

Culture Shock

Culture shock is a known and documented phenomenon that virtually everybody who crosses from one culture to another experiences to some degree. It is a reaction to moving and living amongst people who have different customs, tastes and values from your own, often in a new language. It can be very difficult for some but it is always a worthwhile experience.

I spoke with Kathy Hartmann-Campbell for her insight into exactly what culture shock is, how to get over it and how to deal with common culture shock issues that arise when moving to Switzerland. Kathy went through a severe culture shock experience herself when she moved to Basel 22 years ago and has been helping people through culture shock in Switzerland for many years.

When does it start?

Culture shock can begin even before you actually set foot in your new host country. In Kathy's case for instance, it began in the form of anxiety attacks as soon as she decided to move to Switzerland. She had met Werner, a Basler, at a student ski hotel six years previously while she was traveling around Europe. They fell in love and had been having a long distance romance ever since. When they decided to commit to each other, they decided that Kathy should move to Basel. Kathy's anxiety was triggered by the move, though she was also excited about it, because she was giving up being single, being independent and her professional identity and, to top it off, she didn't know what she was going to do when she got to Basel.

While Kathy was preparing to move, it was up to Werner to find them a place to live. He was having a tough time because they were on a limited budget. One day he called her up (their second phone call in six years) and asked, "Does it have to have a bathroom?" Kathy laughed, "I know people now who live in apartments with the bathroom out in the hall. I know now that they can be very appealing apartments, but I didn't know about that then and we didn't discuss it very long. I just said, 'yes it has to have a bathroom.' Maybe if I'd given him a chance to explain it to me, the difference in the apartment's size and sun light would have been significant. Our apartment was a very small space that did not allow in a single ray of direct sunlight, but it had a bathroom."

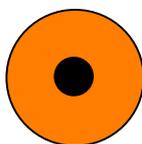
The peach and the coconut

Part of dealing with culture shock is recognizing that there are differences from one culture to another that manifest themselves in a myriad of little ways even if on the surface, your culture and the host culture seem very similar. According to Margaret Oertig-Davidson in her book, *Beyond Chocolate*, intercultural trainers in Switzerland are fond of using the peach and coconut analogy, stemming from the work of Kurt Lewin, a German-American psychologist, as a tool to help people understand and visualize cultural differences.

The Coconut



The peach



The outer layer of each fruit represents a person's public space while the inner layer represents a person's private space.

The four phases of culture shock

I love it here! Everything is so beautiful and tidy!

I just don't know what's happening, I'm doing everything wrong. When I recycled glass bottles last Sunday, a man on the street told me off; he was so rude!

What's wrong with these people? They never smile!

Why bother integrating at all? I'll just spend my time with people I understand who understand me.

The four sentiments above represent the four generally recognized phases of culture shock, the honeymoon phase, the anxiety phase, the rejection phase and the regression phase.

The honeymoon phase

During this phase, you have rose-colored glasses on. Kathy cautions that this phase can last anywhere from a few hours to a few months. "It's like a vacation," she says, "and everything is new and it's exciting and you see the positive things. Then you start to have intercultural incidents, where for example, you're trying to be friendly to someone and they take offense or someone tells you you're doing something wrong."

The anxiety phase

During this phase, "you realize, 'oops, this is not as much the same as I thought it was.'" There's another thing, in particular about Switzerland, explains Kathy, "as a visitor, you can really underestimate how different it is to live here. Another mistake is to have unrealistic expectations of the host culture and how fast you think you should feel at home. Because I extrapolated from Werner, who I still think is the most wonderful person in the world, I made the mistake of thinking that I had left all the assholes behind."

The extent of the anxiety phase depends on the gap between your illusions and false expectations about what life in Switzerland would be like and the reality of your experience here. "It also depends on how many things you've changed at once" explains Kathy. "If your role has changed, if you've gone from being employed to being unemployed and being an accompanying spouse, or if you have just had a child or have a child right away. All of those things compound the anxiety phase. But there is always an anxiety phase even if it doesn't get extreme. At the very minimum it's this realization that, 'this is different; it's not as easy as I thought it was going to be.'" Probably the biggest risk is that you get into a downward spiral of feeling helpless, but feeling that you are a failure so you don't want to tell anyone about it. Isolating yourself in this phase can be very hazardous to your mental health."

The rejection phase

"The next phase, which is very natural," clarifies Kathy, "is the rejection phase: 'They don't stand in line here!' 'They're primitive!' 'This is bad!' 'They're just uncivilized and rude and cold!' You make all of sorts of judgments that come from whatever your paradigm is."

"If you're not careful, then you begin to see everything, even things not having to do with being in Switzerland, as being the problem of Swiss culture. One of the points I make in my workshops," emphasizes Kathy, "is that every culture has a bright side and a dark side of the medallion. Every culture. What happens in culture shock is that you romanticize the positive side of your home culture and you only see the dark side of the culture that you've entered. You can really successfully make yourself extremely miserable doing that."

The regression phase

"During this phase you really step out of it," explains Kathy. "The expatriate community is designed to help you do that. Of her experience during the regression phase, Kathy reminisces, "I did have some American friends, but I had avoided the expatriate community – I didn't join the American Women's Club or any other English-speaking clubs in the beginning because I thought it would hinder my integration. I think that was a mistake, you need some contact with your home culture and you need a community where you don't have to struggle linguistically, humor-wise, culture-wise or ritual-wise to be a part of."

Adjustment

How do you get out of the regression phase?

"The most important thing, emphasizes Kathy, "is to recognize that the regression phase is healthy. Then you have to figure out to what degree you want to integrate and how much you are willing to invest in integrating. The danger, especially if you're in contact with a bubble expatriate community that feeds on rejection, is to get stuck in there and lose all of the benefits of being here. People need to be helped to see what the advantages are to being here."

To help you reach the adjustment phase, Kathy advises finding a mentor who can help you understand what's going on. It doesn't necessarily have to be somebody Swiss, it can just be someone who has been here for a while. The other thing is to realize that anything that nurtures you such as doing a sport or joining a book club helps with culture shock. One of the opportunities that culture shock presents is to learn more about our fundamental needs and how to fulfill them, and how to turn the medallion over, no matter where we are.

Culture shock again?

Yes, even after you have adjusted, culture shock can hit again. "There are waves," cautions Kathy. "Different things can trigger a wave though I don't know if there even has to be a trigger. Certainly for me, having a child triggered a whole new wave. If your professional circumstances change you can experience another wave."

The positives

Look at culture shock as an opportunity to grow up and learn more about yourself, your values and your country as well as an opportunity to learn more about the Swiss and Switzerland. Recognize that you are in the valuable position of being an ambassador for your own culture. And finally, emphasizes Kathy, "one of the biggest positives of going through the culture shock experience is a more well-rounded, more multi-faceted, more open and more self-aware you. There is always a benefit!"

Kathy Hartmann-Campbell

Kathy was born and raised in Middletown, Connecticut halfway between Boston and New York City. She studied philosophy at Yale University and made a living during her college years by successfully selling reference books door to door in remote parts of the United States. She first came to Switzerland during her junior year in college to ski in Davos and to see the Nietzsche stone in Sils Maria. She simply intended to pass through but, as fate would have it, met Werner and fell in love. She moved to Basel to live with him 22 years ago, after a short stint marketing Tampax tampons in New York City.

She worked for many years as a teacher of English in Basel and along the way completed studies in psychology before starting her own consulting company, Communication Skills Training and Consulting. Both as teacher and consultant, she has been helping transplants to Switzerland cope with the joys and sorrows of living in Switzerland for many years. She can be contacted at k.hartmann-campbell@bluewin.ch.