

Overcoming Culture Shock in the United States

A silhouette of a runner in a starting crouch on a track, positioned to the left of the text.


International Student Affairs
Office of Student Leadership and Civic Engagement

The American Society and Culture: A brief overview

It is not easy to make generalizations about the United States – above all, it is a land of diversity. The size of the country, its geographic and climate differences, and the ethnic mix of its people all contribute to its variety. Still, there are a few characteristics you will encounter in “typical” Americans from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Some Typical Characteristics of the Americans

- ◆ Americans tend to value their individuality, to think themselves the equal of any other man or woman, and to believe they are masters of their own destiny. They are direct in their communications; they ask questions when they need information; they say “no” when they mean no.
- ◆ Americans appear open and friendly at first meeting, but this means only that they are pleased to make your acquaintance; it may or may not lead to true friendship.
- ◆ They are informal; they often introduce themselves by their first names and call others by their first names on very slight acquaintance.
- ◆ Americans tend to stand at least an arm’s length apart when conversing and are not inclined to touch one another, except to shake hands upon greeting one another.
- ◆ They value privacy and rarely visit, even good friends, without telephoning first.

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- ◆ On appointments and punctuality – it is always appropriate to make an appointment before visiting someone, particularly at an office. It is best to be on time for appointments.
 - ◆ On invitations – if you accept an invitation or make an appointment, it is very important that you appear as promised since your hosts will have taken considerable trouble to prepare for your visit, and professional people will have arranged their schedules to accommodate you. It is perfectly acceptable to decline an invitation if it is not convenient for you, but some response is always called for.
 - ◆ On dietary restrictions – if health or religious beliefs restrict the foods that you can eat, you should feel free to explain this when you accept an invitation to visit.

- ✦ On cultural diversity – the U.S. is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world. This cultural diversity stems from having a steady flow of immigration from different parts of the world for over 150 years, which contributed to the already existing culture.
- ✦ The 2000 statistics based from the U.S. Census shows that 11% of people living in the U.S. are foreign born and 18% of households speak a language other than English at home.
- ✦ The largest groups of immigrants in the last ten years have been from: Mexico (25%, nearly 2 million); the Caribbean (11%, 836,200); China/Hong Kong/Taiwan (6.6%, 501,000); South America (5.8%, 443,000); Philippines (5.7%, 432,100); Central America (5.5%, 422,200); India (4%; 311,100) and Middle East/Central Asia (3.6%, 274,000).
- ✦ The Latin American community in the U.S., which includes immigrants and U.S. native-born descendants, has become the largest minority group with over 35 million people (13.5%), followed closely by the African-American community with 34 million people (13.1%).

What is culture shock?

- ✦ A condition of disorientation affecting someone who is suddenly exposed to an unfamiliar culture or way of life or set of attitudes;
- ✦ Culture shock is a term used to describe the anxiety and feelings (of surprise, disorientation, confusion, etc.) felt when people have to operate within an entirely different cultural or social environment, such as a foreign country. ...

Coming into a foreign country: Different Stages

1. At first you are excited by the new environment and a few frustrations do not spoil your enthusiasm. When experiencing some difficulties with simple things like, for instance, making telephone calls, or using public transport, you tend to down-play negative emotions.
2. A period in which cultural differences in behavior and values become more obvious. What previously seemed exciting, new and challenging is now merely frustrating. You may feel isolated and become withdrawn from life around you. You seek security in the familiar. Food from home, possibly even what you never particularly enjoyed, becomes a focus, maybe an obsession.

3. In the next stage you may reject what is around you, perhaps becoming opinionated and negative. You may feel that everyone is against you and that nobody understands you. Limpet-like you cling to other students from your home country, hoping to have your negative stereotypes of the Americans and life in the U.S. reinforced. However, you are beginning to re-assert yourself.
4. Based on your successes in negotiating a variety of social situations and, maybe, increased language skills, your self-esteem grows. You can accept the negative differences and tolerate them. Knowing that you cannot change your surroundings you now enjoy certain aspects of British culture and feel relieved and strengthened from having overcome the difficulties. You may even feel a sense of belonging.

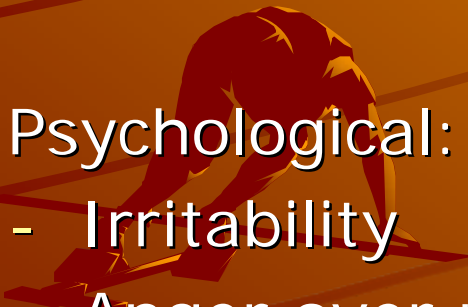
Symptoms of Culture Shock

Physical Symptoms:

- Headache
- Lethargy
- Sleep problems
- Loss of appetite
- Digestive irregularities

Psychological:

- Irritability
- Anger over minor frustrations
- Confusion about morals and values
- Feeling moody, isolated and insecure



Preparing for Culture Shock

- ✦ Read some information about living and studying in the U.S.;
- ✦ Get in touch with someone you know who lives or studies in the U.S. and ask him/her some tips or pieces of advice about living in the U.S.;
- ✦ Read all the pre-departure literature sent to you by your academic department;
- ✦ Email the Office of International Students Office and Scholars for information if you are unsure about anything;
- ✦ Before leaving home, try and find out some social survival skills: how to address people in different social groups; how gender roles affect social relationships; what constitutes acceptable behavior in a range of everyday situations; how gestures and body language differ from your country's



How to Overcome Culture Shock

1. Keep an open mind and do not automatically perceive anything that is different to be "wrong" or "negative". Withholding judgment will allow you to be an objective observer and will facilitate the process of cross-cultural understanding.
2. Do not assume or interpret behavior from your own cultural perspective or "filter". Behavior is not data. For example, Americans often use the phrase "How are you?" to mean "hello" or "I acknowledge your presence as I pass you in the hall." A foreigner may wonder why Americans don't respond in detail to this question about one's well-being. Thus they may interpret the behavior of walking away before one has a chance to respond to the question to be "uncaring", "superficial" or even "rude". An American knows otherwise and would probably not be offended that someone did not take the time to respond to this question.

3. Make sure to get to know people in your new environment, respectfully ask questions, read newspapers, and attend a variety of festivals and events. When one experiences culture shock it is natural to resort to withdrawing to the comfort of what is familiar. Spending a lot of time communicating with friends back home can exacerbate homesickness and delay the acculturation process.

4. Take a break from studying and take part in social activities. NSU offers a lot of social events organized by the different departments like the Office of Student Leadership and Civic Engagement – Graduate Assistant for International Student Affairs.

5. Ask questions about social customs from people with whom you feel comfortable. You will always find someone who will assist you in finding out about life in the U.S. This can be a two-way exchange, with you telling people about life in your home country.
6. Keep in touch with your own culture. Contact the Graduate Assistant for International Student Affairs for information about international students who may have come from your country.
7. Help to reduce stress on your body by keeping fit physically.



8. If you are feeling very low, talk to someone about it. This could be your fellow students, your landlord, or university staff from the Office of International Students or the Graduate Assistant for International Student Affairs.
9. Write down things you like and do not like. Can you change them? If not, perhaps you can find a way of living with them.
10. Maintain a sense of humor! Don't be too hard on yourself if you make a cultural gaffe or don't know what to do in a social situation. Laugh at yourself and others will laugh with you. Most individuals will admire your tenacity and effort to understand their ways, especially if you are devoid of judgment and cultural comparisons that subtlety and perhaps unconsciously convey a veil of superiority.

Sources

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