

TUTORIAL
6.10

Adjusting to a new culture 2

This tutorial looks at some practical ways that the adjustment to a new culture can be made easier. It looks at which attitudes and activities are the most helpful as people adjust to another context.

Introduction

There are many theories on making cultural adjustment easier, and a lot of resources that approach the challenge of adjustment from different points of view. However, most people agree that the very best way to adjust to a culture is to *learn* about it - familiarity, understanding and eventual adjustment come through knowing about your new context and getting to know local people.

Because of the particular goals you have to be in the context in the first place, your initial years will be spent in doing 'culture/language acquisition' activities. You will be working through a systematic program of learning to communicate, understanding the culture and getting to know the people around you - and this also happens to be the best way for you to adjust to your new country and culture as well. In the tutorials following this one, we will be looking at specific details in the process of culture/language acquisition. In this tutorial we are going to discuss some general principles of adjusting well to a new culture.

Prior to relocation

Before you move, it is important for individuals, couples and families to learn as much about their new host country as possible. Personal research should look at the people, culture, social norms, religions, language, food, entertainment, and accommodation - in fact anything you can find out about the country and its people. Good preparation can go a long way in helping you with your eventual adjustment to the culture.

As a goal for your personal research you should try to gain:

- An introduction to the country and its history, politics and culture.
- An understanding of the culture's values, customs and etiquette and their possible impact on work and social life.
- An understanding of the possible lifestyle realities in the destination region.

- An initial connection to the other team members working in the area.
- An introduction to the languages and cultures in that region and specific characteristics of those.

Attitudes that help when adjusting to a new culture

Culture adjustment is something everyone experiences to one degree or another. For everyone there will be times of stress and fatigue and even the feeling of being out of control of your environment. No matter how well we prepare for our destination, there will be times when we just want to be in a familiar place where we understand what is going on and can function and communicate freely.

The challenge of culture adjustment could be said to be one of the major reasons that there are still unreached peoples in the world - it is where the 'rubber hits the road' for the Church in its efforts to fulfill the Great Commission. Because it isn't in a sense the big decision to *go* that is as significant as the daily decisions people make to *stay*. One thing we do know is that the Lord understands and appreciates the sacrifice His people make in putting themselves into difficult situations - or even just out of their comfort zone - for the sake of His purposes in the lives of others. One of the most helpful attitudes to have when facing culture fatigue or stress is to remember what the Lord Jesus Christ did for us.



There are other attitudes also that will help you to bridge cultures:

Realise that everyone experiences culture fatigue. Find someone who has gone through culture adjustment and has a positive attitude now. Get perspective. Avoid others who are in a permanent state of complaining and culture shock (unless you feel you can help them).

Admit that you don't know. Knowing that we don't know everything, that a situation does not make sense, that our assumptions may be wrong, is part of the process of becoming culturally aware. Assume first that you might be misunderstanding the situation and be ready to learn from it: there are different ways of doing things, not worse, not better.

Suspend judgements. Collect as much information as possible so you can describe the situation accurately before evaluating it. Begin looking for logical reasons behind everything that seems strange, confusing, difficult or threatening. Assume that other people are as resourceful as we are and that their way will add to what we know. They have probably found perfectly good, but different, solutions to the same problems we face.

Empathy. In order to understand another person, we need to try standing in their shoes. Through empathy we learn how other people would like to be treated by us. Try to think about the other person's point of view.

Systematically check your assumptions. Ask your local friends or neighbours for feedback and constantly check your assumptions to make sure that you clearly understand the situation.

Become comfortable with ambiguity. The more complicated and uncertain life is, the more we tend to seek control and to work everything out. Learn to recognize this in yourself and allow the Lord to be the One who is in control - guiding and leading in each situation you face.

Celebrate diversity. Find ways of sharing and appreciating the culture around you and your local friends and co-workers, and also the diverse cultures of your expat friends and co-workers. Find ways to talk about differences or similarities in a positive and appreciative way. Relax your grip on your own culture.

Enjoy your situation. Make a list of all the positive things you can identify about your present situation. List all the things you enjoy or appreciate about the culture around you, and the things that you are looking forward to finding out more about, or to trying for yourself.

Maintain a healthy sense of humour. There are often a lot of funny situations that happen when you are adjusting to a new culture and learning a new language - learning to laugh at yourself and your mistakes and to talk about them with others can be a great stress reliever.

Have faith. Remember that the Lord is with you and you will work through culture adjustment to brighter days ahead.

Think about the needs of others. Be concerned about others and you will be less worried about how you feel.

Activities that help with cultural adjustment

Learn the Language and Culture. As we said before, this is going to be an ongoing process for you perhaps for several years - it is good to remember that it is helping you to adjust and feel more comfortable the more you learn.

Explore! Get a sense for the physical environment, look for parks, sports facilities, bus stops, etc. Get an initial sense for how people greet each other, wait in line, etc. Find out where people meet and socialise. Make an effort to go to those places.

Use local media: In every country, a lot about the culture is revealed by the media, which includes: books/poetry, newspapers, magazines, radio, television, movies/theater, songs and music. Your ability to use the media to learn about the culture depends on how well you speak and read the language, but this will increase with time.

Adjust your schedule. Try to fit into a rhythm of life in your host culture. Adjust to their time schedule for meals and work.

Keep busy. Keep active. Keep your mind occupied. Don't sit around and feel sorry for yourself.

Join In. Begin to find the things that local people do and take part in those things. Find ways to actively participate, to become involved in the life of your community and its people. Much of this involvement happens automatically as you go about living and working in your village or city, but you can also make a conscious effort to become involved in community activities outside your work and meet people you ordinarily would not.

Take care of yourself. Make sure you are exercising, getting enough sleep, eating properly, and doing things you enjoy. Draw on your personal resources for handling stress. You've done it many times before, and you can do it again.

Keep in touch. Connect with friends and family at home.

Keep a journal. This will help you make sense out of what you are feeling, how you have changed, and what you have gained so far from your time in your new country. It helps to share this with family and friends, to share your experiences with them.

Make friends. Getting to know sympathetic locals - those who are willing to help you initially - is a great comfort and a way to begin to develop deeper relationships. Ask people for help in learning to do the basic things and you will find the people who want to get to know you. Share with them some of the challenges of your adjustment to this new situation.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. Think about the activities that you like to do now that help you to enjoy life and relax. E.g., exercise, watch movies, shop, cook, fish, bike ride, read, walk, go out to eat, etc. Which of these do you think you will probably be able to continue to do in a new cultural situation? Which activities might you not be able to do and how do you feel about that?