

Don't get shocked. It's cultural shock

Every human being belongs to a culture that orients, supports and frames their life. The expression culture has been heavily discussed in social sciences due to its vast complex concept. In general, culture has been understood as attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviors shared by members of a society.

Cultural beliefs play a significant role in guiding how people act, communicate and understand the world around them. The frame of reference that culture provides becomes a person's second-nature. As a result, people are often blind to elements of their own culture until they experience a new culture that opposes theirs.

Continuing education, working or moving in with a spouse are some of the countless reasons why people decide to leave their homeland to live in a different country. Initially, being a part of a new culture may stimulate a sense of overwhelming fascination and awe for most individuals. However, when moving to a different culture people often find themselves struggling and unable to understand, communicate and function effectively with the new surroundings.

The psychological disorientation that most individuals experience when living in a new unfamiliar culture can be defined as culture shock. Cultural shock is referred to as a person's anxiety that results from losing all familiar signs and symbols of social interaction. Whether an exchange student, migrant, refugee or tourist almost every person that spends some time abroad experiences the problem of culture shock.

Exposure to an alien cultural environment causes distress to a person. However, the actual culture shock is relative to each individual and varies from mild to severe feelings of frustration, homesickness and isolation. Moreover, culture shock brings along various physical, psychological and behavioral symptoms that jeopardize a person's ability to adjust to the demands of the new culture.

Serious physical symptoms may be associated with culture shock. Studies show an increased amount of illnesses and injuries amongst people experiencing living in a new culture. Moreover, digestion problems and loss of appetite have also been linked to culture shock. Other physical symptoms may include sleep disorders and high blood pressure.

Adding to the physical symptoms, psychological disturbances can also arise. Culture shock can lead to decrease in self-confidence because of the failure to cope with the host culture. Feelings of anger and mistrust towards the members of the new culture may occur. Furthermore, an individual finds themselves worried, irritated and depressed about minor solvable occurrences.

The physical and psychological symptoms caused by culture shock lead to numerous behavioral changes. When living in a new culture, people find themselves criticizing and insulting the new culture. Individuals often refuse to learn or speak the language of the new culture. Culture shock may also drive people to become hostile or separate from host nationals and closer to fellow nationals.

Culture shock is considered a complicated phenomenon that is unique to every individual. It is difficult to actually express how disorienting living in another culture can be. Even though values and beliefs between distinct cultures often conflict, however they may often converge. Thus, understanding one's own values and the values of the new culture will help individuals maintain a positive attitude towards adjusting to the new cultural demands.

Remy Elias
Psychologist
www.nawfalclinics.com