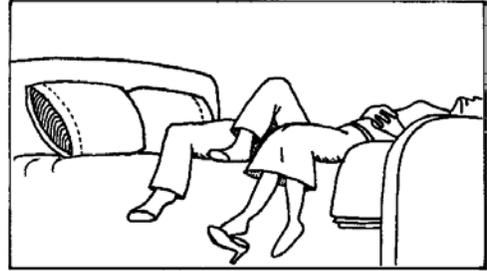


What Is *Culture Shock*?

Most people think of *culture shock* in psychological terms, which allows them to view it as a mental inadequacy. This explains why some people claim that culture shock never affects them. Actually, culture shock is the *exhaustion* resulting from the extra effort, mostly mental and emotional, needed to live ordinary daily life in an environment that is full of novelty.



Culture shock in action

By "full of novelty," I refer to the hundreds of small differences between the way they lived life back home and the way they must live it abroad. No one of these "trivial" differences, in itself, would throw anyone off stride. But hundreds of small differences, occurring repeatedly during one's daily routine, day after day, week after week. . .well, that's another matter.

For example, there are subtle differences in nonverbal behavior, including not only gestures and use of voice and eyes but also how people dress and groom, that need to be interpreted. There are matters of etiquette and business practice to be noticed and adopted. There are subtle differences in values and sensibilities that need to be inferred from personal interactions. There's the need to build personal relationships with local nationals -- but exactly how? There's the need to hold yourself in check while trying to figure out if you've been insulted. There are new foods to become familiar with, new transportation options to master, new expectations in relation to bosses, subordinates, neighbors, children, shopkeepers, civil servants. . . .

The mental and emotional effort required to notice, figure out, and respond to myriad minor differences, morning till night day after day, has a cumulative physiological effect over time (as does any kind of long-term stressful situation). The result is a gradual increase in exhaustion, which in turn is debilitating to one's immune system. It is known, for example, that one's white blood cell count lowers, and it is white blood cells that defend against disease. Many expatriates become ill four to eight weeks after arriving in an unfamiliar culture, and many do not get well soon. Their body is too tired out to recover quickly from whatever illness has felled them.

The remedy? Since culture shock is, above all, cumulative *physiological*/exhaustion, the single best way to counteract its effects is simply to get more rest. That means not only sleep but also relaxing "down time" and enjoyable activities with friends -- friends, by the way, from your own home culture because being with them involves much that's familiar and little that's novel.

Additional Information about Stress

In addition to the psychological aspects of stress – feeling as though you've lost control – stress evokes a physiological response. When under stress, the body....

- mobilizes stored energy (you need more)
- increases the heart rate (to increase energy)
- activates the immune system (to ward off illness)
- limits blood to nonessential systems (so the brain and muscles can have it)
- sharpens senses, cognition and memory (so you can better notice and process information)

When the stress is long-term and constant, as it often is when adjusting to a new culture, people are likely to experience general fatigue, irritable bowel syndrome, susceptibility to disease and chronic conditions, disturbed sexual functioning or menstruation, depression, irritability, anxiety, and "burn-out." The term *culture shock* designates these psychological and physiological effects of stress.

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