CULTURE SHOCK AND HOMESICKNESS

Culture Shock
Living and studying abroad is an exciting and enriching opportunity. However, the ways in which you view the world and the views, values and customs of people of other cultures may be vastly different. Culture shock is the stress of the psychological disorientation experienced living in a culture different than your own. Symptoms of culture shock may include the following: discomfort, irritability, homesickness, hostility towards the host culture, frustration, and other physical symptoms of stress. Culture shock has identifiable cycles. They are as follows.

Stage One: Initial euphoria – “It’s great to be here! Look at how much our cultures have in common!”
Possible clues- excitement with new sounds and sights; superficial involvement (like a tourist); intrigue with both similarities and differences between host and U.S. culture; high interest in learning; high motivation; cooperative spirit; feeling that with time patience, and hard work he/she can handle anything.

Stage Two: Irritation and hostility - “Why are they so different? Why can’t I do anything right?”
Possible clues- novelty has worn off; cultural differences begin to intrude; greater involvement in petty personal problems; some prejudices develop against host nationals and the culture is seen as strange; isolation; searching out friends from home culture; uncooperativeness; helplessness and frustration; nostalgia for home country.

Stage Three: Gradual adjustment - Reorientation into the host culture’s norms.
Possible clues- greater participation in culture with a sense of humor; acceptance of some values of the new culture; feeling that “if I am here, better make the most of it”; tempering of radical feelings towards the new culture; feeling of being at home; more pride in work and the ability to communicate; periodic personal highs and lows as adjustment gradually takes place.

Stage Four: Adaptation/Biculturalism- Learning to live in and feel comfortable in another culture.

Here are some strategies to help you cope with culture shock:
- Know the culture prior to living there. Find out all you can. Talk with people from that culture if possible. Talk with returned study abroad students who have lived there.
- Be curious. Explore the values and traditions behind the cultural behaviors.
- Bring familiar items from home- things that make you feel most comfortable.
- Have a sense of humor! You will be making lots of mistakes and it is ok!
- Set realistic goals for yourself. Attempting to be perfect is a sure way to increase your frustration. Also, have the ability to tolerate failure and ambiguity.

Homesickness
Almost everyone experiences some degree of homesickness and it is completely normal. The important thing to remember is to dealing with these feelings so that they do not hinder your experience abroad. Here are a few tips you can use to help combat feelings of homesickness.

Take a piece of home with you
Take pictures of your family, friends, and pets. If you have a poster that you always hang on you wall, take it with you.
Stay in touch with the people you miss
While phone calls are expensive, e-mail, Skype, Whatsapp, Textme and personal blogs are fast and usually free. Corresponding with your family and friends will help everyone keep up to date with the new things in your life.

Remember that it is worth it
Do not forget that you are in the middle of a wonderful opportunity. If you find yourself counting down the days you have left, look at the other side of the coin — "Wow! I have been here for two whole months! It is half over and there are so many things I have left to do!" Go and explore your new surroundings. There are people to meet, places to go and things to see.

Fitting In
Social customs differ greatly from one country to another. It is, therefore, impossible to give guidelines that will be applicable in every culture. Generally speaking, you can be yourself as long as you remain friendly, courteous, and dignified. Always keep in mind that you are the guest in someone else's country. Therefore, you would be safe to assume that your behavior should be regulated pretty much in the same manner as if you were the guest in someone else's home. On the other hand, as an outsider, especially if you are on the side of being respectful, some allowances are likely to be made for the things you do not immediately understand or feel comfortable with.

Politeness
In keeping with the relatively formal manner of social customs abroad, you should place much more emphasis on the simple niceties of polite social interactions than you might at home. Be prepared to offer a formal word of greeting to whomever you meet in your day-to-day activities. For example, should you approach a clerk in the local market in Strasbourg always be courteous enough to begin your conversation with, “Bonjour, Madame (Monsieur, Mademoiselle)” before you launch into your inquiries about the products, and become familiar with the appropriate expressions of gratitude in response to your hosts' hospitality.

Humor
While each country has its own particular brand of wit and humor, very few of cultures appreciate the kind of “kidding” to which Americans are accustomed. Comments, even when intended to be humorous, can often be taken quite literally.

Speaking the language
When it comes to language, most people will be extremely flattered, rather than amused at your effort to communicate in their native language. Do not be intimidated or inhibited when practicing your own limited command of the language. A couple of words of caution might be in order: do your best to avoid slang expressions, which are usually unique to the particular culture, and which may, therefore, be totally meaningless or inappropriate in the context of another culture. Be aware of the differences between the “familiar” and the “polite” forms of address and be sure to use them properly.

Do not try to translate American idiomatic expressions directly into the native language. Idioms as a whole may be complete nonsense when translated into another language. While it is not true that all people speak English, it is true enough for you to be wary of making impolite or tactless comments on the presumption that those within hearing distance will not understand what you are saying.

Physical Contact
When establishing social relationships “play it by ear” in determining the level of familiarity that you should adopt at the various stages of your relationships. Physical contact, for example, may not be especially appreciated or understood by someone unfamiliar with the American idea of camaraderie; a cheerful pat on the back or a warm hug may be quite embarrassing and uncomfortable in certain cultures. All cultures have different notions about social space, for instance, how far away to stand or sit when conversing, or how to shake hands or wave farewell. Restraint is advisable until you learn how the locals do it and what they expect of you.

**Personal Questions**
Let your hosts point the way when engaging in “small talk.” While American may find it easy and quite appropriate to talk about themselves, in some countries, your hosts may view this as being as impolite as asking personal questions of them. On the other hand, don’t be surprised if you are asked very personal questions in some of the places you go (you’re your plans for marriage, children, how much money you make, how much it costs to go to school, etc.).

**Drinking and Drunkenness**
Be extremely sensitive of others’ attitudes and feelings when it comes to drinking. You will probably find that your hosts enjoy social drinking as much as any American, but they might not look upon drunkenness as either amusing, or indeed, tolerable.

**Talking Politics**
Expect people abroad to be very articulate and well informed when it comes to matters of politics and international relations. Do not be at all surprised if your counterparts try to engage you in political debate. There is certainly no reason for you to modify your own convictions, but you should be discreet and rational in your defense of those convictions. Here again, you may very well find yourself butting heads with another of those unfortunate stereotypes, such as the arrogant American who thinks everyone must fall in line with the United States.

**Photography Etiquette** You may want to record many of your memories with photos and it is often convenient to include some of the local populace in your photographs. However, remember that the people you ‘shoot’ are human beings and not curiosity objects. Be tactful and discreet in how you approach photographing strangers; it is always courteous and wise to ask permission before taking someone’s picture.

**GENERAL TIPS FOR SUCCESS ABROAD**

- **Make an effort to communicate.** People will appreciate your questions and your effort to participate in their customs. They would prefer that you make mistakes rather than remain silent in fear, which can often be perceived as coldness. Your efforts to communicate are likely to overshadow your “accent” and your errors, and the more you speak, the more you will improve.

- **Don’t get frustrated.** For many students, one of the goals of traveling abroad is to improve their foreign language skills. Language learning can often be frustrating and embarrassing, but you should remember that the more attempts you make, the more often you’ll succeed. Attempting
to speak the language will bring you closer to the people of your host country and open up opportunities to experience your host country more fully.

• **Get involved to make local friends.** The shared experience of study abroad will bring you close to other U.S. students, but can also keep you from meeting people from the culture where you are living. It is important to have people to talk with who can relate to the experience you are having, but getting to know people from your new country will make your experience richer, and could result in life-long friendships.

Making local friends can initially be one of the most difficult aspects of living abroad. Eventually, it will also be one of the most rewarding. Returned students suggest getting involved: volunteering, joining clubs or sports, visiting dance clubs and cafes, etc. Often a shared interest (live music, photography, dance) can help bridge seemingly insurmountable communication barriers. Be prepared to take the initiative and to be friendly. You may make friends at the bus stop, grocery store, gym, etc.

• **Leave your life in the U.S. in the U.S.**
  This has become increasingly more difficult in the era of cell-phones, e-mail, Facebook and instant messaging. However, you should try to minimize your contact with your social life here in the States. Every hour that you spend communicating with people back at home or school is irreplaceable time that you have lost abroad. This may be difficult, but most people will understand that you have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to live in another country, and will appreciate the information that you do provide.

Instead of checking e-mail/Facebook/Twitter/Instragram/etc. daily, think about checking it twice or even once a week. Think about writing a “Florence Journal,” or “London Notes,” that you can send back to a group of friends and family via e-mail once every week or ten days (or even better, post to a personal blog). This will cut down on the time you spend communicating with and thinking about the U.S., and also help you have a journal of your time abroad.

A weekly scheduled phone call home should do the trick as well. It will give you and your family something to look forward to, and also help you build up a week’s worth of stories and questions.

“I spent two or three – sometimes four – hours a day IMing with my friends back home while I was in France, and I began to realize that I wasn’t making as much progress in the language as some of my friends, and didn’t have that close a relationship with my host family. It was expensive, too! I now wish that I had spent less time on the computer, and more time getting to know France, because when I got home, things were pretty much the same, and I wondered what I had missed in France.”

• **Prepare!**
  Learn about yourself, learn about the country and city that you will be going to, and learn about your own country. You will find that people abroad know a surprising amount about the United States. In general, young people abroad are much more politically aware and active, so you should be prepared for many questions about U.S. politics, history, and foreign policy. A good way to prepare is to begin reading the *New York Times* or *Boston Globe* on-line – you can sign up
to receive a free email or text alerts of the daily headlines.

Whether you agree with the policies of our government or not, you will be seen as “the American” and will be put into the position of being an ambassador for our country. You should know the names of our government officials and be up-to-speed on U.S. foreign policy, especially as it relates to the country or region that you are going to.

You may be faced with some anti-American feelings. If so, try to remain calm and honest in your reactions. You may also confront certain stereotypes of the “American.” Try to be open and not hostile in your reaction, so that you engage in dialogue and not argument.

Final Suggestions for Overcoming Culture Shock

- Try to resolve family and personal problems before leaving.
- Learn as much as possible about your new culture before you go.
- Be a good observer: listen and look non-judgmentally.
- Take care of your physical and emotional health.
  Exhaustion or illness makes coping all the more difficult.
- Be good to yourself.
- Keep a journal.
- Communicate with your host family, program director, and other students.
- Don’t be afraid to ask questions and resolve issues that arise.

Most of all, have fun and make your new culture part of who you are. Get out and go to museums, the opera, a soccer (or fútbol/calico) game. Take a walk by yourself, observe, explore a new part of town. Read a book at an outdoor cafe, or just sit back and people watch. Write everything down in a journal so you can reread it in six months or twenty years.

In conclusion, although culture shock can be painful, overcoming it provides a valuable opportunity for personal growth. It is a mind-stretching process that will leave you with a broader perspective and wider tolerance for others and others’ ways of life.