



Culture Shock: What's normal and not

Working abroad not only offers you the opportunity to acquire international business skills and experience, it also gives your children the chance to acquire a new language and a better understanding of the world. However, adapting to a country where everything seems different, from the climate, landscape, language, food, religion and dress to people's attitudes, values and way of communicating, can be stressful for the entire family. Understanding the adaptation process can make your family's transition easier and allow you to focus on your professional responsibilities.

It's a process

The adaptation process has several stages.

1. The Honeymoon Phase. This is the euphoria you feel starting any new adventure. Everything is fascinating and exhilarating and the differences seem exotic and interesting.
2. The Rejection Phase. The honeymoon is over and culture shock has set in. You feel more confident and secure in your own culture and only want to associate with people who share our background.
3. The Recovery Phase. You're beginning to regain a sense of perspective and are making friends inside and outside the expat community. You're not rejecting the local culture anymore. Instead, you're starting to enjoy your new environment.
4. The Adjustment Phase. Everyday tasks and conversations have become easy and you're now comfortable and confident in the new country. You no longer feel like an outsider.
5. Reverse Culture Shock Phase. Reverse culture shock occurs when people return home after a long period away. As they had to adapt to a new country and culture, now they have to re-adapt to what was once home.

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What to expect

Moving across the country or around the world can cause homesickness, anxiety, loneliness, insecurity and irritability. It's also normal to have physical complaints and sleep difficulties, have trouble concentrating or develop negative feelings towards the host country and its culture.

While a degree of culture shock is to be expected, some people experience severe reactions that can damage both their professional and family lives. In fact, family issues are the leading reason for an expatriate's premature return home.

A common issue involves the challenges facing accompanying spouses. They have often left careers, families and friends and without the ability to work or opportunities to socialize, they may become isolated. Accompanying spouses must muster all their socializing skills to make new connections with locals and other expats.

Most people become comfortable in their new environment after about six to 12 months. However, there are some signs that may indicate you or your spouse is having more serious difficulties. These include:

- Deepening depression and anxiety
- Increasing anger and resentment
- Use of alcohol or drugs to cope
- Unwillingness to interact with other expats and locals
- Inability to concentrate and solve simple problems
- Fear of doing new things or go to new places

If these issues do not improve and become long-term, causing problems with relationships and impairing day-to-day functioning, contact your family physician or your EAP for assistance.

Children experience culture shock too

Kids often experience the same reactions as adults but have difficulty verbalizing their feelings. Watch for changes in behaviour – are they more irritable, aggressive, shy or clingy than usual? Is a normally happy child suddenly crying a lot or acting out? Are they frequently complaining of tummy aches or headaches? Encourage them to talk about what is bothering them and help them develop strategies to make friends and feel more comfortable.

Easing the transition

There are some things you can do to lessen the effects of culture shock on the family.

- Know what to expect. Before leaving, find out as much as possible about your future home. The more you know about the culture, the easier it will be for you to adjust. Have your child research their future home and school and talk about what to expect. Find some interesting places to go and activities to get involved with.
- Learn a few words and phrases. Not understanding the local language can be extremely stressful and isolating for adults and children alike. As a family, master a few words and phrases before arriving.
- Understand non-verbal communication such as facial expressions, hand gestures, etc. This can be just as important as spoken language in any culture. For example, in Brazil the okay sign (a circle with the thumb and forefinger) is considered a profanity.

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- Take treats. Kids can be fussy about food at the best of times. To help them adapt – and alleviate your own stress – take a box of favourite cereal or cookies to ease the stress of the few couple of weeks. Until children discover local treats, have friends and family send the occasional goodies from home.
- Make your child's new bedroom a haven. Make it as familiar as you can so he or she has a place to go when things feel overwhelming. If possible, bring some favourite toys, games and stuffed animals and paint the room the same colour.
- Get the whole family involved in the expat community. Meeting people who have been through similar experiences can be very helpful to you and your family.

Finally, be patient and maintain your sense of humour. With time, everyday tasks and conversations will become effortless and you'll no longer feel like outsiders. Everyone in the family will find a balance between living in a different culture while holding on to their own identity.

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