



Cross-Cultural Journey for International Students

There are many reasons why students choose to come to study in the United States. Some of the most common reasons are to obtain a degree, to gain professional and academic training, to learn about another culture, or to enhance personal growth. Often it is some combination of these. Some international students know a lot about the United States before arriving while others know much less. Whatever the reasons for coming to the U.S., and regardless of how much is known about the culture, nearly all international students go through a period of adjustment.

I. Common stages of adapting to a new culture

Adaptation to a new culture is a normal process. A number of stages in this process have been identified and are useful as guidelines. However, due to individual differences, not all people experience each stage, and the stages can last different lengths of time for different people.

The honeymoon stage: In this stage everything seems exciting and new; people often feel energetic and enthusiastic during this period.

The culture shock stage: In this stage people become very aware of the differences and conflicts in values and customs between their home culture and the new culture. Culture shock increases especially when one has difficulties with a new language and/or when one experiences prejudice. Common feelings during this stage include confusion, anxiety, homesickness, and/or anger.

The recovery stage: In this stage people begin to resolve the stress of stage 2. One learns more about the new culture, finds more understanding, and manages better than before. The common feelings during this stage are a mixture of those felt in Stages 1 and 2.

The adaptation stage: In this stage people come to accept and appreciate the similarities as well as the differences between cultures. There is room to develop a realistic view of both and have clearer ideas about one's likes and dislikes in each.

II. Some reasons why coming to a new culture can be a challenge

Many factors can make the process of adapting to a new culture challenging. Some common factors include:

Change: All changes, whether positive or negative, can be stressful, because change brings the unknown and unfamiliar with it. Certainly, coming to a new culture involves many changes.

Loss: Coming to a new culture can mean having some losses to grieve: loss of contact with family and friends; loss of the status one is used to in the home culture; loss of familiar and favorite places, foods, climate, etc.

Value differences: The differences in values between the U.S. culture and one's home culture can be challenging. These can include moral, social, political, educational, and work-related value differences; generally, the greater the differences between the cultures, the more challenging the process of adaptation.

Expectations: One's experiences in the U.S. may be affected by the expectations one has beforehand. Difficulties can arise when high expectations are not met.

Social skills: The social skills necessary to be successful, both interpersonally and academically, vary from culture to culture. Many international students have very effective social skills in their home culture and language, but may find it hard to learn the different ones needed for success in the U.S.

Host country receptivity: The way people in the U.S. treat international students also affects the adaptation process. If one encounters people who express discrimination and prejudice, and who expect everyone to conform to the U.S. way of life, adaptation can be more difficult.

III. Common signs of adaptation stress

It is natural for people living in a different culture to feel sad and lonely at times, and to miss their home culture, friends, and family. Sometimes, however, the stress of adapting may reach a level that requires special attention. Common signs of this stress can include:

- feeling homesick most or all of the time
- feeling lonely much of the time
- feeling sad or anxious much of the time
- crying more than usual, often for no particular reason
- experiencing a marked change in sleeping habits
- experiencing a marked change in appetite
- feeling irritable a lot of the time
- experiencing physical problems or discomfort for which doctors can find no reason
- having many minor illnesses, such as colds, headaches, or stomach pains
- having difficulty concentrating
- experiencing academic difficulties not typically experienced before
- feeling out-of-control in various aspects of life
- feeling tension and pressure much of the time

IV. Ways to help cope with culture adaptation

There are many things that can help during the adaptation process. Different things help different people and often, more than one approach is useful. Three areas that are most often helpful to address are academic skills, social skills, and adequate emotional support.

Academic skills:

Educational systems and expectations vary from culture to culture. Being unfamiliar with the U.S. system, especially when coupled with the challenges of using a second language, can lead to academic problems. Some ways to overcome these problems include:

- getting help to improve reading and study skills
- looking over old exams and papers to see what is expected
- keeping in close contact with teaching assistants and professors; stating one's needs and asking about educational norms, suggestions, ideas, and assistance
- meeting one-on-one with colleagues and teachers if possible to address specific questions and allow sufficient time for clarifications
- studying with a friend, classmate or a study group

Social skills:

While it is important for international students to retain their home country's cultural identity and beliefs, learning about U.S. culture and becoming familiar with the social customs here can aid in the adaptation process. Ways to do this include:

- spending time listening and talking with people from the U.S.
- watching TV and reading newspapers
- seeking out a supportive person who knows the U.S. culture well and is able to explain behaviors, language and customs.

Emotional support:

Some ways to address emotional issues include:

- sharing feelings and experiences with others who are understanding and supportive
- staying connected with the "comforts of home" (special foods, rituals, activities, etc.)
- balancing academic work with leisure activities
- seeking professional help if things do not get better over time

It is important to remember that adaptation is a normal process that can take some time and effort.

V. Positive outcomes

While the process of adaptation can be challenging, it also has many positive aspects. International students who go through this process benefit in terms of achieving personal growth, becoming more flexible and insightful, as well as more adaptable to future experiences. Cultural adaptation typically results in a broader and richer worldview that allows a person to draw from the best parts of different cultures.

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