

COPING WITH CULTURE SHOCK

Dr Jane Tuomola

Culture shock is defined as "the result of being overwhelmed by major life changes to established patterns without usual support." This is a normal process that occurs when moving countries as we adjust to a new life – new food, new people, new customs.

There are many different stages to culture shock:

- * **Honeymoon phase** – during the first couple of weeks or months everything seems exciting.
- * **Disintegration** – After 2-3 months you may start to notice many frustrations and difficulties of the new culture and think how good home was.
- * **Reintegration** – After 3-6 months you become determined to work through the frustrations.
- * **Tolerance** – Around 6 months you "become more functional" and accepting of the local culture and feel more in control of your life.
- * **Creative independence** – After about 9 months you gain a sense of understanding the culture better and generally enjoy day-to-day life.

Everyone settles in at different paces, and you may go back and forwards through many different feelings during this process of adjustment. Symptoms of culture shock may include: unwarranted criticism of the culture and people, preoccupation with returning home, irritability, loneliness, or physical symptoms of stress.

Children may lack the verbal skills to express their emotions, either as they are too young or choose not to talk as a way of expressing their unhappiness with the move. Instead their feelings may be communicated more through behaviour. There may be physical symptoms such as sleepless nights, headaches and stomachaches, crying, or not eating well.

What You Can Do

If you are feeling distressed there are many things that can help:

- * Talk to other expats, which helps you feel less alone and can give you ideas about how to overcome difficulties.
- * Find out about the culture and social customs which can prevent misunderstandings.
- * Work out what you miss from your own country and find ways to meet this need locally.
- * Focus on what you enjoy in the new culture.

- * Look at your own assumptions and expectations before moving – were they reasonable? Re-examine your own values and be open to learning new things.
- * Talk to friends and family back home who can offer support.
- * Exercise regularly and eat well. Look after yourself physically.
- * Get plenty of sleep, as everything seems worse when you're tired.
- * Keep a routine and structure your days. Avoid long periods on your own.
- * Continue existing hobbies and interests, or use this as a chance to try out new things.
- * Get out and socialise – meet people and above all have fun!

Helping Children Cope

- * Talk to your children to find out what is wrong, and try to normalise their feelings.
- * Turn the potential shock into exciting discoveries by exploring the area and trying new things.
- * Allow your children to feel sad or angry as this is a normal part of the grieving process.
- * Try to recreate a sense of familiarity – with furniture and photos around the house, for example.
- * Keep to normal mealtime and bedtime routines.
- * Set normal limits and boundaries - even though they may feel angry with you, this is no excuse for bad behaviour.
- * Encourage children to both keep in touch with friends and family back home and make new friends locally.



Above all, don't "outsource" parenting – your children need you more not less after a move, and you may need to make some sacrifices of your own.



For more resources for expats, on coping with culture shock, and on general mental health issues, visit www.jane.tuomola.org/resources.

Dr Jane Tuomola is a Clinical Psychologist from the UK who has lived and worked in Singapore for several years. She is Registered with the Health Professions Council in the UK and is on the Singapore Register of Psychologists. She works at Fernhill Counselling (www.fernhill.com.sg).