

## Understanding culture stress

### Coping with culture shock

by Howard Culbertson

***Globalization: Survival skills for missionaries, foreign exchange students and others working to weather cultural shock as they bridge cultural differences***

The term "culture shock" was coined by Kalvero Oberg in 1954. It's a good label for the psychological experience of adults during the time of cultural adjustment that accompanies a period of cultural socialization or acculturation (which is different from the enculturation process experienced by children). The cultural adjustment period usually includes some disorientation brought on by such things as being confused as to where the cultural boundaries are.

The confusion and anxiety brought on by culture stress or shock may cause us to think, do or say things that are contrary to God's purpose.

This non-animated diagram illustrates two paths that one can take in cross-cultural encounters.

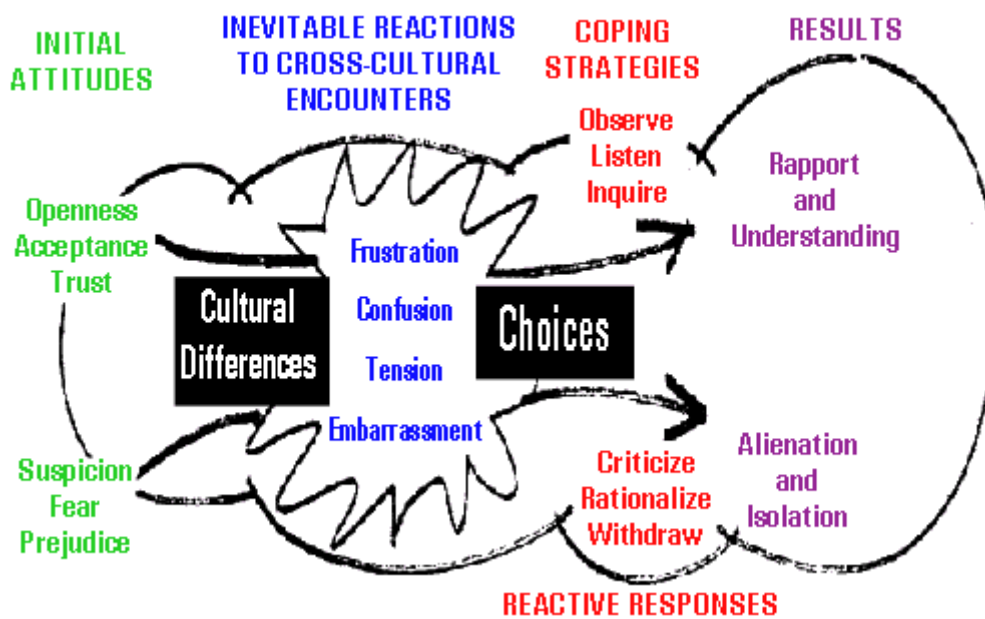


Diagram is used by permission from Duane Elmer's *Cross-Cultural Connections* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 72).

#### **Symptoms of culture shock:**

- Unwarranted criticism of the culture and people
- Heightened irritability
- Constant complaints about the climate
- Continual offering of excuses for staying indoors
- Utopian ideas concerning one's previous culture
- Continuous concern about the purity of water and food
- Fear of touching local people
- Refusal to learn the language

- Preoccupation about being robbed or cheated
- Pressing desire to talk with people who "really make sense."
- Preoccupation with returning home

### ***Stages most people go through in adjusting to a new culture***

1. **Fun:** The excitement and adventure of experiencing new people, things, and opportunities.
2. **Flight:** Disorientation brings the urge to avoid everything and everyone that is different.
3. **Fight:** The temptation to judge people and things that are different as bad or foolish.
4. **Fit:** Creative interaction with the new culture that includes a willingness to understand and embrace.

### ***Coping strategy for culture shock: Survival techniques***

How can we cope with culture shock? Having some information about culture shock is a first important step. Attempting to distance ourselves from ethnocentric perspectives will help. Then, to successfully cope, make sure your attitudes mirror those suggested in green and red in the top half of the diagram. As you work through cultural socialization, follow these tips on surviving situations where you are unfamiliar with verbal and non-verbal codes:

#### **Focus on what you can control.**

When we are suffering from culture shock, we usually feel out of control. So, don't spend energy on things you cannot change.

#### **Don't invest major energy in minor problems.**

We make "mountains out of molehills" even more quickly in cross-cultural situations than we do in our own culture.

#### **Tackle major stressors head on.**

Don't avoid things.

#### **Ask for help.**

Create a wide support network as quickly as you can in your target culture. This can include expatriates like yourself as well as people of the local culture.

#### **Write it down.**

Record your thoughts and frustrations in a journal. This will give you a healthy outlet for expressing your feelings.

Knowing how to survive culture shock or stress can be useful to missionaries as well as to aiding foreign students who come to our country to study.

### ***Help from the Bible***

Can Scripture help us with cross-cultural adjustment? Well, the book of Acts would be a good place to start in looking for examples of cultural adjustment or socialization. Paul, who grew up in modern-day Turkey and then was educated in Jerusalem, moved around the Mediterranean planting churches in different cultural contexts. To the Philippians he wrote: "I learned to be content whatever the circumstances." (Philippians 4:11). As Paul coped with various cultural issues, he was

also dogged by Jewish Christians from Israel who tried to force Gentile converts to become Jewish (in which case Christianity would have been a mono-cultural movement).

Another Biblical event to look at would be the story of Ruth. Here's a young woman who left her home country and culture and moved to Israel and wound up ultimately being in the list of Jesus' ancestors!

***Other Bible stories to ponder include:***

Joseph: He wound up being forced as a slave into another country and culture. He kept his faith and lived in such a wise way that he rose to a position of power. (Genesis 37-50)

Daniel: Living in Babylon during the exile period, he kept his faith while also being a person of influence in the Babylonian government.

Abraham: Abraham had some failures in his cross-cultural encounters. Because of fears for his own safety, he introduced his wife as his sister during a visit to Egypt. (Genesis 12:10-20)

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