

Surviving and Thriving in a Foreign Culture

You have the opportunity to live for a time in the heart of Europe in a country renowned for its beauty and prosperity. Wonderful! . . . except that it turns out to be a bit (or a lot) more difficult than you thought. People's behavior, way of thinking and values seem strange and difficult to comprehend. Things work differently than at home, seem more complicated, less efficient – or am I just not succeeding at this? Doubts start to creep in, then anxiety. Is this a big mistake? What's wrong with me? What's wrong with these people? I'm not so sure I want to be here.

What you are experiencing are the four phases of culture shock: honeymoon, anxiety, rejection, and retreat. Every sojourner in a foreign culture passes through these phases on his or her way to cultural adjustment. The individual experience of culture shock varies from mildly irritating to deeply threatening, as our basic assumptions of how life works are thrown into question.

One of the most important ways of coping with culture shock is to recognize and understand it, to realize that it is a natural human response to the circumstances and not your failure to adjust or the crumbling of your sanity. Understanding how we are influenced by culture enables us to have a deeper understanding of our own values and more openness and tolerance for the foreign culture we are living in. Rather than feeling alienated, in this way we can reap the full benefits of living in another culture. We not only survive, but thrive, and can make a contribution to the global community.

When I moved to Basel eighteen years ago, I was completely unaware of the phenomenon of culture shock. I did not expect life here to be as different from life in the U.S. as it is and was thrown into a personal tailspin that was hard to recover from. When I completed my psychology training several years later, I decided to devote part of my work to helping expatriates in the Basel area to overcome culture shock. In public workshops and private counseling sessions, I help clients to cope with the challenges of culture crossing and make the most of their stay abroad.

Make an investment in your sense of well-being and come to the workshop "Surviving and Thriving in a Foreign Culture" on October 31. In a relaxed atmosphere we will look at what culture shock is and, most importantly, how you can help yourself and your family through the difficulties and reap the benefits that living in another culture can provide.