accepted America as your home, and have learned to adjust to the differences in culture here.

People progress through these stages at their own rate. Some will last longer than others, and you will respond uniquely based on your own personality and methods of coping with new experiences. Interestingly enough, after going through all of these stages, if a person then goes back to live in their country of birth, they may go through a "re-entry shock" and need to go through them all over again!

### **Tips for Helping the Adjustment**

It's important to be patient with yourself while adjusting to a new culture and to learn to utilize resources available to help you, whether a language class or local ethnic community group

(which can give a refreshing language and culture break and help lessen loneliness as you adjust to our country).

Other ideas to help you adjust include:

1. Realize that these feelings are normal. Everyone who comes to a new country and culture goes through them to some extent.
2. Humor can help. Sometimes the differences between cultures, or situations that can come up, are humorous and can help with releasing some of your feelings as you adjust to new ways of doing things.
3. Look at some of the differences between your expectations of your new country, and the reality. You may have thought Americans acted one way, or that our country was a certain way, and then found out that things are actually quite different here (see below, on "Culture"). Realizing that the two might be quite different can help with adjusting to the reality of life here.
4. Try to put yourself in the other place. Imagine what it would be like for your new American friends if they were suddenly placed in your culture. This can help you be a little more open minded, and empathetic to the differences.
5. Get involved with others: whether with a hobby, a team sport, or other activity, doing things with others will help you with both your English acquisition, and with the feelings of loneliness that can occur. Mutual interests are a great way to make new friends, so consider taking that art class, volunteering in a local community.
6. Take good care of yourself by eating nutritiously and getting plenty of rest. Exercise, especially group sports or even walking with another person, can help with stress reduction and help ease some of the loneliness at the same time.
7. Share how you feel with family or close friends. The support of others can help as you adjust to our culture and also grieve the loss of close contact with friends or family in your native land. Making new friends at work or school can also help with learning to accept your new culture and language.
8. Set realistic goals for yourself, even if it's learning the bus route to your work by the end of the week, or learning seven new words in English over the next five days. This can help build your confidence up as you see yourself reaching towards and achieving new things in your life.

### **A Little About U.S. Culture**

You may have had some preconceptions about our culture, based on reading books, watching American films, or talking to others who have been to the United States. While some of the ideas of American life may be accurate, others may be exaggerated or unrealistic, and you may feel quite a bit of surprise as you learn the reality of living here.

### **Working Life**

You may have heard that life here is very easy compared to that in other countries. In some ways it is, since Americans enjoy a high standard of living, but many Americans work long hours. Life here can be very fast paced in comparison to some cultures. The work ethic is very strong in our country, and the business arena can be a competitive one where productivity is expected. A typical business here opens its doors around 9 a.m. (this can vary some), with a short break for lunch at noontime (1/2 hour) and then stays open until 5:30. A typical workday means 8 hours of working, with the noon break, and occasionally a ten minute break during the mid-morning or afternoon. Some businesses have longer hours, and expect employees to put in overtime routinely (find out what your company's policy is on this). The pace at businesses will vary. Some businesses are high pressured and competitive, and the pace is busy all day long; others may be more relaxed, but expectations are usually high no matter the pace. Being late or calling in sick too often is frowned on, and while most businesses will have a certain number of sick days allotted for the year they encourage workers to not use them unless really necessary. The good news is that most businesses will have good benefits such as vacation days, medical and dental insurance, and other options; and employees who work hard are often given promotions or raises as time goes on.

### **Bureaucracy and Cultural Values in America**

Sometimes newcomers to our country are surprised at the number of rules and regulations that govern daily life, from how to cross a street to whether they can smoke in a public restaurant. Learning these rules can take time. Also certain cultural values such as discussion of sexuality, how women (and men!) dress, and program ratings in movies and on public television may be very different from your native country. To make things even more complicated, there are many different ethnic and cultural groups that make up our population, and standards may vary some depending on which group you are with! It's important to listen and learn how things are done here, to ask questions when you aren't sure, and to be patient with yourself as you learn what is acceptable and not in this new culture.

People in our culture tend to be direct, and to speak what they are thinking or feeling more than in some cultures, and this is considered okay. Being frank and honest (but not cruelly blunt) is considered a good thing. People also enjoy debating issues in a friendly manner, and exchanging ideas. Sometimes American behavior may seem rude to you because we are more outspoken, but usually the comments are well intentioned and not meant to be disrespectful.

Many Americans are forward thinking, and believe that a person can control their own destiny by working hard and planning for the future. They also value their time (especially private time) and feel that "time is money". They admire people who show up to work early or on time, and who manage their time well.

### **Individualism is Valued**

Our country was founded on the rugged individualism of the earlier pioneers and settlers, many of whom came from Europe, and as a culture we still value this. Families tend to be less interdependent or close knit than in many societies. There is a great deal of freedom of individual expression (and opinion) in this country, including religious belief, that is tolerated as long as no one is bothered and people are respectful of one another. Open discussion of different beliefs and practices, and questioning our own beliefs and why we do things is common, especially in the youth in this country.

### **Schools**

School in our country may begin with preschool (at age 3) or kindergarten (age 5), although it is not uncommon for young children under age 3 to be in childcare or daycare if both parents work and there are no grandparents who live nearby to help with this task.

### **People on the Move**

We are a mobile culture, and people will move if their job depends on it. Some families move once every few years because of their work or other factors. And military families will move quite a bit, since they are stationed at new bases from time to time.

### **Religion**

Freedom of religion is a tradition in our country, and you will probably meet people with a variety of religious beliefs. Larger cities may have most of the large faiths expressed, from Christianity (a variety of denominations), to Judaism, Hinduism, and others.

And yet... As you live in our country, you will learn that it is a diverse mix of ethnic origins, religious beliefs, and social class. Most Americans do admire the person of any background who takes the effort to learn about our culture and who works hard. You will find that being here will help to increase your own knowledge of different types of people, and that there will be many new friends here interested in learning about you and your country of origin as well.

Source:

[http://www.rapidimmigration.com/usa/1\\_eng\\_goal.html](http://www.rapidimmigration.com/usa/1_eng_goal.html)