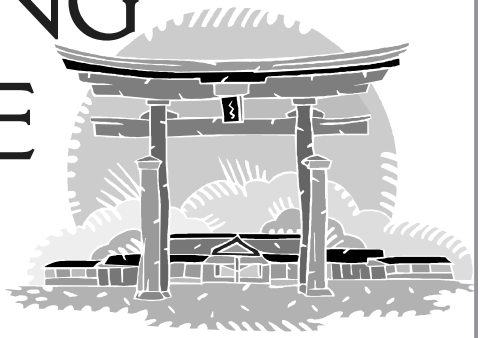
# MANAGING CULTURE SHOCK



## Helping to Make the Most of Your Overseas Tour

An overseas assignment presents a golden opportunity to visit interesting places, cultivate international friendships, and buy unusual items. An overseas tour can also create culture shock, a phenomenon that occurs when you enter another culture. How you handle this introductory stage will set the tone for your entire tour. Culture shock is nonselective. It hits military members and civilians, adults, and children. Not even an experienced international traveler is immune.

Your local Fleet and Family Support Center (FFSC), Air Force Family Support Center (AFFSC), and Army Community Service Center (ACSC) can help ease your overseas move. They have a tremendous amount of material (overseas workshops, books, videos, maps, etc.) available to familiarize you and your family with your new duty station.

OVERSEAS TRANSFER WORKSHOP

Entering a culture similar to yours doesn't necessarily eliminate or lessen negative impacts. Culture shock is just as acute for Americans living on U.S. installations overseas. The longer individuals cling to the base and its familiar lifestyle, the more disenchanted they will become with the host country and their everyday life. Sooner or later, it will become necessary to deal with the local economy. The self- imposed exile serves only to magnify the differences, making them harder to understand and cope with.

To be able to reap the maximum benefit from your overseas tour, you must be able to manage culture shock. Taking the initial step into the "unknown" can be difficult and a bit frightening, but it is much easier than you think, and the rewards are great.

A simple, three-phase plan can be used. These phases take place over a prescribed period of time, with Phase One usually being initiated before you leave the States. Phase Two starts when you arrive at your new duty station, and Phase Three is put into place after you have lived in the foreign country for at least five to eight weeks. Remember to visit your FFSC, AFFSC, or ACSC throughout your moving experience.

## PHASE ONE

## Preparing for the Unknown

### 1 Accept that you will probably experience culture shock

Having just arrived in England, Sue found that one of the chores she hated was shopping. A trip to the stores left her with a headache that lasted for days. Bags were unobtainable, and she found herself causing a holdup at the register while she nervously tried to organize her purchases. Then a sympathetic English neighbor gave her a wallet that unzipped into a shopping bag. She was now able to pack her purchases as they were rung up. This bit of organization took away the confusion and pressure. Having learned a way to handle the shopping, it no longer created stress for Sue. If Sue had known about culture shock, she would have been able to recognize the symptoms and found a way to manage, eliminating the strong negative emotions and discomforts she experienced. The knowledge that culture shock is a normal state is one of the strongest tools in managing stress.

## 2 Acquire a basic knowledge of your new home

A couple receiving orders to Germany located a family on their Stateside base who had just returned. The meeting that ensued gave the Germany-bound couple a comprehensive list of "do's" and "don'ts." Consequently, they were able to avoid one of the biggest problems plaguing military families living in Europe: having too much or too little furniture. By knowing in advance what type of housing was available, the family chose their household effects for shipping wisely, storing the rest Stateside at government expense. They avoided underfurnished or overfurnished quarters and the possibility of expensive foreign storage.

The family that had just returned from Germany was so enthusiastic about their tour that the couple arrived with a positive attitude and a desire to get involved in the German culture. This positive attitude carried them successfully through the first few confusing weeks at their new duty station. After an understandable period of adjustment, the family adapted to their new duty station and went on to thoroughly enjoy their tour. The information and "Lessons Learned" they had been given by the other couple were a definite bonus to them and shortened their adaptation time significantly.

You may not be fortunate enough to find a family who has just returned from your upcoming duty station, but there are many sources of information readily available. Public libraries, banks, bookstores, national tourist bureaus, travel sections in newspapers and magazines, public affairs offices, and even your doctor and veterinarian can supply you with much that will give you a good idea of your new home and the type of life you will lead. Many FFSCs, AFFSCs, and ACSCs have information packets on military installations worldwide. Ask them.

From these sources you can learn the current money rate of exchange, sights to see, goods available, the climate, customs, history, shopping hints, clothing sizes, legal requirements for cars and pets, and pertinent medical information for your family.

An English foreign language dictionary can give you a start on learning the necessary phrases, while language tapes or CD-ROM will help you accustom your ear to native accents and tones.

Another excellent source is community schools which usually offer conversational foreign languages.

## 3 Arrange for mail-order catalogs/ websites

Many foreign countries have different size ranges than America. You may find it hard to find clothing that fits you properly. For example, the best selections in the Orient are in the very small sizes, and the most popular colors are the darker shades. Families with growing children face the most difficult shopping tasks. Even the accessibility of military exchanges sometimes cannot answer your immediate clothing needs.

Your favorite department stores or specialty stores may offer website shopping or will send you mail-order catalogs. As soon as you have an overseas address, contact these sources and get on their mailing list.

# PHASE TWO

# TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

The first few weeks in your new country might be taken up with moving. Initially, you will probably spend some time in a hotel, and the natural inclination is to act as a tourist. Although this is a good time to do some sightseeing, this is not a vacation. You need first to tend to certain preparations that will give you the strength and skills to handle the confusion and culture shock.

## 1 Correct your internal clock

International travel often takes a lot out of your system, and the time changes can contribute to strange living habits that are out of synchronization with the rest of your world. So, get your sleep patterns coordinated. One way is to take naps until you have acclimated your body to the new clock; another is to slowly adjust your bedtime until it conforms to the local time.

## 2 Watch your diet

If possible, eat foods you are familiar with or stick to a bland diet initially. Vitamins will help you to build your strength and keep you fit in the new climate. As your system adjusts, try some of the native dishes. This is part of the fun and reward of living in a foreign country. Most waiters and waitresses, shopkeepers, and local citizens will be delighted to explain local foods.

A young wife in Spain found her efforts in the local market paid off. Not only did she learn the native names and uses for products, but with each conversation, she was given a cooking lesson. Women in the shop would join in, trying to outdo each other with favorite recipes and advice. These conversations made her feel at home with the culture and provided some good humor for all.

## 3 Exercise

You may want to keep up your exercise program even though it may be difficult with your new surroundings. If you don't have an exercise program, walking can provide you with the exercise you need as well as an opportunity to experience your new surroundings.

## 4 Create a familiar environment

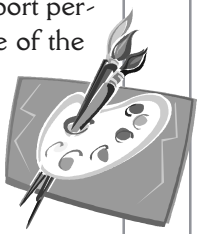
The way you organize your belongings in a hotel room can give you a sense of familiarity and security. One family unpacked their clothes as soon as they arrived, even though their stay was a short duration. With suitcases out of the way, they had more space and a sense of ownership in their room. Another family with small children assigned areas to each person. Everyone had his or her own place to read, relax, and play.

Doing without your favorite things can cause you to feel unsettled. Always keep with you something which is special to you or your family. A favorite stuffed animal, a picture of loved ones, a snapshot of your pet, or some favorite books are items that can make you feel more at home and give you a sense of comfort.

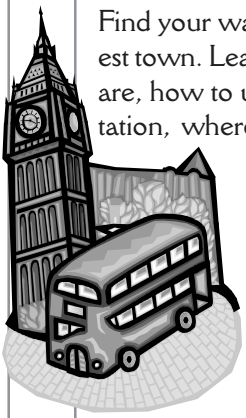
## 5 Find a support system

Before Diane moved into her apartment, she asked her landlord what the area had to offer in the way of shops and community activities. She discovered a series of inexpensive community activities courses and signed up for an evening class in antique appreciation. She found herself with a group of long-term residents who took a great deal of pleasure in acquainting her with the neighborhood. By making the effort to join this group, she was soon rewarded with friends, an abundance of information, and the joy of sharing a hobby with others.

Many military spouses have taken up interesting hobbies and skills by taking advantage of local classes. A person or group you feel comfortable with can give you the information and strength you need to adjust to your new home. Spouse Clubs, religious groups, neighbors, professional clubs, hobby groups, and social clubs all offer group support. Remember, you must make the effort to seek them out. Finding a support person or group can be one of the most important steps you can take toward managing culture shock. Each of us has felt new and strange at one time or another in our lives, so your efforts will be rewarded with understanding and sympathy. However, beware of the eager individual who can't wait to tell you all the bad points. The "wait-till-you-find-out" type can be depressing.



## 6 Learn your local area



Find your way around the nearest town. Learn where the shops are, how to use public transportation, where to get lunch, etc. Locate the museums and historical spots. Think of it as your town, even if you think of it as your "foreign" town at first.

Support your local establishments whenever possible. Shopping in most foreign countries is a social event. It will be easier for you to get to know people and be accepted if you show them by your patronage that you are interested in being part of their community.

Local post offices, libraries, police stations, travel agents, and travel information bureaus are good sources of information, and they may also provide information about upcoming events. Shopkeepers are usually willing to tell you where a local sight is located. They have a great deal of pride in their town, and your interest will please them.

## PHASE THREE

# Compare and Accept

Once you have moved in, it is reasonable to expect your feelings to subside and your life to return to normal. Not so! Usually at this point, you have been at your duty station over a month. Just about the time you think you're adjusted, culture shock hits its hardest. You have moved in, the children are in school, and you've started your job. When your defenses are down, you find yourself getting frustrated, angry, confused, a little depressed, and in some cases, accident-prone. It is now time to put Phase Three into action.

### 1 Find the common key

Even though cultures may be radically different, shared interests and values will make it easier for you to adjust. Remember, many of our cultural habits are rooted in other countries. Make an effort to find behaviors and ideas you have in common with the natives. Feelings are universal and can provide a common ground.

Jane's turning point came when a British neighbor asked her to substitute for a "Meals on Wheels" volunteer. Delivering meals to shut-ins and the elderly gave her an opportunity to meet senior members of the population. She discovered that the elderly in Britain are not much different from the elderly in the United States. With this understanding, she began to take a more open view of her environment, finding herself a part of it rather than an observer.

Common threads usually can be found in human feelings and needs. Concerned mothers setting up an area playground, national holiday celebrations, religious activities, sports, and caring and providing activities are good examples. Make the effort to observe and to participate in activities that hold a mutual value for you and your neighbors. You will find that when you do, you will stop feeling uncomfortable and depressed. You will be too busy just living to harbor negative feelings.

This does not mean that you should "go native." Your new-found foreign friends might well become suspicious when you become more native than they. You are an American with some very different cultural values, and these values are a part of you. By trying to eliminate the American part of you, you run the risk of alienating yourself from your military community, a vital support system. Living in another culture and accepting its values while holding on to your cultural values is a bit like visiting a distant and important relative. It can be a success if you remember who you are: a guest, privileged to enjoy the best offered while still being yourself.

## 2 Identify and accept the differences

Don't work on the differences until you have acquired a strong base of common keys. Once you feel comfortable and secure, you are then ready to identify the things about the foreign culture that cause you the most frustration. Some of the ways of the natives you will never truly be able to support. Learn to accept these and live with them.

As the impact of culture shock diminishes, don't stop learning about the country you are living in. There will be days when you will be frustrated beyond measure by the way things are or are not done. But then there will also be days of excitement, created by something you have discovered in your new culture. You will find that every bit of effort you put into learning about and adjusting to your foreign duty station will reap benefits. One of the finest treasures can be the memory of living overseas. With effort and action, you can turn this experience into the highlight of your military life.

And please, let us help you! Come see us and check out our services. You will be glad you did!

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