What Is Culture Shock?

Culture shock refers to feelings of uncertainty, confusion, or anxiety that people may experience when moving to a new country or experiencing a new culture or surroundings. This cultural adjustment is normal and is the result of being in an unfamiliar environment.

Culture shock can occur when people move to another city or country, such as when retiring abroad. Culture shock can also occur when people go on vacation, travel in retirement or for business, or study abroad for school. For example, international students studying abroad for a semester in another country may experience a cultural adjustment due to an unfamiliarity with the weather, local customs, language, food, and values.

Although the timing of each person's adjustment process can be different, there are specific phases that most people go through before they adjust to their new environment. Culture shock can be quite stressful and lead to anxiety. However, it's possible to overcome it and grow as a result.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Culture shock refers to feelings of uncertainty, confusion, or anxiety that people may experience when moving to a new country or surroundings.

Culture shock can occur when people move to a new city or country, go on vacation, travel abroad, or study abroad for school.

A cultural adjustment is normal and is the result of being in an unfamiliar environment.

Culture shock is typically divided into four stages: the honeymoon, frustration, adaptation, and acceptance stage.

Over time, people can become familiar with their new surroundings as they make new friends and learn the customs, leading to an appreciation of the culture.

Understanding Culture Shock

Culture shock occurs when an individual leaves the comfort of their home and familiar surroundings and moves to an unfamiliar environment. The adjustment period can be fairly intense, particularly if the two locations are completely different, such as going from a small rural area to a large metropolis or moving to another country. People can also experience culture shock when moving from one place to another within the same country.

Typically, no single event causes culture shock, nor does it occur suddenly or without reason. Instead, it gradually builds from a series of incidents, and culture shock can be difficult to identify while struggling with it.

2

The feeling is particularly intense at the beginning and can be tough to overcome. It's important to remember that the cultural adjustment usually dissipates over time as a person becomes more familiar with a place, the people, customs, food, and language. As a result, navigation of surroundings gets easier, friends are made, and everything becomes more comfortable.

The adjustment process due to culture shock can get better over time, leading to growth and an appreciation of the new environment.

Symptoms of Culture Shock

Culture shock can produce a range of symptoms, which can vary greatly from person to person in terms of scope and intensity. These may include:

3

Being homesick

Feeling helpless

Feeling isolated

Disorientation

Lack of concentration

Irritability

Sadness

Sleep or eating disturbances

Paranoia

The 4 Stages of Culture Shock

People who experience culture shock may go through four phases that are explained below.

The Honeymoon Stage

The first stage is commonly referred to as the honeymoon phase. That's because people are thrilled to be in their new environment. They often see it as an adventure. If someone is on a short stay, this initial excitement may define the entire experience. However, the honeymoon phase for those on a longer-term move eventually ends, even though people expect it to last.

1

The Frustration Stage

People may become increasingly irritated and disoriented as the initial glee of being in a new environment wears off. Fatigue may gradually set in, which can result from misunderstanding other people's actions, conversations, and ways of doing things.

As a result, people can feel overwhelmed by a new culture at this stage, particularly if there is a language barrier. Local habits can also become increasingly challenging, and previously easy tasks can take longer to accomplish, leading to exhaustion.

Some of the symptoms of culture shock can include:

1

Frustration

Irritability

Homesickness

Depression

Feeling lost and out of place

Fatigue

The inability to effectively communicate—interpreting what others mean and making oneself understood—is usually the prime source of frustration. This stage can be the most difficult period of cultural adjustment as some people may feel the urge to withdraw.

2

For example, international students adjusting to life in the United States during study abroad programs can feel angry and anxious, leading to withdrawal from new friends. Some experience eating and sleeping disorders during this stage and may contemplate going home early.