

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 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 any differences you notice.

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

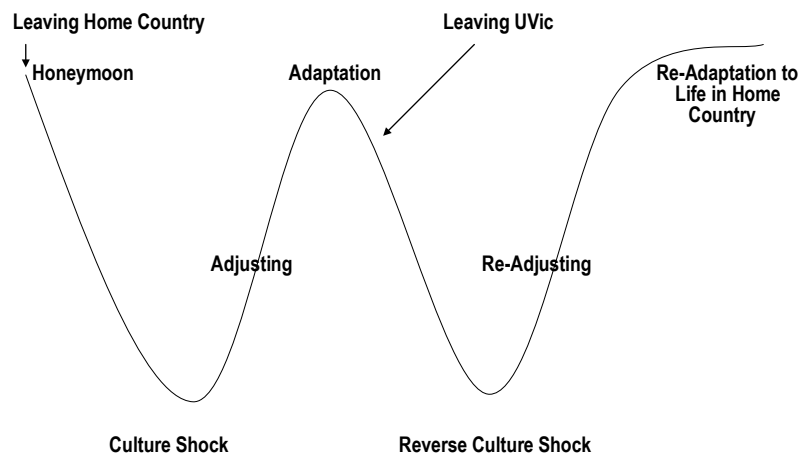
Symptoms of the second phase can include:

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



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Recognizing symptoms of the “culture shock” phase, and making a conscious effort to adjust to your new surroundings, are the best strategies for moving into the “adaptation” phase.

The UVic Student Mental Health website and blog are excellent resources to support this process:

- More information: www.uvic.ca/mentalhealth and onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/studentmentalhealth

Some other 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 always 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 values. Joining a social, athletic, spiritual, 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.

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.

Manage stress by staying healthy. Eat well, exercise, and get enough sleep. If you drink alcohol or use drugs, limit your consumption.

Practice the language.

If English is not your first language, make a point of speaking it every day. The more you do it, the easier it will be.

Seek out support.

Counselling is widely accepted in Canada. It is considered a good option for anyone who is struggling emotionally or who just needs someone to talk with. At UVic Counselling Services, professional counsellors are available to meet individually with students. Appointments are confidential and free. Groups and workshops are also available.

- More information: www.uvic.ca/counselling

Students who are not ready to visit a professional counsellor sometimes find it helpful to share stories and experiences with one of their peers. The UVic Global Community Mentorship Program offers friendship and guidance as you navigate your social and academic transition to UVic and Canada.

- More information: www.uvic.ca/global-community

Some students feel more comfortable speaking with a health professional.

- More information: www.uvic.ca/health

Some students prefer to receive support through their connection with a faith group or spiritual community.

- More information: www.uvic.ca/multifaith

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