

Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety which results from the loss of all familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. These are the words, gestures, facial expressions, customs and norms which enable us to interact comfortably with others and they with us. It is driving on the other side of the road; it is having strangers for neighbours; it is not having supermarkets and safe public places to walk; it is not being able to ask for help when you lose your way on unfamiliar streets.

The non-verbal language of another culture is the most difficult at which to become adept and produces the most stress because it is subtle. These are the clues that let you know how quickly to invite someone for dinner, what time to arrive for dinner, when to call them by their first name; how far away to stand when in conversation, whether or not to shake hands and how; whether to talk business over lunch or wait until you get back to the office; whether a small office in a back alley or an unprestigious address is indicative of importance or not; whether a casual invitation to visit is to be accepted or not; and whether it is necessary to seal an agreement with a signed contract or a handshake.

Some of the symptoms of culture stress are:

- disorientation in time and space
- anxiety, despair, insomnia, loneliness
- excessive washing of the hands
- excessive concern over one's health
- fear of physical contact with locals or servants
- unfocussed staring
- a feeling of helplessness
- over dependence upon others
- anger
- refusal to learn the local language, customs, resources, history
- fear of physical violence or of being cheated
- distrust of all locals
- a longing to be home

During the early stages you may experience conflicting emotions: total rejection of the new environment during which time everything local is bad and everything at home is perfect; a consuming fascination with everything local; hostility or aggression; helplessness. There is a tendency to band together with others who think and feel as you do which may explain why those who arrive at a post when you do remain your most frequent contacts during your posting.

Gradually you become more competent, you begin to learn a little of the local language, customs and norms and you venture about more on your own. You may find yourself indulging your sense of humour at the expense of the host country, hiding behind a feeling of cultural superiority or becoming superactive.