

What is Culture Shock?

“Culture shock” describes the impact of moving from a familiar culture to one which is unfamiliar. It is an experience described by people who have travelled abroad to work, live or study; it can be felt to a certain extent even when abroad on holiday. It can affect anyone. It includes the shock of a new environment, meeting lots of new people and learning the ways of a different country. It also includes the shock of being separated from the important people in your life, maybe family, friends, colleagues, teachers: people you would normally talk to at times of uncertainty, people who give you support and guidance. When familiar sights, sounds, smells or tastes are no longer there you can miss them very much. If you are tired and jet-lagged when you arrive small things can be upsetting and out of all proportion to their real significance.

What are the effects of culture shock?

Some of the symptoms of culture shock can be worrying themselves. For example, you may find your health is affected and you may get headaches or stomach aches or you may start worrying about your health more than previously. You may find it difficult to concentrate and as a result find it harder to focus on your course work. Other people find they become more irritable or tearful and generally their emotions seem more changeable. All of these effects can in themselves increase your anxiety.

How to help yourself:

- Most importantly: own up to your feelings and accept them. Believe that they will pass; they almost always do. In the meantime, there's nothing 'weak' or 'childish' about feeling homesick.
- Remember that many other people will have similar feelings, although you may assume that they are doing fine. (You can't read their minds- and they can't read yours!)
- Talk to someone. If you haven't yet made friends at your host university or work place, try speaking or emailing someone from your host university or employer, or perhaps contact the University of Exeter's student run listening service VOICE: +44 1392 275284.
- Use your phone. Text people. Send emails. Keep in touch with those you left behind and arrange a firm date to go back and see them. But also give yourself a chance to get involved in your new life.
- Keep busy. Try to establish a routine. The fuller your days are, the less time you will have to feel homesick or lonely.
- Make a real effort to join societies/activities. This might feel difficult, but there are so many clubs and societies within your host university (if you are completing a work placement you can join the Erasmus Network at your local university) and the city that you are very likely to find something that suits your particular interests. At the start of the new academic year many new people will be joining- so you are unlikely to be the only new person.

- Take advantage of all the help that is offered by your institution. In particular, the orientation programme offered by most universities, it can be a valuable way of meeting people and finding out things that can help you.
- Walk around. Explore your new surroundings.
- Don't expect to get everything right. You're bound to make mistakes, forget things, and get lost. The first few weeks are all about getting it wrong, wasting time, not understanding, feeling stupid. There will be plenty of time to catch up... after all, it's common for people to be off with flu for a few weeks and still get through the year successfully.
- Find a supplier of familiar food if you can. Your student advisor or a student society may be able to help. Eat a healthy and balanced diet.
- Take regular exercise. As well as being good for your health it can be a way of meeting people.
- Have familiar things around you that have personal meaning, such as photographs or ornaments.
- Don't make any major decisions. Even if you feel strongly that you don't want to stay, take your time and talk it over with others.

And if it's really bad.....

- If you can't sleep or eat properly see a doctor or contact the student health service at your host university.
- Decide whether the best policy is to have frequent contact with home (because contact makes you feel better) or little contact (because contact makes you feel worse). Think carefully about whether or not to go home during holidays, assuming this is an option. Some students find it helps to ease the transition; others find the constant readjustment just makes them feel worse.
- Stay in touch with the Erasmus office, we may be able to help or put you in touch with Exeter students in your area: Erasmus@exeter.ac.uk
- Ask yourself if you really want to be at this university or workplace, in this city, studying this particular subject, at this time. Most people get through bouts of homesickness and go on to enjoy university. But for some it can be right to leave and take another direction.

Finally....

It is important to stress that culture shock is entirely normal, usually unavoidable and not a sign that you have made a mistake or that you won't manage. In fact there are very positive aspects of culture shock. The experience can be a significant learning experience, making you more aware of aspects of your own culture as well as the new culture you have entered. It will give you valuable skills that will serve you in many ways now and in the future and which will be part of the benefit of an international education.

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