

Culture Shock—Recognizing and Overcoming

(Adapted primarily from Thomas Hale's *On Being A Missionary*)

Definitions of Culture Shock

1. *Culture shock is when you experience frustration from not knowing the rules or having the skills for adjusting to a new culture. (Duane Elmer, Cross-Cultural Connections)*
2. *Culture shock is the disorientation we experience when all the cultural maps and guidelines we learned as children no longer work. (Paul G. Hiebert, Anthropological Insights for Missionaries)*
3. *Culture shock is primarily a sense of disorientation, together with the uneasiness and anxiety that such disorientation produces. (Thomas Hale, On Being A Missionary)*

Symptoms:

1. **Fatigue**
2. **Discouragement, depression.** "The more we sense we're failing and the more we compare ourselves to others, the more we shall become discouraged.
3. **Critical spirit** (often of nationals and the country you are serving in). "If only they'd...Our critical spirit may spill over onto our mission leaders or other colleagues."
4. **Feeling of guilt** ("...that the over-consumption in [your] own country is somehow responsible for the poverty of the country [you] have come to.")
5. **Pessimism.** "You look at the need around you and think, 'My contribution is a drop in the bucket; it's worthless.'...Those five loaves and two fish were only 'drops,' but Jesus used them to feed five thousand men and their families."
6. **Self-pity.** "The best cure for that is to remember that Jesus was unappreciated too. He didn't come to get appreciation, and neither did we. Our job is to follow where Jesus leads, to love, and to expect nothing in return."

Timing:

"Culture shock often begins to take hold in earnest six to eight months after [your] arrival on the field, at which time the initial romance and excitement of the new country has mostly worn off and [you are] trying to set up house and get into the work. The language is coming slowly; [you have] already had seven bouts with dysentery. [You don't] like the food. There are inconveniences and problems at every turn. [You think]: 'Three (or thirty) more years of this!'"

Overcoming culture shock:

Many new arrivals to the field have the misconception that they can protect themselves from culture shock in the early days by minimizing their involvement with the host people. For most, however, this is unwise; because in the long run the best way to overcome culture shock is to expose oneself to the culture and the people. Sooner or later, if one is to feel comfortable in—and ideally to enjoy—the host culture, one must more and more reach out, make friends, and adapt, adapt, adapt...we must at all costs prevent a 'we-and-they' mentality from taking root. If it does, we shall always be only foreigners, visitors, guests...we want to be friends, colleagues, partners, and equals with the national people.

Practical ways to overcome culture shock:

1. **Recognize it. It's normal. You will survive it.** You will simply get used to the things that shocked you at first. Some things take more getting used to than others, but in the end you'll say: 'It was no big deal.'
2. **Pray earnestly for God's grace and enabling.** The struggles you are facing are not only cultural; they are also spiritual.
3. **Determine that in all but ethical and religious matters you are going to adapt to the nationals;** you adapt to them, not they to you. Cultivate a positive attitude; don't adapt grudgingly. Look for the good things in their culture; there will be many.
4. **Go out of your way to make a circle of friends...**The more national friends you make, the more at home you're going to feel in their culture, and the more opportunities for witness you are going to find.
5. **Put yourself in the nationals' shoes...**Try to see things through their eyes. Think about their needs, their limitations, their aspirations. They are not happy with many things in their own culture...Don't complain; understand.
6. **Cultivate an attitude of exploration, of adventure.** Be willing to try new things, new foods.
7. **(Included with caution) Maintain close links with your fellow missionaries.** It is not a cure for culture shock, but periodically we need the refreshment, encouragement, and counsel that can best come from those of our own culture. In addition, it is perfectly normal to enjoy other reminders of our home culture: favourite household objects, old family traditions, familiar toys for the kids.
(the danger): Retreating back into our own cultural milieu, however, can become habitual; this is its danger. We come to rely more and more on the people and things of our own culture, and thus become more and more isolated from the people we've come to serve. Retreating in this way may shield us from culture shock for a time, but in the end it will prolong our adaptation, and may, in fact, prevent us from ever making deep contact with the people.
8. **Don't take yourself too seriously.** Learn to laugh at yourself.

We need to understand and be patient with each other. While bad carpentry may get to one person, something else will get to you—something that wouldn't in the slightest bother anyone else. We must resist the temptation to label another person "unspiritual" simply because he is vulnerable to a particular irritation...Of course, people at home have irritations too. The only difference is, really, that irritations on the mission field are ten times greater, both in variety and in intensity. It's all part of this thing we call culture shock.

To read more excerpts from *On Being A Missionary*, go to

http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=MvKBxsAlyZ4C&q=culture+shock&source=gbs_word_cloud_r&cad=5#v=snippet&q=culture%20shock&f=false