

Culture shock

Culture shock, though not always as dramatic as the term might imply, is a perfectly normal and temporary reaction when adjusting to a new culture. Not everyone experiences a cultural shock. However, for some people the shock may be quite severe while for others it is easier to cope with.

When living and studying in a new culture, the integration period may be quite long. Surrounded by new people, habits, values and a new environment, one is constantly receiving new information, so it is quite common to feel a bit out of place. Individual expectations affect how one reacts to a new country, so try to be open-minded.

Culture shock is not entirely a negative phase to go through. It can be a significant learning experience, after which you are more aware of aspects of your own culture as well as the new culture you have entered.

However, realizing that you may suffer from culture shock when studying or working abroad, and recognizing the symptoms will help you to cope with it better. Common symptoms include homesickness, depression, concentration difficulties and irritability. This emotional state can also have physical symptoms such as nausea, insomnia and loss of appetite.

Stages of adaptation

When you are experiencing culture shock there are four basic identifiable stages of adaptation. Not everyone goes through these exact stages, but it is quite common to experience similar feelings when dealing with the positive as well as the negative aspects of a new culture.

1. Euphoria

The new environment is exciting and you are enthusiastic and curious about the new country and its culture. Your own home culture with its habits is still fresh and active in your mind.

2. Conflict

Feelings of isolation and loneliness are common as you become more aware of the cultural differences. They seem more obvious and may be frustrating. Familiar things, such as food from home and being with other students from your own country, offer comfort and security. You might reject everything around you and feel hostility towards the new culture. Comparing this new culture to your own is common and many things seem to be much better at home.

3. Gradual recovery

You accept the differences and similarities as you become more familiar with the new culture and new situations. You may feel relaxed and more confident in dealing with different aspects of the new culture.

4. Acceptance

As you become more involved in different social activities and get to know the people and places around you better, you will adapt to the new culture and develop a sense of belonging. You may not even realize how well you have adjusted to the new culture until you return to your home country. Then you may experience reverse culture shock.

5. Coping

When you are experiencing culture shock it is important that you deal with it in a constructive way. Since you find yourself in the middle of strange surroundings and people you do not know, it is essential that you pursue a "normal life". Explore your new surroundings and locate useful places such as the post office, shopping facilities or a bank. Get settled in your accommodation and make it cosy. Introduce yourself to your neighbours and fellow students or researchers. Other newcomers are in the same situation and you can support each other. Make the best of your visit by getting to know Swiss people as well. Take part in different social activities organized by your colleagues. If you are having a hard time coping in the new environment, do not hesitate to talk about it with friends, colleagues, your tutor or your supervisor. Talk to your family and keep in touch with your friends back home. If you feel that you need professional help, please contact the local representative of the "Personalvertretung" (Staff Trade Union), who is there to support you and to guide you to the right people within or outside Empa.

Have an open and curious mind!

If the Swiss social customs puzzle you, do not be afraid to ask questions and get to know the culture, habits and values of the country better. Also keep in touch with your own culture. Throughout this period of cultural adaptation, remember to take good care of yourself. Adapting to a new country, culture and social customs can sometimes be a complex and difficult process, but the whole experience of a culture shock is rewarding and enriching in the end.

Relax and fully enjoy your time at Empa!