Culture Shock: What is It?

“Culture shock” is the name given to a feeling of disorientation or confusion that often occurs when a person leaves a familiar place and moves to an unfamiliar one. Coming to New Concord from another country, you will encounter a multitude of new things. The buildings look different, and so do the trees and the birds. The food is not the same as it is at home, and the people look, speak, and act differently from the people at home. Even the smells are different. Your English might not serve you as well as you expected it would. You might not be able to convey your full personality in English, with the result that you think other people are seeing you as a child. And your family and friends are far away. As a result of all this you may feel confused, unsure of yourself, and you may have some real doubts about the wisdom of your decision to come here. However, the real core of “Culture Shock” has to do with values and belief systems. You have been brought up believing in certain things and sometimes when you go to another country, their beliefs are different than yours. At this time, you may begin to question- who is right and who is wrong. It is this sense of misplacement or dislocation that is the crux of “Culture Shock.”

Symptoms

Culture shock can be manifested by various symptoms. Some people are more affected by culture shock than others. Those who do experience it tend to become nervous and unusually tired. They want to sleep a lot, and write many letters home. They may feel frustrated and hostile toward their host country. They may get excessively angry about minor irritations. It is not unusual for them to become very dependent on fellow nationals who are also in the new country. All these feelings may make it difficult to deal with residents of the host country and to use their language.
Coping with Culture Shock

Different people react differently to culture shock. Some become depressed, or even physically ill. Others are stimulated by the new experiences that are open to them. Here are some ideas that might be helpful:

- Maintain your perspective. Try to remember that millions of people have come to the United States from other countries and have survived.

- Evaluate your expectations. Your reactions to the U.S. and New Concord and the University are products both of the way things are here and of the way you expected them to be. If you find yourself feeling confused or disappointed about something, ask yourself, “What did I expect?” “Why?” “Was my expectation reasonable?” If you determine that your expectations were unreasonable, you can do much to reduce the amount of dissatisfaction you feel.

- Keep an open mind. People in New Concord might do or say things that people at home would not do or say. But the people in New Concord are acting according to their own set of values, not yours. Try to find out how they perceive what they are saying and doing, and try to avoid evaluating their behavior using the standards you would use in your own country.

- Learn from experience. Moving into a new culture can be the most fascinating and educational experience of your life. It gives you the opportunity to explore an entirely new way of living and compare it to your own. There is no better way to become aware of your own values and attitudes and to broaden your point of view.
Adjusting to a New Culture

When you are in a new setting, you have to make certain adjustments or adaptations in your usual behavior and attitudes. It is important to observe your own reactions to being in a new culture, and to compare your reactions with those of other people who are from different countries. These observations can result in increased understanding of yourself and of the various factors that have made you the kind of person you are.

Furthermore, if you are able to keep the perspective of a person who is observing himself or herself while undergoing an unusual experience, you will be able to help prevent yourself from becoming anxious or depressed. You will learn more from the intercultural experience you are having. Many factors influence the way different people adjust to a new culture. One of these factors is, of course, the individual’s personality- degree of self-confidence, sense of humor, ability to interact with other people, ability to tolerate ambiguous or frustrating situations, and so on. Other factors influencing people’s adjustment to a new culture are the nature and quality of differences between their own culture and the new one; the comparative status of their own country and the new one; the nature of the person’s past experience in foreign cultures, and the nature of the particular setting in which the newcomer to a culture is situated.

Social scientists who have studied the phenomenon of adjusting to a new culture have identified four phases of adjustment through which newcomers to a culture commonly pass. As summarized by Marjorie Eaein, those phases are as follows:

- **Spectator Phase** - The new person is excited and optimistic.
- **Stress and Adaptation** - Problems, disappointments, and internal conflicts emerge. Feelings of sadness, depression, anger, hostility, or rebellion might result.
- **Coming-to-terms** - Increasing involvement with the host society reduces the foreigner’s generalized hostility and disappointment, and helps him or her find a relatively comfortable or at least acceptable position in the society.
- **Decision to return home** - This is a period of excitement and self-examination. If the foreigner has become detached from his or her own society, this phase brings about tension and feelings of ambivalence; if the foreigner still identifies strongly with his or her home country, this phase brings a feeling of release and pleasant anxiety.

This is only one way of looking at the process of “phases of adjustment”. Not everyone goes through all these phases, and different people spend different amounts of time in those phases through which they do pass. It can be interesting for you to see whether you pass through phases like this yourself.