

## IWG Member support materials

### Culture shock: What is it and how to deal with it.

We recognise that moving abroad can be a very exciting experience, a new adventure in a new country, but equally it can also be a disorientating experience. Suddenly everything is new again and you might find yourself a stranger to the culture and customs that surround you.

The impact this change (the culture shock) can have on you can range from minimal to severe. It is important to be able to recognise what culture shock looks like and understand how to deal with it.

We have pulled together a brief guide to culture shock to explain what it is, how to recognise it and how to deal with it. This guide is meant as a brief introduction to the subject and hopefully you will find the summaries and links we have included useful.

### What is culture shock ?

Wikipedia defines culture shock as:

***Culture shock** is an experience a person may have when one moves to a cultural environment which is different from one's own; it is also the personal disorientation a person may feel when experiencing an unfamiliar way of life due to immigration or a visit to a new country, a move between social environments, or simply transition to another type of life. One of the most common causes of culture shock involves individuals in a foreign environment. Culture shock can be described as consisting of at least one of four distinct phases: honeymoon, frustration, adjustment, and mastery.*



([diagram credit](#))

The stages of culture shock are often depicted as a roller coaster with many ups and downs. It is important to remember that these ups and downs are perfectly normal, many of your friends will be going through / have gone through similar feelings so don't be reluctant to talk about these feelings.

It is also normal to slip back down into some of the lows, for example, using the diagram on the previous page you might feel that you are well on the way to accepting the new culture / country but then something will happen and you may find yourself back at the anxiety of adjustment stages. This is normal, don't worry about it!

Everyone will adjust to new surroundings at different speeds so you just need to work out where you are on the diagram and what it is that will help you get to the acceptance stage.

Your colleagues at IWG will be familiar with how you are feeling and might be able to give you some good ideas on how to take control of the feelings so you have way more ups than downs! Everyone will transition through the culture shock cycle at different paces.

### **What are the common symptoms of culture shock?**

Different people will experience culture shock in different ways, however here are some of the common symptoms to look out for.

#### **Physical symptoms**

- Fatigue, malaise
- Generalized aches and pains
- Increase in illness or accidents
- Excessive need for sleep or inability to sleep
- Overeating or lack of appetite/excessive dieting

#### **Psychological symptoms**

- Sadness
- Loneliness
- Homesickness
- Idealizing the home culture
- Stereotyping host culture nationals
- Dissatisfaction with life in general
- Loss of sense of humour
- Sense of isolation, withdrawal from society
- Overwhelming and irrational fears related to the host country
- Irritability, resentment
- Family conflict
- Loss of identity

- Feelings of inadequacy or insecurity
- Negative self-image
- Developing obsessions (health, cleanliness)
- Cognitive foginess, lack of concentration
- Depression

You might experience some or none of these, but it is important to understand and recognise **your** symptoms of culture shock so you can deal with them in the most effective way when they start to appear.

## How to deal with Culture Shock

So you know what culture shock is and what the symptoms can look like, so how do you deal with it? The most important thing to realize is that these feelings are completely normal, they are not a sign of weakness and talking about it will help. We have found a couple of good articles that will be able to give you some great tips on dealing with culture shock.

[Overcoming culture shock in a foreign country](#)

[Travel.gc.ca](#)

[Ten ways to deal with culture shock](#)



[diagram credit](#)

## Things you might not have expected

It is not just culture shock that can take a psychological toll on your life as an ex-pat. Once you are settled in your new country and have formed a new social circle you will face continuous change as people move in and move out of that social circle. It can seem that you are always saying goodbye to people and just when you thought things were settling down!

Here is a great article that talks about the seemingly constant transition of ex-pat relationships.

[the transition that never ends](#)

## **Reverse culture shock (Moving home)**

So, you are heading home after your international assignment(s), that is going to be straightforward....right? Maybe, maybe not is the unhelpful answer. While you might be excited to be returning to your home country you need to be aware that maybe things might not be as straightforward as you think. Reverse culture shock, as the term implies is the shock suffered by some people when they return home after a number of years overseas. This can result in unexpected difficulty in readjusting to the culture and values of the home country, now that the previously familiar has become unfamiliar.

So what does this look like?

Typical symptoms of reverse culture shock can include:

- Frustration.
- Boredom.
- Restlessness.
- Change in values, goals, priorities, and attitudes.
- Feelings of isolation or depression.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Reverse Homesickness (missing people and places from abroad)
- Negativity towards your native culture.

The challenges of reverse culture shock can include:

- People at home aren't as interested in hearing your stories about "When I was in" as you are in telling them.
- You aren't as interested in hearing about what has happened at home as they are in telling you about it.
- It feels like nothing at home has changed, but you have.
- You miss being abroad.
- You miss cultural richness and diversity of your ex-pat social circle

Here are a couple of articles / blogs that talk about reverse culture shock and give some tips on how to deal with it

<http://thehappypassport.com/reverse-culture-shock/>

<http://blog.apiabroad.com/reentry/reverse-culture-shock/>

[10 tips for repatriating with dignity](#)

**Further reading / articles**

<http://matadornetwork.com/notebook/8-things-can-help-partner-deal-culture-shock/>

<http://blogs.wsj.com/expat/2016/02/23/strategies-for-coping-as-an-unhappy-expat/>

<https://globetrotterstravel.wordpress.com/2011/08/31/the-complete-guide-to-culture-shock-for-students-abroad/>

[http://moving.about.com/od/internationalmoves/a/culture\\_shock.htm](http://moving.about.com/od/internationalmoves/a/culture_shock.htm)