

# The Challenge of Culture Shock

Martina Famos is a psychological counsellor with a practice in Zurich, working with individuals and couples in difficult situations. Her intercultural experience formed her natural talent of understanding different cultures, the clashes that can potentially arise when people have differing sociological aspects, and has set the groundwork for her to contribute professionally to a peaceful multicultural society. Read on to learn what Marina has to report.

**C**ulture shock, also named transitional experience or expat blues, describes an emotional difficulty one may experience when moving to a new country or to a different social environment.

Anyone who has lived in a foreign country has experienced culture shock to a certain extent, some intensely, others only mildly, but all experience it in the same order of stages. The same phenomena is also how all human beings go through the same stages of grieving. But let's come back to culture shock and see what the difficulties are.

## Stage one

In stage one, starting before transition, most people have various positive feelings. One enjoys the many new impressions, feels at ease with the new culture, finds it fascinating, may be euphoric and stimulated. One is still passive, as the experience with the new culture still young.

Then follows a time of more face-to-face interactions with the locals, and as a consequence, come experiences of frustration. The people of the host country have different patterns of responding to situations, have a different world view, have other values. One may interpret the reactions of the people as unusual and unpredictable and here is where the expat realizes that he or she is emotionally challenged by the move – it is where many start to feel uncomfortable, lonely, home sick, alienated and some try to reject the task of meeting the challenge. These unpleasant feelings can lead a person to become hostile towards the people around them if they are not under control.

If someone makes a defamatory remark about the people from the host country, it is most likely a sign of that that person has not yet integrated. Sometimes this negative attitude is practiced by an entire group, and if part of that group, it is difficult for an individual to find the right attitude needed for integration.

In this phase it is decisive how determined one is to sustain a self-process that is inclusively international in attitude and behaviour. As Richard Brislin states in his book *Culture Learning*, 'We are speaking, then, of a social-psychological style of self-process that differs from others. The multicultural person is intellectually and emotionally committed to the basic unity of all human beings while at the same time recognizing, legitimizing, accepting, and appreciating the differences that exist between people of different cultures. This person cannot be defined by the languages he or she speaks, the number of countries he or she has visited, nor by the number of personal international contacts that have been made. Nor is he or she defined by profession, place of residence, or cognitive sophistication. Instead, the multicultural person is recognized by a configuration of outlooks and world-view, by how the universe as a dynamically moving process is incorporated, by the way the interconnectedness of life is reflected in thought and action, and by the way this woman or man remains open to the imminence of experience'.

## Stage two

Stage two can be very difficult for an individual, as no one is culture-free, and life asks one to meet a challenge at a time when one is far away from family, friends and perhaps has even left behind an occupation that was fulfilling or is highly challenged by a new job. In other words, while alone, he or she is facing the challenge of learning a new lesson, and it is not voluntarily, so to speak!

It is natural that the human mind tries to avoid learning an unwelcomed lesson. As a result, as in this case, one pays the

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price: by taking a very long time, or worse yet, never feeling at home in the new country, not having come to the valuable experience of extending their horizon beyond their own culture.

### Stage three

Once past the difficulty of culture shock, however, comes the time of confidence and appreciation. To navigate safely through this time full of challenges, it is helpful to integrate some solid routines in a daily structure, since routines help one to feel more safe in times dominated by insecurity.

To learn the language and to interact with local people is important and also to have contact with people from the home culture as long as they are not suffering from culture shock themselves.

A cross-cultural course can be helpful, as well as to participate in integration programs of the host city, and to find a new occupation or hobby.

The move to a new country can possibly trigger issues that seemed to belong to the past, or it can provoke issues that have consequences on one's health, or involve other people in the difficulty too. Culture shock can come back after years again, triggered, for example, pregnancy, loss of a loved one, loss of a job or job change. And it will quite likely hit again when moving back to the home culture, known as the re-entry shock. Interestingly, culture shock is then usually even harder.

Adlerian psychology believes in the power of courage, and that an individual can manage all difficulties in life if encouraged. Please note the book I suggest if interested in what good things encouragement can result in:

#### *Encouragement Makes Good Things Happen,*

By Theo Schoenaker (Routledge 2011)

Written in an engaging and conversational style, the book explores the negative consequences of discouragement on the individual and on society as a whole. It then discusses what encouragement is, why it is important in people's lives, and how individuals can encourage both themselves and others. A book of wisdom, written from the heart, which is surely where all "feelings of community" originate.

I encourage anyone who is in a difficult time of his or her life to take the chance to learn as much as possible from it, on your own or with a counsellor, because in times of crises often lies a treasure of knowledge for each of us.

Adaptation and biculturalism bring a sense of achievement and enthusiasm — when one functions well in and enjoys being in the culture. ■



**About the author:** Martina's hometown is on the boarder triangle of Switzerland, Austria and Italy, and she has been working on projects in the countries of: Canada, USA, Mexico, Guatemala, Cuba, Ecuador, Argentina, Switzerland, France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Austria, Sweden, Thailand, China, Japan and New Zealand.

Martina works with the Individual Psychology methods (also called Adlerian psychology), which includes both encouragement as well as a solution and resource-oriented approach.

More about Martina Famos and her work can be found on [www.martina-famos.ch](http://www.martina-famos.ch)

### Quote for the Day ...



*One's destination is never a place,  
but a new way of seeing things.*

- Henry Miller