# Adjusting to a new culture 1

This tutorial focuses specifically on the process that people typically go through, during their initial period in a new cultural context. We will look at some different stages of cultural adjustment and the characteristics of those stages.

## Introduction

Relocation into a new cultural situation is a huge step. The changes and contrasts in the simple things such as the language, food, television, weather, shopping and socialising are only a small part of the relocation process. It is often the deeper differences in customs, mentality, worldview and interpersonal interaction that have a more profound effect.

There are many different reactions and feelings people have, when faced with the challenges of moving and living for the long-term in an (initially) unfamiliar cultural context. Although it is often an exciting, interesting and positive time of learning, there will probably be days when it seems overwhelming and you feel that you just want to be back in your own culture, where you feel comfortable and can relax. No matter what kind of a person you are, or what preparation you have had previously, one of the major factors in adjustment is your willingness to make the adjustment, and your motivation to keep walking through those challenging times.

Your motivation is, of course, based on your overall *purpose* for being in the new culture and new situation in the first place. If you can find a deep and satisfying answer to the question, *Why am I (and my family) here?* then that will get you through the initial stages of culture adjustment better than anything else. If we are convinced that God is the one who has guided and led us to where we are for His purposes, then we will trust Him with the details of our living situation, new foods, new neighbours, and all the rest of the daily adjustments we must make - we will be more patient through the challenges of that process. Being more relaxed because we know He is in control can also help us to be open to see the fun side of cultural adjustment, and see it as a positive time, that will help in the process of us becoming more like Christ.

There are some distinct stages that have been recognized in people as they adjust to their host country, the host culture and their new daily activities. Looking at these stages can help us to recognize in ourselves that we will probably go through some similar feelings and attitudes, and hopefully we will be more prepared and objective about it at the time. No person's experience is exactly like another's, but you should be aware of some of the thoughts and feelings that you or your family *might* experience, during your initial adjustment to a new cultural living situation.

## 'Culture Shock'

'Culture shock' is a term you have probably heard and you may have an existing view of what it actually is. When people use it in reference to expatriate relocation it refers to the process of coming to understand and adapt to differences in culture through daily interaction and situations.

It is probably better to call it 'culture adjustment'. The term 'culture shock' can be misleading, because many people making a planned move to a new culture have had time to think about the move and prepare themselves in some way for it, so they won't face a sudden 'shock' that hits them out of the blue and that they have no control over. For most people, adjusting cross-culturally is a gradual process with a mix of 'positive' and 'negative' experiences, as they gradually adjust to a new set of rules for living, relating, communicating and doing just about everything else, and in effect, as they become a different person in the process.

Some of the factors that make cultural adjustment more difficult for some people, have to do with their lack of preparation for another culture. If someone hasn't thought about it too much before, they will probably struggle to really *believe* in cultural differences and as a result, they will probably tend to impose their own cultural value system on



others. This can lead them to think people who are behaving differently are behaving wrongly. They will tend to think that the way they behave themselves is natural and normal and the way other people behave, if it's different, is wrong or at the least, misguided. Generally, people who begin to think like this have had limited contact with people different from themselves and so have no experiential basis for believing in, and therefore understanding, the real scope of the differences that exist in other cultures.

Culture adjustment is a process that affects people of all different walks of life and ages; teachers, managers, sports people, business people, aid workers, medical personnel, children and teenagers all deal with some degree of adjustment as part of international relocation. Learning to recognise stages of the process of adjustment is helpful because it is important to realise it is a process that is common to everyone, and that we *can* work through it, and gradually become well adjusted to our new situation.

## Common stages of adjustment

One way of describing the varying stages of culture adjustment that have been recognized is:

**1. The Honeymoon - Initial Enthusiasm** (First week or two in host country) This is a period of initial enthusiasm and excitement, hope and stimulation. Everything is exotic and quaint. The attitude toward the host country is generally positive, mixed with enthusiasm for the move and the new things you are experiencing. Little is expected of you. Interaction with the host culture is primarily passive.

At this stage, you are probably unaware of most cultural differences. It may not occur to you that you may be making cultural mistakes or that you may be misinterpreting much of the behaviour going on around you. You have no reason not to trust your instincts.

## **2. Culture Fatigue - Initial realisation of the challenges of adjustment** (After the first few weeks)

Wider exposure to the country and culture means more realistic and more mixed reactions. You are trying to establish daily life routines and even those can be a challenge to accomplish. Enthusiasm is tempered with frustration. Feelings of vulnerability and dependence are common. Homesickness is frequent. Nothing seems routine or has yet become 'easy' or 'fun'. Limited language ability undermines confidence. Close bonds can be formed with other expatriates rather than locals. The differences in behaviour combined with the stress of adapting to a new daily routine sometimes lead to criticism of the host culture. Symptoms of culture fatigue can start to appear such as boredom, lethargy, irritability and hostility toward the host culture.

You now realise that differences exist between the way you and the local people behave, though you understand very little about what these differences are, how numerous they might be, or how deep they might go. You know there's a problem here, but you're not sure about the size of it. You're not so sure of your instincts anymore, and you realise there are some things you don't understand. You may start to worry about how hard it's going to be to figure these people out.

#### **3. Initial Adjustment** (After the first six months or so)

Routines are re-established - you now know what to do to 'get by' and how to do what you need to. You are able to communicate in the language with

people in a limited way. Some aspects of the country and culture now seem normal. Adjustment to the physical aspects of the host country is beginning to improve. You are somewhat more self-reliant. You are more positive about your ability to function. An understanding and empathy with the host culture starts to develop. You feel more comfortable with your routines and surroundings.

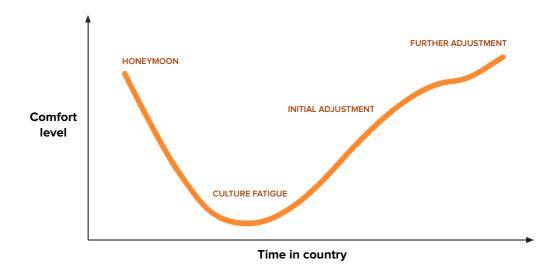
You know cultural differences exist, you know what some of these differences are, and you try to adjust your own behaviour accordingly. It doesn't come naturally yet - you have to make a conscious effort to behave in culturally appropriate ways, but you are much more aware of how your behaviour is coming across to the local people. You are in the process of replacing old instincts with new ones. You know now that you will be able to figure these people out if you can remain objective.

### **4. Further Adjustment - Enthusiasm** (After the first year or more)

Your relocation is now a distant memory and your host country feels more like 'home'. The effects of culture adjustment lessen as a genuine enjoyment of the new location develops. Elements of the host culture's behaviours and values are adopted. You are less likely to criticise things that are different, and certain areas of the host culture are now preferred to the way you used to do things. You can communicate fairly well and have developed some relationships that are becoming closer and can sometimes even relax and enjoy socialising with local people, or having deeper, more open conversations with them.

You no longer have to think about what you're doing in order to do the 'right thing'. Culturally appropriate behaviour is now second nature to you; you can trust your instincts because they have been reconditioned by the new culture. It takes little effort now for you to be culturally sensitive.

The diagram below shows the typical "U" curve of cross-cultural adjustment:



## DISCUSSION POINTS Adjusting to a new culture 1

1. Think back and remember a time when you have you felt out of your depth in a new situation - e.g. at a new job, a new group, a new school or university or a new country. Think about how you felt initially - what bothered you most? How did you learn to cope with it long term - did you recognize in yourself any of the characteristic stages of culture adjustment? How long did it take you to feel comfortable? What would you say was the most important factor in that process?



1. Try to find a person who is a fairly recent immigrant to your country and ask them about their adjustment to the culture here. Can they tell you the story of what it was like when they first came to the country? What did they find difficult at first? How long did it take till they felt at home? What kinds of things did they find helpful as they adjusted to the culture and lifestyle here?