



Understanding and Supporting People Experiencing Culture Shock

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Experiencing change from familiar locations, signs, customs, cues, norms and symbols of regular day-to-day life can cause anxiety for many people. Studying or working at La Trobe University and living in a new culture away from family and friends may impact on a person's ability to interact in public. Even if choice has precipitated such a change of culture, the challenges of the new environment can lead to bewilderment and distress. This is referred to as 'culture shock'.

Many people who are new to La Trobe experience this. Often those experiencing the frustration and anxiety of a new culture express themselves in a range of different ways such as withdrawal or being frustrated. They can experience headaches and nausea, depression, unexplained crying.

University staff and/or students can unknowingly contribute to the difficulties faced by people experiencing culture shock. For example, when organising administrative processes and protocols, staff might be unaware of the many cultural adjustments that students are making. It is easy to forget that Australian English, the Australian accent and idiom, the speed of speech and the exclusive use of Australian-specific examples might make important information unintelligible for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The emotional and physical symptoms experienced by a person with culture shock can be minimised through understanding and responding sensitively. The chart on the following page provides a general idea of the impact of cultural shock and cultural adjustment.

Passage for Staff/Students/Families Experiencing a New Environment

	General attitudes and feelings	Significant events	Emotional responses	Behavioural responses	Physical responses
At home	Anticipation	Preparation Planning Packing Partying	Positive Excitement; Enthusiasm; Some fear of the unknown; Concern about leaving family and friends	Withdrawn Loss of interest in current home activities	Normal health Possible weariness
First month	Exhilaration	Welcome events New housing; University; Orientation; Enrolment; Campus tours; Induction programs	Preparing Sense of mission or purpose; Enthusiasm; Adventure	Curiosity Avoids negative hostility; Enthusiasm for classes and colleagues	Unsettled health Intestinal disturbances; Minor insomnia
Second month	Bewilderment Impatience; Disenchantment	Classes begin Unfamiliar sounds, smells, foods, language, assignments, sights, shops	Uncertainty Qualms; Uncertainty; Restlessness; Critical; Frustration	Skepticism Search for familiar activities; Increase in smoking; Some withdrawal; Invokes stereotypes	Unsettled health Colds, headaches; Some more serious illness; Increased doctors visits
Third month	Discouragement Irritability	Search for reassurance Need for security; Need for recreation; Mid-semester assignment	Discouragement Bewilderment; Concerns about health; Homesickness	Avoidance Avoids contact with local people; Withdrawal; Unexplained crying	Unsettled health Minor illnesses; Insomnia; Sore throat; Weight loss; Skin problems
Fourth–fifth months	Gradual recovery	Settling into University routine Acceptable class performance; Exams	Interest in new culture Resignation	Constructive Accommodation	Normal health
Sixth month	Normal	Normal class performance Prepare for second semester	Equilibrium	Equilibrium	Normal health

Adapted from University of Michigan (<http://www.internationalcenter.umich.edu/life/passage.html>). Note that this is one model of cultural adaptation, and that people may not go through all stages, or may have different responses to the ones listed above.

Responding to Culture Shock

In the diverse environment at La Trobe, it is important to be aware of ways that the stress from culture shock can be reduced. If you become aware of someone who may be experiencing culture shock, the following strategies can help you assist a new staff member or student to be comfortable within this culturally unique environment.

Positive actions	How these actions can help	How to respond to people experiencing culture shock
Social activity	Encourages people to observe and learn how different customs are practised in a non-threatening atmosphere.	Encourage as much involvement as possible, so as to experience first hand what others are doing. Invite someone to visit public places, such as shopping or sporting events. Ensure students know about Orientation activities and encourage them to take part.
Having Australian friends	By having friends to talk to, people are able to ask questions about perplexing problems and without feeling vulnerable or foolish.	Often a friendly face and a cheery 'How are you?' is enough. Start a 'buddy' system in your area, or locate existing programs.
Access to support	Helps to inform and reduce isolation – a common symptom of culture shock.	Inform students about the free counselling services available, the support of International Student Support Services Staff in the International Programs Office. Inform staff about the Employee Assistance Program – see http://www.latrobe.edu.au/hr/ohs/employee-assistance
Exercise	Reduces stress and depression. Sports clubs and societies provide a valuable social link to meeting new people and understanding local culture.	Make information available about student clubs and societies and the range of sporting clubs that may interest them. Invite new people to walk with you or join you at lunchtime.
Community involvement	Community activities, religious services or volunteer opportunities can help someone become a member of the community.	Talk about the interests and community involvement of people within the local culture. Keep copies of local newspapers in student waiting areas.
Meeting others in the same situation	Other staff or students may be experiencing the same problems. By talking to them, various ways to cope with problems can be shared.	Extend an invitation to go to a social event on campus, or a community event such as a football game. Ensure that you have "Getting to Know You" activities during orientation activities and in the first few tutorials groups.
Keep in contact with family	Generates excitement, lessens isolation and helps to maintain an individual's culture.	Encourage the use of email to contact friends and family, making sure students know how to use their email. Make sure students know how to phone home and that the use of phone cards can reduce the cost.
Patience	Patience and encouragement demonstrate understanding, respect and acceptance.	Reassurance that their feelings are not permanent will help, as will acknowledging that it takes time to adjust and accommodate. It can help people greatly to know that cultural adjustment is a normal process to undergo.

Adapted from Schneider <http://www.uwec.edu/counsel/pubs/shock.htm>

References

Schneider, K. (Undated). *Cultural Differences: International Students Coping with Culture Shock*.

<http://www.uwec.edu/counsel/pubs/shock.htm>

Accessed 26 October, 2007.

University of Michigan, International Centre (Undated). *Phases of Adjustment*.

<http://www.internationalcenter.umich.edu/life/passage.html>

Accessed 26 October, 2007.

Further Reading

<http://edweb.sdsu.edu/people/Cguanipa/cultshok.htm>

http://www.worldwide.edu/planning_guide/Culture_Re-entry_Shock/index.html

<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/hr/ohs/employee-assistance.htm>

<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/counselling/>

<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/international/index.html>

