CULTURE SHOCK

Many people who spend time in a new culture experience what is commonly referred to as “culture shock”. Although the intensity and timing of culture shock varies from one individual to another, most people will experience some difficulty or discomfort adjusting to a new culture. It is important to be aware of the phases of culture shock and the feelings you may encounter as you adjust to life in Canada.

During the first phase, often described as the “honeymoon” phase, most encounters and experiences are perceived as exciting, interesting and positive. You might feel confident that you will easily adjust to Canadian culture and excited about having a new adventure. You might enjoy finding similarities between your culture and Canadian culture. You might also enjoy exploring the differences.

In the second phase, often described as the “culture shock” phase, you may feel a sense of dislocation and anxiety. Symptoms of the second phase can include:

- feelings of confusion, frustration or irritability, anger, disappointment, self-doubt, inadequacy
- withdrawing from social situations, feeling lonely or homesick, spending lots of time alone, spending time only with other non-Canadians
- negative feelings about Canadians, their values and their social practices
- boredom, fatigue, an inability to concentrate or work effectively
- physical ailments

In the third phase, often described as the “adaptation” phase, you will start to accept your new surroundings and develop routines to keep yourself healthy and happy. Your understanding of Canadians and your confidence communicating with them will increase.

Here is a diagram to help you visualize the phases of culture shock. Please be aware that some students also experience a “reverse culture shock” when they return home.

Culture Shock Diagram

International Student Services  uvic.ca/iss  |  International Student Centre UVC B272  |  250-721-6361  |  issinfo@uvic.ca
Recognizing symptoms of the second phase, and making a conscious effort to adjust to your new surroundings, are the best strategies for coping with culture shock. Some suggestions:

**Acknowledge the impacts of adjusting to a new culture.**
It is not a sign of weakness to admit that you feel uncomfortable or confused. Leaving your home country to study abroad involves a certain amount of stress. It is common for international students to experience disappointments and frustrations. Be patient. Learning to live in a new country and culture is a process, not an event. Allow yourself and others time to develop trust and understanding.

**Learn the unspoken rules.**
Try to understand how and why Canadians act the way they do. Canadian behaviour and customs may be different from your own, but they are not necessarily better or worse than what you are used to. Be open and curious. Try to keep a sense of humour. Ask questions, observe and listen.

**Get connected and involved.**
It is important to make time for friends and fun. Get to know some Canadian students. Observing and communicating with Canadians will help you overcome cultural differences by increasing your understanding and tolerance of Canadian culture. Joining a social, athletic, religious or community group is a great way to meet people. Volunteering is also a great way to meet people and could lead to a Canadian reference for your résumé.

**Maintain contact with friends and family back home.**
Communicating with people you trust, who know you and who understand your point of view can be a useful way to work through your problems and experiences. Consider keeping a journal of your feelings and thoughts.

**Do something that reminds you of home.**
Listening to your favourite music or practicing a familiar hobby can boost your spirits when you are feeling homesick.

**Take care of yourself.**
Eat well, exercise and get enough sleep. If you drink alcohol, limit your consumption to moderate amounts.

**Practice the language.**
If English is not your first language, make a point of speaking it every day.

**Seek out support.**
The UVic Student Mental Health Initiative is an excellent resource.
- More information: [www.uvic.ca/mentalhealth](http://www.uvic.ca/mentalhealth)

Counselling is widely accepted in Canada. It is considered a good option for people who are struggling emotionally or who just need someone to talk with. At Counselling Services, professional counsellors are available to meet individually with students. Appointments are confidential and free. Group counselling is also available.
- More information: [www.uvic.ca/counselling](http://www.uvic.ca/counselling)

Students who are not ready to visit a professional counsellor or attend group counselling sometimes find it helpful to chat with one of their peers. The UVic Global Community Mentorship Program offers friendship and guidance for international students as they navigate their social and academic transition to UVic and Canada.

Some students feel more comfortable speaking with a health professional. At University Health Services, a team of doctors and nurses are available to meet individually with students.
- More information: [www.uvic.ca/health](http://www.uvic.ca/health)