

Culture Shock: A Guide for International Students



INTRODUCTION

Canadian post-secondary schools have seen an increase of 13.7% in international student registration prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. For many students moving to Canada may result in culture shock.

Culture shock is the feeling of being disoriented when entering a new and different culture. As an international student, you are likely making constant adjustments to climate, campus life, time zones, food, language, and social rules or rules of behaviour.



FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE DEGREE OF CULTURE SHOCK

There are different risk factors among newcomers that influence the severity of culture shock:

- 📍 Sense of control within the new country you are in
- 📍 Interpersonal factors (Age, gender, language skills, finances)
- 📍 Personality factors (How sociable you are, your emotional stability)
- 📍 Biological factors (Disability, medical care, dietary restrictions)
- 📍 Spatio-temporal factors (The duration of the stay, the location of travel)
- 📍 Geopolitical factors (Political climate)

Culture shock is less likely to impact you if you cultivate greater level of acceptance of new cultures, practice optimism, have confidence, have a flexible belief system, and display tolerance.

Additionally, the behaviours and attitudes of people around you have an impact on culture shock as well. For instance, the interactions you have with members of the new country can also worsen the experience of culture shock. This includes racist or prejudiced actions against international students can disrupt the alliance and belonging they may want to feel.

Another example is how staff and faculty respond to you. If staff and faculty do not have a good understanding of cross-cultural differences, it may feel like you are not being heard. For example, service providers may not understand the role of mental health stigma within different cultures, or the desire for non-pharmacological approaches within healthcare.

THE STAGES OF CULTURE SHOCK

There are 4 stages of culture shock newcomers can experience. You may find yourself moving forward and backward through these stages at any point in time.



- 1 Honeymoon Stage:** You may feel joy, fascination, and admiration
- 2 Crisis Stage:** You realize the differences in language, concepts, values that can lead to feeling inadequate, frustrated, anxious, and angry
- 3 Recovery Stage:** The crisis is resolved, and you learn about the new country
- 4 Adjustment Stage:** You enjoy the new culture with a new lens regardless of any minor anxiety or strain.

COPING WITH CULTURE SHOCK

Here are some ways to cope with culture shock:

- Talk about your experience with other international students as it may reduce feelings of isolation, homesickness, intercultural conflict, and increase social integration.
- Keep in touch with your home culture by partaking in clubs, finding activities that remind you of your home country, or calling friends and family back home if possible
- Look into what kind of supports are available on and off campus and seeking them out if the transition to a new country is impacting your health or performance
- Reminding yourself what is within your control and practicing grounding methods such as using your five senses to bring you back to the present when overwhelmed. This can look like taking a walk or holding a piece of ice.
- Approach new experiences with curiosity and wonder
- Foster close and positive relationships with members of the new culture to increase cross-cultural adjustment skills.
- Be patient and giving yourself time for adjustments

RESOURCES

YMCA Newcomer Information Centre (NIC): Offered through the YMCA, NIC offers a variety of free supports virtually and in-person. Services include information and referrals, one-on-one meetings, mentoring programs and community connections for networking.

International Students Connect: This website provides resources for international students such as a student guide, student handbook, a transition plan, webinars and fact sheets on various relevant topics. They also offer the ArriveON app to access information on working, community, education and finances for newcomers to get settled in Ontario.