

The Challenge of Adjustment

When students leave home to study they are beginning a new life, often alone. Adjustment to a new culture and environment is not accomplished in a few days. On the contrary, it can take a year or, in some cases, more.

People who enter a new culture almost inevitably suffer from disorientation. The physical and social environment contains much that is new and hard to understand. It takes time to learn how to get around, do laundry, buy food and other necessities, and become comfortable in the new society. It is exhausting and difficult to speak in a second language, understand the meanings that lie behind spoken and non-spoken language and learn new behaviors. The cultural differences encountered and an inability to comprehend them produces a pervasive sense of insecurity. When entering a new culture a person is separated from the people and circumstances that define one's role in society and may experience, in varying degrees, a loss of identity. The impact of this disorientation is generally termed "culture shock." Culture shock can manifest itself in a number of ways: headache, upset stomach, irritability, homesickness and so on. Eventually it will disappear, except in very rare cases. Hosts (American friends) can do much to ease the student's adjustment and culture shock by being aware that this is a normal and "real" experience that most sojourners encounter. They can provide assistance by listening patiently and offering support when it is needed.

Some explanation of the various stages of adjustment may be useful. Not every international student will experience all the stages but "friends" or hosts who are puzzled by students' attitudes and behavior may find the following list enlightening.

Initial Euphoria

Hardly recovered from travel fatigue and jet lag, students are soon busy with registration, interviews, orientation, tours, parties and getting acquainted with their hosts. Everything is new but still exciting—possibly "quaint"—and students purposefully set off to accomplish their goals. At this point they are most apt to notice the similarities and assume that people are basically alike everywhere. This stage can last from two weeks to two months—but it inevitably ends.

Irritability and Hostility

As the differences become apparent and perhaps some difficulties are encountered discomfort sets in and students may become irritable, develop various physical ailments, withdraw, watch TV rather than study or exhibit other signs of being troubled. Since the new environment is the cause of the discomfort, some hostility toward Americans, the college or university and the United States may be expressed. Some students have called this the "three month blues" since the worst part of this stage seems to occur about three months after arrival. >

Gradual Adjustment

As the student begins to better understand lectures and textbooks, passes one or two quizzes and correctly interprets some of the cultural cues that have been so puzzling, there is a gradual—sometimes hardly perceptible—adjustment taking place. A student may still avoid those areas of life that continue to prove difficult or cling to a friend from his own country. Gradually, things will seem less forbidding and more comfortable and his sense of humor returns.

Adaptation

Students have adapted when they can function well in two cultures—the new one and their own. They are able to handle with understanding any differences encountered, are at ease with the college and their peers and can communicate more readily. In fact, they may find a great deal to enjoy and their relationship with their host can deepen and mature.

Return Anxiety

As students near the completion of their studies and face the prospect of returning home, anxieties can intrude. Strangely enough, the student who had adjusted best will probably be the one who finds returning most difficult. Most students realize how much they have changed since leaving home and wonder if it is possible to fit back in. They will once again be leaving friends and what has become a safe and familiar environment. These feelings may be compounded by changes that have occurred at home during their absence. The student may appreciate opportunities to discuss these changes and the apprehension that is felt with their hosts.

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