

# CULTURE SHOCK AND ADJUSTMENT

When refugees first arrive they are often in 'crisis mode.' There are more needs than any one person can supply and the process of building independence takes time. Relatives, community resources and World Relief Sacramento exist to help refugees move towards self-sufficiency.

There are times when volunteers are surprised by the limitations of the services resettlement agencies provide. Part of the experience of volunteering is entering into some of the realities of social work, government services, and under-served communities. Volunteers may encounter situations where a refugee family is not getting the types of services they (the volunteer or the family) believe they should receive and think "World Relief is not doing their job." In these circumstances, it is important to consult with World Relief in order to clarify our role and responsibilities for each family we resettle. While our desire is to provide the utmost care for each family, our staff capacity limits our ability to exceed the core services set by our contract with the U.S. State Department. While there are families that have unique needs and require additional care, it is important for us to maintain consistency of service to all of the families we serve.

Refugees often come to America with high expectations about what their life will be like here. As a volunteer, you can help guide the expectations of your partnered refugee in the following areas:

## **Resettlement will not be Easy**

- Economic assistance from the government is short-term
- It will take time to find a job
- College education in the U.S. is not free and can be very expensive
- Cars are very expensive to buy and maintain
- Houses are very expensive to purchase and require good credit history
- It is normal to feel frustration and anxiety about the many adjustments
- Resettlement case managers are working with up to 35 families at a time. They may not be able to help with additional needs

## **CROSS CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT FOR REFUGEES**

It is natural for refugees moving to a new country to go through what is called "culture shock." This happens because the values, traditions, customs, and beliefs one carries may vary greatly from the new culture one now lives in. Adjustment to any new situation or culture is not accomplished in a few days. It takes time to adjust to a new lifestyle and to make new friends. Culture is not just experiencing new foods, language, or living in a country with a different political system. Remember, culture refers to the values, traditions, norms, customs, and beliefs of a group or society. It encompasses not just what people think, but how they think and process information. While each person undergoes adjustment at his or her own pace, successful



adjustment usually includes passage through the following four stages. Going through these stages takes anywhere from a few weeks, to months, to years!

### **The Honeymoon Stage**

The first adjustment stage is characterized by a sense of anticipation, exhilaration, and excitement. This is an exciting time. Refugees may experience fascination with their new surroundings. Although they may not fully understand their surroundings at this time, they are eager to fit in. America is great! Everything is new. Refugees have a spirit of cooperation and want to please the people they meet. When misunderstandings increase, they are likely to experience the second state of cultural adjustment.

### **The Hostility Stage**

This adjustment stage is characterized by feelings of frustration, anger, anxiety, and sometimes depression. The initial excitement gives way to frustration with the bureaucracy, the weariness of communicating in English every day, and in some cases, physical discomfort or other problems. Although not fully aware of it, refugees probably react to these stressors by rejecting and displaying hostility toward the new environment. The hostility stage can be a difficult and painful stage. It is important for them to keep in mind that they are not alone -most individuals in their position experience these emotions to some degree and are able to overcome them in due time. Frustration and depression sets in. Refugees are weary of trying to communicate and being misunderstood. They may begin to experience feelings of fear & mistrust.

### **The Humor Stage**

This stage occurs when refugees begin to relax into their new surroundings and begin to laugh at minor mistakes and misunderstandings which would have caused them major headaches in the hostility stage. By now, they have made some friends and adjusted to the complexity of the new life here.

### **The Home Stage**

The final adjustment stage comes when refugees have retained the allegiance to their home culture, but also "feel at home" in their newly acquired one. They may now have successfully adjusted to the norms and standards of the new environment, and should be commended for the ability to live successfully in two cultures.

## **CULTURE SHOCK OR CULTURE FATIGUE**

"Culture fatigue" describes the gradual accumulation, day by day, of stress from encountering the many differences in a new culture.



## **Situations that Trigger Cultural Fatigue**

- Normal habits of communication (customs of politeness, idioms, expressions of emotion, etc.) do not work the way they expect.
- They do not understand the language and must heavily rely on translation and decision making which feels like it is done for them.
- People behave in ways that are not customary in their country. Sometimes, it is not clear to them what the rules for appropriate, customary behavior is.
- They find that people have surprisingly different values and beliefs in this culture regarding the importance of family, money, time, religion or other things.
- They feel that no one knows them for who they really are. People may not know or care who their family is, and their previous accomplishments, profession, or job positions seem unimportant – they are now “only” a refugee.
- Despite all these stresses, they are expected to function with full competence.

## **Symptoms of Culture Fatigue**

It is not unusual for your partnered refugee to experience some of the following symptoms from culture fatigue: exhaustion, irritability, depression, homesickness, sleep difficulty, anxiety, a desire to withdraw, or unexplained weeping. Many people experience one or more of these symptoms between two months and a year into their stay in the foreign country. Normally, these symptoms will come and go, and eventually pass.

## **Suggestions for Adjusting to a New Culture**

The following are suggestions you can make to your partnered refugee to help them in their cross cultural adjustment process:

1. Listen and observe. There are many new rules and norms that may be unfamiliar to your partnered refugee. Encourage them to listen carefully to verbal communication and also observe non-verbal communication. Explain to them through examples the different verbal and non-verbal communication norms we use (i.e. on the west coast of the U.S. it is polite to smile and look people in the eye when talking to them, even to strangers).
2. Ask questions. Remind your partnered refugee to not assume they always know or understand all that is going on. Encourage them to ask questions and repeat back what they hear to make sure they understand. Most Americans will be very helpful if they need an explanation of something.
3. Try not to evaluate, judge or compare. Your partnered refugee will experience many things that are different from their culture. If they talk about how “good/better” life in their previous country was, listen and validate their experience. Their adjustment will be easier



when they accept their new place of residence and begin to look for things they like about their new home. Inquire what these things are.

4. Exercise a sense of humor. It is very likely that your partnered refugee will make mistakes as they explore a new culture. Encourage them to find humor in these moments. This will help them learn and other people will respond with friendliness.

5. Expect some anxiety and frustration. Learning to function in a new culture is not easy. It is natural to feel anxiety and frustration. If your partnered refugee recognizes that these are a normal part of the experience, they may be able to deal with them more effectively. Again, a sense of humor and openness will also help.

6. Be open and curious. In order for your partnered refugee to experience and learn from their new culture, it is important for them to become open to new experiences. This may take time. Encourage your partnered refugee to relax and try to see this as a new adventure. Ask them questions that allow them to be curious about life here. Encourage them to make an effort to meet people, establish friendships, get involved in activities, and learn about people and their culture.

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