

# CULTURE SHOCK AND ADJUSTMENT



## 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:**

- 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).
- Ask questions. Remind your partnered refugee not to 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.
- 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.

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## **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 set in. Refugees are weary of trying to communicate and being misunderstood. They may begin to experience feelings of fear and mistrust.

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**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.

**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.

**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.