



Intercultural Communication

Culture Shock

As refugees experience the reality of American life, they will go through a period of culture shock. As tourists, we never quite enter true culture shock. It is when we realize that the new environment is going to be our life that the shock comes. Uncertainty, identity conflict, and depression set in. Culture shock has five distinctive stages:

1. **Exhilaration** upon encountering a new environment or culture
2. **Bewilderment, confusion** and an **idealization** of one's own country and culture
3. **Withdrawal** from the alien or new culture, including feelings of discouragement and sometimes depression
4. Gradual growing **understanding** and **appreciation** of the new culture along with emotional recovery
5. **Return to normal** feelings

Emotional needs of refugees are as significant as physical and material needs, but are much harder to identify and measure. The most difficult emotional adjustments usually come after basic self-sufficiency is achieved. The flow of making basic adjustments begins to subside. Refugees have time to think and they are confronted with the permanence of their expatriation. For freedom they have traded family, friends, language, country, and familiarity. The choice is permanent and they are not going to go home.

Because culture shock is a form of loss, it can be compared to the way in which people cope with bereavement. Phases of denial, anger, depression, and finally acceptance can be distinguished. Individuals do not, however, move from one phase to another in a sequence but may go back and forth between the different phases. This is a normal, necessary, and temporary part of the adjustment process. In order to invest emotionally in a new country, the loss of the original country must be resolved and the grieving process must take place.

Culture shock can be either subtle or obvious. Impatience with employment; changes in eating and sleeping patterns; irritability; lack of motivation; inability to concentrate; declining interest in learning the new language; wanting to stay at home alone; overall depression; physical ailments such as digestive difficulties and headaches; lack of trust are all examples of different manifestations of culture shock your mentees may experience.

Responses to Diversity

When you work as a mentor, you will come in contact with aspects of another person's culture that you may not understand or approve of. For example, the role of women is not universally defined around the globe. Compared to many other countries in the world, women in the US have many rights and liberties. When working with women from different or diverse backgrounds, it can be natural to disagree with the manner in which such women may dress, act and live.

It is important to be aware of your feelings on these matters. Only when you are aware of these feelings and beliefs can you actively work to avoid allowing the differences negatively impact the relationship and the work you are trying to accomplish.

It is not a bad thing to disagree with another person's cultural norms and behaviors. In fact it is normal to dislike things about other people. However, it is more important that you are aware of your feelings and that you make sure that these feelings do not come out in the way you work. And remember to have fun and learn! This can be an amazing learning experience if you allow it to be.

Confronting Your Comfort Zone as a Volunteer

Although you will not experience the intense emotions of your mentees, don't be surprised if you also suffer some culture shock. This is because you will be traveling outside your comfort zone.

Your comfort zone is the protective space of familiar activities, environments, and people that surround you. You feel confident and comfortable in that zone because you know and understand how to function in that setting. In fact, you are so comfortable in your comfort zone that you are probably not even aware of it until something pushes you outside of it.

As a new volunteer you will experience some awkward moments. You may travel to areas of the city where you have never been, try new foods that look and smell different, or wait uncomfortably through long pauses in the conversation. On a deeper level, you may feel that your personal space is infringed upon, be uncertain how to interpret comments or criticisms from your mentees, or feel out of place in your mentees' home.

These experiences outside your comfort zone can be frustrating. They may create feelings of anxiety, nervousness, or ambiguity. The best way to manage these experiences is to develop the key attitudes listed below. With time, as you and your mentees get to know one another better and become more familiar with each other's cultural perspectives, the feelings of discomfort and frustration will lessen.

Six Key Attitudes for Working Interculturally

Willingness to Suspend Judgment

Be willing to set aside your ideas about how things ought to be done. When your mentees do or say something that seems strange, difficult, or confusing look for the logical reason behind it. Don't immediately jump to conclusions or make judgments. Keep an open mind and seek to learn. Remember every culture makes sense to the people living in it. Try to discover how different pieces of the culture fit together.

Willingness to Learn

Ask questions. Find out as much as you can about the history, customs, values, or attitudes of your mentees and the country they left behind. Listen carefully to the answers – don't simply use the answer as a spring board to talk about how it is different in the US.

Sense of Humor

Be willing to laugh off embarrassing moments, confusion, or annoyance you encounter as you and your mentees work to understand each other.

Low Goal/Task Orientation

Americans often focus on accomplishing things. Try not to set unrealistic goals for your time volunteering. During your time don't always focus on the tasks you will accomplish together. Instead, concentrate on simply spending time with one another.

Ability to Take a Risk

If you are afraid to fail, you will not take the risk of reaching outside your own culture. Be willing to venture out into unknown territory. Don't be afraid to try new things, say new words, or reach out in new ways.

Willingness to Share Yourself

Don't be afraid to be yourself. Remember that you have special gifts to offer. Be honest and open in your relationship. If you are uncomfortable in a situation, take time to identify your emotions and understand what is causing you to feel that way.

Cross-Cultural Comparisons

One way to examine differences between cultures is to look at closure and non-closure cultures. American culture is an example of a closure culture, while the cultures of many refugees exemplify non-closure cultures.

Closure culture

A culture in which people are most comfortable when things are finished or settled. People in closure cultures are quick to draw conclusions about people, issues, or ideas. They do not like ambiguity. They value setting goals and tasks and working to achieve them.

Non-Closure culture

A culture in which people are very comfortable when things are open-ended. People do not draw conclusions quickly. They have a high tolerance for ambiguity. Above all, people value relationships - deep, warm, harmonious relationships with others.

It is important to remember that specific groups living within a larger culture may not conform to all the general values of that culture. For example, minority communities in the US often have their own cultural characteristics.