

Managing Cultural Fatigue

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Culture Shock vs Cultural Fatigue

Culture Shock is the personal disorientation a person may feel when experiencing an unfamiliar way of life due to immigration or a visit to a new country, a move between social environments, or simply travel to another way of life

Cultural Fatigue is a “state of being where the small, adverse (intricacies) of the culture begin to bother you out of reasonable proportion after living in another country for an extended amount of time.” (Wade Sheppard)

Shock has the implication of confusion and being momentary, while **fatigue** stresses the continuing effect of everyday stressors from a change in lifestyle

“. . . I found myself reacting to situations much more aggressively than I had earlier in the field work. I was edgy, irritable, and even resentful against the villagers. Not only was I feeling these emotions but I also began to express them in my relationships in the village. My actions were very disturbing to me. I tried as best I could at the time to analyze what was happening to me.” – Delmos J. Jones, *Cultural Fatigue: The Result of Role-Playing in Anthropological Research*

The Stages of Cultural Fatigue

Stage One – The Honeymoon Period

“Everything is new and exciting and rainbows and unicorns in this stage. You’re drinking in your new surroundings and you can’t get enough of it. You’re going out on the town every night, seeing new bars, new clubs, new streets, new parks, new coffee shops, and everything is wonderful and magical. Any differences you notice are obviously improvements on whatever you’ve left behind. ” – Ruth

“(M)ost people begin their life in a new country with a positive mind-set.... They come with expectations which are too high and attitudes that are too positive toward the host country and forthcoming experience.” (Kohls, 1984)

- **The Emotional Roller Coaster** - Lack of stability; “this happens because your rhythm of life is out of whack with the rhythms that run through the host culture.”
- **Insomnia** - As jet lag fades away, troubles with insomnia may continue. Insomnia in the honeymoon stage tends to be caused by the fact that the brain is constantly encountering things it is trying to comprehend and so at night, many people experience the sensation of their mind

racing. Exercise does wonderful things for this kind of insomnia, so if you can't sleep because your mind is racing, go for a walk and then try sleeping again.

- **Loneliness** - In the honeymoon stage of culture shock, the uncomfortableness caused by loneliness tends to be sharp and come on suddenly. The loneliness that people in this stage of culture shock tend to suffer is shallow because they have only lost meaning in their communications with others; the core values with which they were raised are still fully intact and relatively unchallenged. As such, a quick conversation with a good friend can be all it takes to make loneliness disappear.

Stage Two – Everything Sucks

“The people in your new (area) are idiots who don't know how to live like civilized people. The way they do everything is inefficient and irrational. Even the weather is worse than back home. You might become angry and cranky, or you might get depressed and withdrawn. It might just be mild irritability or listlessness, or it might be full-on drinking wine out of the bottle naked on the floor. This stage can last a few days or a few weeks, and it can come back in cycles.” – Ruth

“Gradually your focus turns from the similarities to the differences.” (Kohls, 1984).

- **Irritability**
- **Loss of Perspective** - When you have problems with one or a few Japanese people, take time to figure out who you are frustrated with; put a name to "them" and try to remember the kindness you have received from others. Don't blame all Japanese people for the actions of one or a few.
- **Loneliness** - people back home can't understand what you are going through. You also might feel that Japanese people who haven't left Japan can't understand what you are going through. During this time, remember the JET community. Most of us have experienced culture shock, and we help each other through the hard times. Don't be afraid to ask for help; it's often the people who help you through the hard times that become your lasting friends.
- **Excessive Sleepiness**
- **Weight Fluctuations** - So long as your weight remains within the healthy limits for your height, don't worry about it. Your weight goes up, it goes down, if you aren't going to die from it, it just doesn't matter. Let what happens happen. Eat wonderful food, play fun sports, whatever floats your boat, indulge.
- **Imagined Anxiety** - You may find yourself imagining bad or negative situations that have never happened. Don't let these imagined situations cause you too much stress; after all, they haven't happened. What's happening is that your brain is coming up with responses to potential situations. Imagining your reaction to bad or negative situations is a sign that your brain is starting to figure everything out. In some ways, imagined anxiety is the light at the end of the tunnel. Your brain is moving from constantly reacting to unexpected situations to anticipating

potential problems and this can be the first sign that you are beginning to understand the world around you.

- **Paranoia** - The reason why any given person doing something can only be guessed at. Sometimes when the brain gets tired, it starts coming up with strange paranoid reasons for why people are doing these things, for example: staring. It's good to talk to someone who can walk you through the problem.

Stage two tends strike the hardest during the cold winter months – right about now. You may be annoyed or frustrated, *even if it's for no particular reason*. But it's important to know yourself, and beware of:

- A free-floating anxiety that effects normal everyday behavior (Free floating anxiety means a person is anxious but they do not know why. Something is bugging them.)
- A lack of self-confidence
- A lack of energy or interest in life
- Panic attacks
- A loss of initiative and spontaneity
- Excessive anger over small problems (delays) and minor frustrations
- Feelings of hopelessness
- A strong need to be with people of your own cultural background, especially your own nationality
- An excessive amount of time spent sleeping or reading, introverted activities that do not involve exposure to the foreign environment

Stage Two Advice

- Treat the cause, not just the symptom. By identifying what it is that's causing you to feel culturally fatigued, it's easier to compartmentalize and focus on the things that really matter to you
- Eat well
- Sleep well
- Exercise often
- Socialize
- Continue to study Japanese language and culture
- Stay in contact with friends and family back home

“That advice can sound patronizing or self-evident, but when the fatigue hits it can be very tempting to do the exact opposite of the above things.” Shimane PA

Cultural spider webs

“Cultural fatigue is an occasional part of travel, it is a sign that you have collected enough

experiences to begin seeing through the outer crust of a place, that the patterns of a culture are making themselves known to you, that you are getting down to the deeper layers of the cultural spider web. All “culture” is a set of behavioral patterns, so getting to know these patterns — even though occasionally onerous — is part of the learning process of travel.” – Wade Sheppard

Stage Three – Life Goes On

Eventually, the low of stage two fades and you move into stage three, the stage of acceptance. You’ve figured out a way to live in this new place, you’ve reconciled yourself to the crazy things, you’ve learned coping strategies. Your focus is on daily living and on your established routines.

“The most difficult stage is over and you are on your way to adjusting to life in the new culture. This step may come so gradually that, at first, you will be unaware it is even happening. Once you begin to orient yourself and to be able to interpret some of the subtle cultural clues and cues which passed unnoticed earlier, the culture seems more familiar. You become more comfortable in it and feel less isolated from it. Gradually too, your sense of humour returns and you realise the situation is not hopeless at all” (Kohls, 1984).

- **Loneliness** - Often people in this stage feel that they are caught between two cultures.
- **Melancholy** - Melancholy tends to come from the same root cause as the loneliness. During this stage, you are beginning to recover meaning in your life and you can understand a lot of what is going on around you, but it lacks a sense of reality. It is as though you are watching others enjoy life while you are on the outside. Melancholy differs from depression in terms of the outlook of the future. When you experience depression, you have difficulty feeling happy, and you even have trouble imagining that you will ever feel happy again. When you experience melancholy, you do have difficulty feeling happy in the present, but you are fueled by a sense of purpose; you have some goal that you are working towards that is keeping you going even when the going is tough.
- **Cognitive Dissonance Anxiety** - In the Gradual Adaptation Stage, you are beginning to look at life from a double perspective. There are times when the perspective of your home culture conflicts with the perspective of your host culture. The human brain isn't very good at dealing with this conflict and it can cause you to have trouble making decisions. The Gradual Adaptation Stage is the stage when you first begin to understand your host culture and as your understanding of that culture grows and deepens, cognitive dissonance tends to go away. In order to overcome cognitive dissonance, read up on Japanese history. History can be the key to understanding why the correct choice for a member of Japanese culture is not always the correct choice for you.

To quote the author Pierre Boulle in his introduction to his novel *The Bridge on the River Kwai*: *“The insuperable gap between East and West that exists in some eyes is perhaps*

nothing more than an optical illusion. Perhaps it is only the conventional way of expressing a popular opinion based on insufficient evidence and masquerading as a universally recognized statement of fact, for which there is no justification at all, not even the plea that it contains an element of truth. During the last war, 'saving face' was perhaps as vitally important to the British as it was to the Japanese. Perhaps it dictated the behaviour of the former, without their being aware of it, as forcibly and as fatally as it did that of the latter, and no doubt that of every other race in the world. Perhaps the conduct of each of the two enemies, superficially so dissimilar, was in fact simply a different though equally meaningless manifestation of the same spiritual reality."

Stage Four – Assimilation

“Finally, living in the new place for some time, you may attain such a level of comfort in both cultures that you become “bicultural.” Being able to get to this stage depends on a lot of things, not least of which is how different your new home is. If you’re moving from Los Angeles to Phoenix, it might not be so hard. If you’re moving from rural Wyoming to New York City, it might be a different story.”

-Ruth

“Full recovery will result in an ability to function in your own and in Japanese culture with confidence. You will even find a great many customs, ways of doing and saying things, and personal attitudes which you enjoy- indeed, which you have to some degree adopted- and which you will definitely miss when you return home. In fact you can expect to experience reverse culture shock upon your return to your own country.” (Kohls, 1984)

Three Possible Outcomes

The Constructive Marginal – Constructive means that your actions and opinions benefit the people around you (in your host culture). **Marginal** means that your actions and opinions are different from those of people around you/the host culture. People in this outcome allow their lives and values to intersect with those of the host culture but they also go their own way when they feel the host culture’s values are conflicting from their own

Assimilation – People in this outcome have learned to function entirely within the bound of the host culture. Sometimes called “Going Native.”

Rejection – These people may either need to leave the host culture entirely or find a middle ground by establishing a life in the expat community

“People in this state find that there is something fundamental about the way the host culture operates that causes them to be unable to function. People who reject the host culture tend to retreat from any experience involving the culture. The most self-destructive manifestation of rejection occurs when a person retreats into themselves and loses contact with the outside world, home culture and host culture.” -Akita Jet

Advice

- Realize that some degree of discomfort and stress is natural in a cross-cultural experience.
- Gather information so at least the cultural differences will seem understandable, if not natural.
- Look below the surface. Look for the practical reasons behind host culture patterns that “fit” the culture - discover why!
- Keep studying! Find ways to motivate yourself to maintain your studies. Japanese language and culture can be difficult to learn about but it’s possible. Bounce back and forth between difficult and easy to help keep your positivity up.
- Relax your grip on your home culture and try to cheerfully adapt to new rules and roles.
- When things bother you that you can’t control – let it go, focus on something else, find a new hobby. You’re only scratching the surface so dig deeper into the culture and find the things you love
- Comparing your situation isn’t useful and it’s probably not helpful. Try to improve your situation as best as you can and be open to advice
- Reevaluate your goals and make them realistic
“I’m going to go to Japan and be accepted for who I am and turn from a socially awkward ugly duckling into a beautiful swan and social butterfly. Other JETs will envy my ability to blend in to society and regular Japanese people will fall to their knees in awe before me and propose on the spot when they see my graceful foreignness and demand my gaigenes for their babies.”
- “It is important to be humble and recognize that you don’t have the full picture. Trust others, listen, ask for advice, be actively curious, and take time to reflect on your experiences. “ Akita JET
- Break your routine
- Get back into old hobbies
- Learn something new
- Travel
- Find places outside of work where you can become a regular – a bar, restaurant, or local hangout; it’ll be one less place you feel foreign
- Remember that adapting to everyday life in Kumamoto is a learning process
- Understand the symptoms and recognize signs of cultural fatigue

Losing your rose-tinted glasses

“When you begin feeling fatigued in a culture for the first time, treat it as a sign of learning — the patterns that you observe are beginning to come together, the people are becoming more real, you are beginning to see through your inter-cultural blinders, and you are beginning to see not only another culture but your place in it.” -Wade Sheppard

When all else fails – keep it simple

Relax

Reach Out

Keep Moving

Who you can talk to

The goal when you're in Stage 2 is to recognize it, survive, continue on, and keep aiming to improve, even with small steps, so that you don't get caught in Stage 2 forever.

The Kumamoto PAs: They're amazing and have been through this, too!

AJET Peer Support Group: National AJET is responsible for the Peer Support Group helpline. The Peer Support Group (PSG) operates its helpline every day of the week from 20:00 to 7:00 . It is run entirely by current members of the JET Program. These are volunteers selected according to their experience with psychology, help lines, and with counseling. Every day (8pm-7am) Toll Free: 050-5534-5566

Tokyo English Life Line (TELL) Tokyo: Every day (9am-4pm & 7pm-11pm – by appointment): (03) 3968-4099

Women's Hotline (counseling – Legal and psychological support) Yokohama: English and Chinese: (04) 4271-0091

Friends and family back home: Be aware that, unless they've lived abroad themselves, they may have trouble relating to your situation.

Other JETs: Everyone's been through this and we all know how hard it can be. Talking with someone you know who has been through it before can be very useful!

Sources

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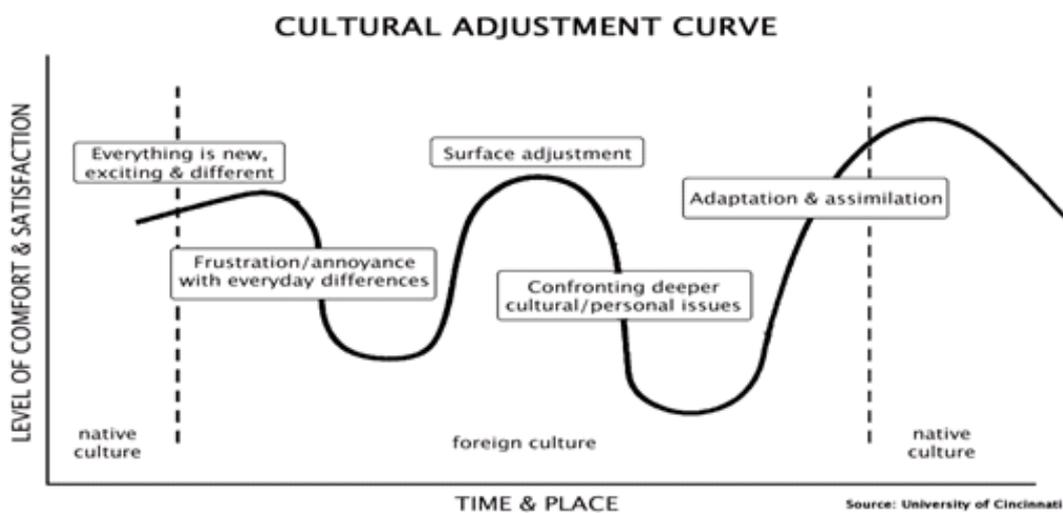
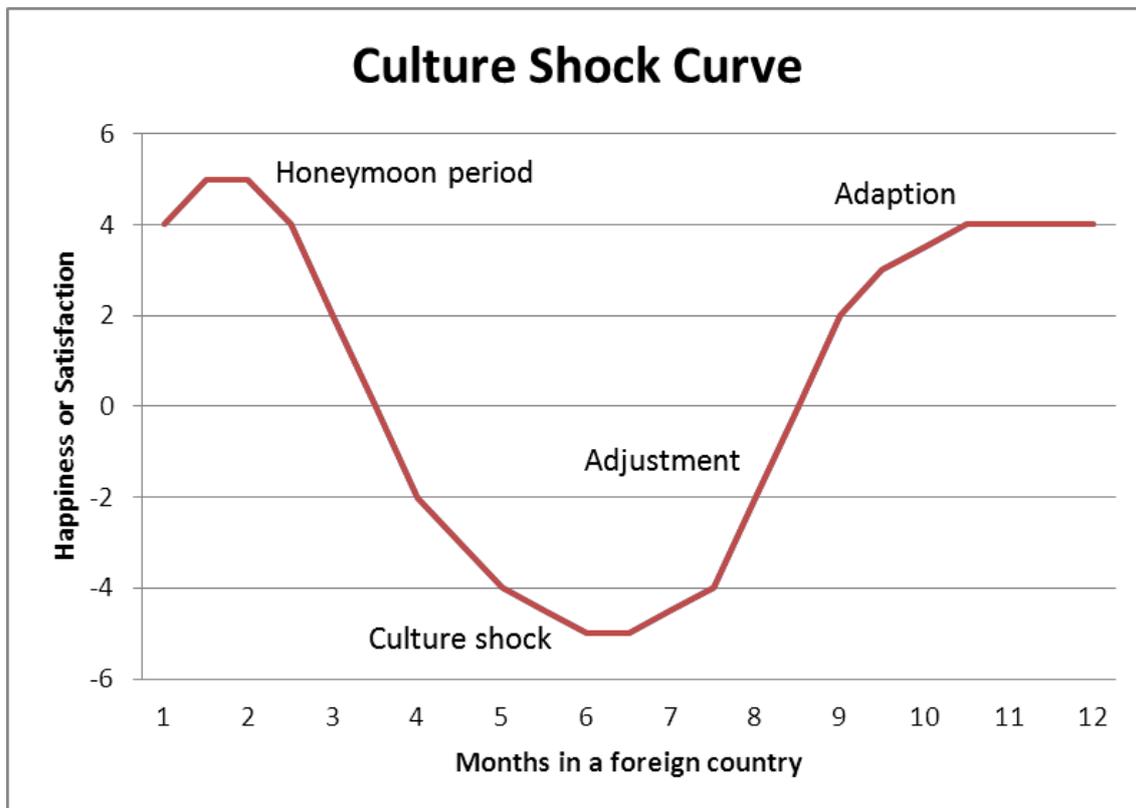
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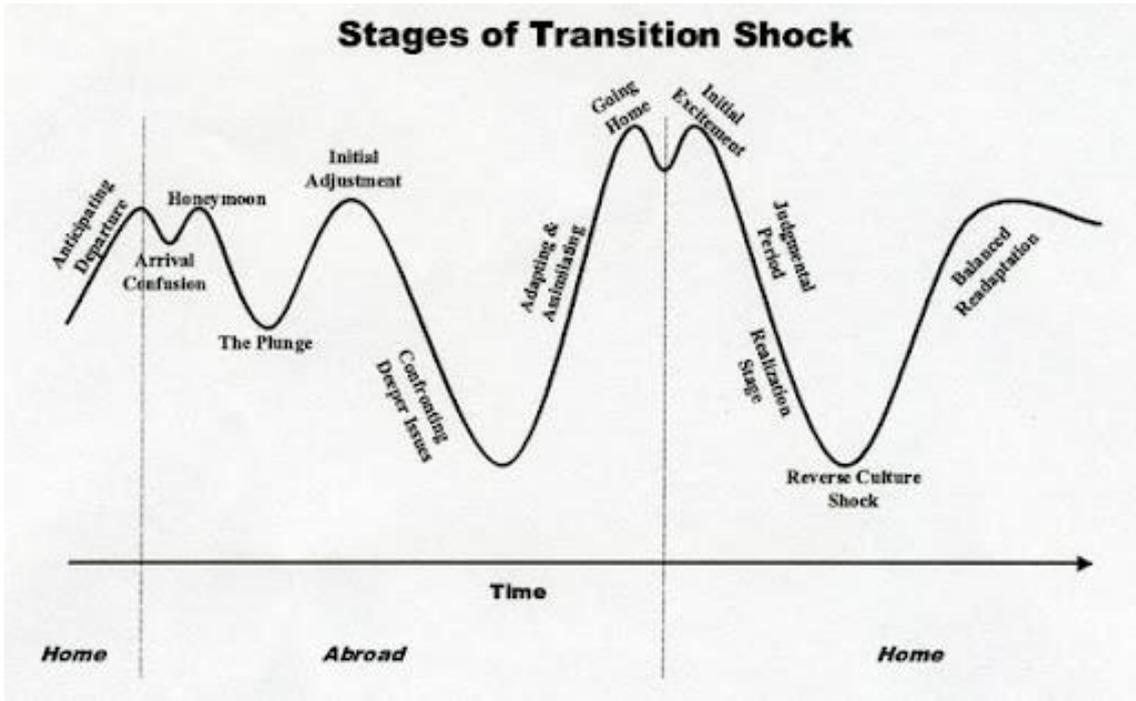
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Graphs about Cultural Fatigue





A JET Participant's Typical Culture Shock Cycle

