

Culture Shock

What is Culture Shock?

Culture shock is a form of complex emotional stress that happens when people move from one culture to another. Anthropologists studying this concept have called it a form of disorientation anxiety. This results from becoming aware that some of the most basic assumptions we make about life and the way we live no longer seem appropriate or comfortable in a new environment.

Dealing with language differences, unspoken rules and new physical surroundings can create tremendous anxiety. Although participants may go through one, all or none of the typical phases of culture shock, Turtle Mountain School Division (TMSD) supports participants and provides them with the tools to help them get through these experiences. It is noted that often both the Host Family and the participant may experience some form of culture shock as they learn to adapt to one another.

The Culture Shock Cycle

1. Pre-Arrival
For the participant, the pre-arrival phase combines pre-departure excitement and anxiety as s/he looks forward to a new adventure. The Host Family meanwhile, is combining the anticipation of the participant's arrival and how much help s/he will be with the anxieties about the participant's role and how s/he will fit in to the community.
2. The Honeymoon
During this arrival period, the participant is emotionally excited and everything is new and wonderful. The Host Family is working hard to make the participant feel at home and they are excited that s/he has finally arrived.
3. Flight and Fight (Culture Shock)
The newness of things begin to wear thin and participants start to find everything annoying or inconvenient. They complain about Canadians in general and their Host Family in particular. Confronted with unfamiliar or uncomfortable cultural situations, one reaction is to withdraw or remove oneself from the situation, taking "flight" from the new environment.

The participant may choose to be only with friends of the same nationality or s/he may reject or ignore the Canadian way of doing things. In turn, the Host Family may respond critically and reject the participant's approach, perhaps even regretting, for a time, having accepted the participant in the first place. During the "flight" phase, the participant may seem to place "blame" on either the local population, for lack of "understanding," or on him/herself for an inability to handle new experiences.

In the "fight" phase the participant may think s/he can somehow change others to his/her way of thinking or doing things. The Host Family may become irritated with the participant for making them feel ill at ease in their own community.

4. Filter and Flex (Cultural Adjustment and Adaptation)

During this phase, non-native English speaking participants may have become more comfortable speaking the English language and communication is less difficult. S/he has become more relaxed and perhaps more confident and the Host Family seems more accepting and trusting as the dialogue improves and most problems are successfully resolved. Rather than rejecting or trying to change behaviors, the participant begins to filter information and examine things more objectively.

The Host Family and the participant learn to be more and more flexible with one another in accepting personality and cultural differences. This flexibility strengthens their relationship and the participant's ability to continue deepening the relationship with the host culture.

5. Pre/Post Departure Re-entry Adjustment

Toward the end of the program, some participants will begin to feel anxious anticipating having to say goodbye to their Host Family and their new friends. The Host Family also begins to consider the inevitable goodbye and sadness of losing a member of the community and they may become anxious about their next child care provider.

Participants may also experience reverse culture shock as they return to their former world with memories of their stay abroad. Host Families can help participants who are near the end of their program by discussing the realities of returning home and how the participant might best adjust to her/his home country.

Common Symptoms of Culture Shock

- Participants may feel isolated and frustrated. They may become nervous and/or excessively tired. They may sleep a lot, even after they have recovered from jet lag.
- Participants may be excessively homesick. It is normal to miss home, family and friends; but if they can think of nothing else, write letters, call home all the time, or frequently seem depressed or cry, they are most likely suffering from culture shock.
- Participants may feel hostile toward Canada as the cause of their discomfort. Normal, minor irritations may make a participant overly upset.
- Participants may become dependent upon other program participants from their home country. These friendships are important and are extremely supportive. However, if they spend time exclusively with participants from their home country, they deny themselves the educational experience of interacting with people from Canada and other countries. TMSD makes every effort to separate participants from the same country as often as possible so that they can more fully immerse themselves in the language and culture of Canada.
- They may feel reluctant to speak English or to associate with people.

Suggestions for Participants Dealing with Culture Shock

- Maintain your perspective.
- Keep an open mind and a sense of humor. People in Canada may do or say things people in your home country would not.
- Talk to people about how you are feeling. You are not alone, and you do not have to go through the adjustment by yourself.
- Remember back to before you came to Canada, and why you wanted to participate in the program. Reflect upon the positive!
- Use the resources around you: your Host Family, new friends and TMSD staff.

- Speak English. In order to overcome culture shock, you must accept certain aspects of the new culture.
- Open yourself to people from other countries.

Suggestions for Host Families Dealing With Culture Shock

- Provide participants with a clear set of guidelines. When your expectations are presented in a straightforward and honest manner, participants will be more aware of what they should and/or should not do.
- Communicate. The majority of misunderstandings arise from poor communication. Let participants know that they are appreciated and that their contributions are not only important, but valued.
- Whenever possible set schedules for your participants. Clear schedules help participants to know what to expect.
- Encourage your participants to speak English. Let them know that you don't mind grammatical mistakes, and that you are willing to help them improve their English language skills. The more they practice, the better their language skills will become!
- Keep an open mind and a sense of humor. People in Canada may do or say things that people in the participant's home country would not do or say. Try to understand that the participant is acting according to his/her own set of values, and that these values are born of a culture different from yours.
- Participants will occasionally need advice or encouragement. Usually participants just need to know they have someone "on their side" to help boost their confidence while adapting to their new environment.