

Welcome to Global Culture Shock!

Three simple steps to help manage culture stress

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Almost everyone on the planet has been affected personally in some way by the new coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). Social norms are changing and cultural markers are moving as our culture is changing from under our feet. We currently live in a world characterized by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA). As a result, we are experiencing global culture shock.

Culture Shock/Culture Stress – what is it?

Culture shock is defined by Miriam Webster as “a sense of confusion and uncertainty sometimes with feelings of anxiety that may affect people exposed to an alien culture or environment without adequate preparation.” No one could have been prepared for the massive changes that have recently occurred around the globe as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic. No wonder so many people feel anxious or frustrated.

Cross-cultural workers often distinguish between culture *shock* and culture *stress*. The initial shock of being thrust into a completely new culture can be overwhelming. It is not uncommon to feel exhausted from the overload of so much new information as you try to understand how you are supposed to operate in this new environment. Culture stress usually refers to the ongoing challenges of adapting to the new culture. Although it might not be so severe as to paralyze the individual from being able to function, it can result in negative stress behaviors such as short tempers, over-sensitivity, withdrawing from interaction with others, bossiness, talkativeness, or mild depression.

Most cultural anthropologists agree that we go through four stages as we try to adjust to a new culture: honeymoon, frustration, adjustment, and acceptance or adaptation. A fifth stage would be re-entry shock upon returning to the home culture. After we adjust to a new culture, our perspectives change and we no longer see our previous home culture through the same lenses.

1. Honeymoon. Some people might have seen the initial stages of lockdown and voluntary quarantine as a vacation, a time to get some work done at home, read a book, or catch up on social media and correspondence. The first week or so of Zoom meetings were fun for those who were new to video conferencing.

2. Frustration. As the messages from officials and news media were changing, sometimes hourly, frustration soon began to rise. To some extent many people are still in the frustrated stage as they are waiting and wanting to get back to work, back to school, back to the way things used to be. The realization that this new “temporary reality” is going to last longer than many people first imagined causes more frustration. Now many people are “Zoomed out” and suffering from screen fatigue after too many hours in video conferences.

3. Adjustment. People make it to the adjustment stage at various paces. Some find it easier than others to adjust to the new realities of the new cultural norms.

4. Acceptance or Adaptation. Over time the new normal begins to feel normal. You begin to accept that this is the way things are without being so concerned about whether it is right or wrong—it simply is the way things are. You begin to adapt your way of life to be in step with the expectations of the new normal. Your own cultural values have been challenged and some of these no longer work in the new culture. The values that survive now form part of your personal new culture.

5. Re-entry. We cannot know all that will be different after the emergency has past and a more permanent normal sets in. We can, however, be quite certain that not everything will be the same as it was before COVID-19. Prepare yourself to be caught off-guard by the unexpected when you realize that you actually miss some aspects of the way things were during the crisis. You might even experience a little post-reentry depression.

Three simple steps to help manage culture stress

1. Practice the Spiritual disciplines.

One of the first questions we ask the person exhibiting signs of culture shock is, “Where are your anchors?” If you feel that you are adrift, quite possibly it is because your anchor has not been set in a firm foundation. Establishing a routine is often indicated as help to relieve ongoing stress when one feels out of control of their environment. Putting the spiritual disciplines into practice can help to establish a routine. The spiritual disciplines also help build resilience against the storm of culture shock.

New cross-cultural workers moving to a new country learn the importance of maintaining spiritual health through the disciplines. The people we see who are thriving in this current season have the healthiest spiritual lives. Under pressure they spend more time in silence, solitude, Scripture study, prayer and regular Sabbath rest. Their prayers are not just asking God to give them solutions to their problems or to protect them from harm; they spend more time praising God for his attributes and in intercessory prayer. Sabbath rest is needed as an important part of your routine while it also helps to provide a break from other routines.

Another good question is, “What have you been reading?” The sure footing and handholds of scriptural truth are the ones that can so easily be forgotten by the cross-cultural worker when under duress. One’s grit, personality, cleverness, or experience can be helpful, but the negatives of these same traits can also entrap. You will quickly discover that these alone are not enough to navigate the tumultuous waters of culture stress. Seeking God’s Word and Wisdom to sustain you through transition is key. *It is the Key!* We find the Psalms a good place for comfort. Psalm 46 is a favorite in times of stress. Psalms 41-45 provide the background that set it up nicely. Isaiah 30:15 is another favorite.

In chapter 15 of the Gospel of John, Jesus outlines the essence of the spiritual disciplines. They help to keep us constantly and consciously connected to him and to maintain a close fruitful relationship with him and with others.

While you are forced to stay in place with family, it can be very difficult to practice these disciplines. You might have to get creative to find even a closet where you can experience solitude, or get up before everyone else to listen to the silence. It can also be challenging to actually take a day off for Sabbath

rest, especially when every day seems the same and the needs around you are so great. Or you might feel guilty because you are at home all the time anyway. Instead of making excuses why you can't do that right now, you might need to get creative to find new ways to put the disciplines into practice.

2. Self-awareness – know your needs and get them met

Each of us has our own ideas about the way things ought to be. For us to be in our best, productive, most effective behavior we need things to be in balance. When the world does not operate according to our expectations, when our environment does not seem to be meeting our needs, when others around us are not treating us the way we would like or the way we expect them to treat us, then our life can get out of balance. The result of these unmet needs or expectations is STRESS. More accurately, we are DISTRESSED because things are not the way we think they ought to be.

Consider how you prefer to be treated in the following categories of needs and how your present environment might not be meeting these needs.

a. Emotional Energy: Do you prefer an unemotional environment, separating emotions from business, or do you feel more comfortable being open and expressing emotions in conversation?

b. Social Energy: do you need more time to work alone, or do you prefer to work in a team setting?

c. Physical Energy: Do you need more time to reflect and control your own agenda, or do you prefer a busy schedule?

d. Self-Consciousness: Do you need direct and straightforward communication, or do you prefer more diplomacy that shows respect for you as a person?

e. Assertiveness: Do you need a non-directive, democratic style of supervision, or do you need to know clearly who is in charge?

f. Insistence: Do you need a more informal and flexible routine, or do you prefer a more structured environment with a definite plan in place?

g. Incentives: Do you tend to measure team success as a group, or do you need a means of measuring and rewarding your personal performance?

h. Restlessness: Do you need an environment with few distractions to allow you to focus, or do you prefer variety in your work and deal well with interruptions?

i. Thought: Do you make quick decisions, or do you need time to reflect and consider all angles and possible consequences before making a decision? Do you prefer to have a general outline, or do you need to have a detailed agenda in advance?

(For more about Needs and Stress, read about The Birkman Method at www.gripbirkman.com.)

How are the present circumstances affecting you in these areas? Chances are you are feeling stressed in several of these categories of needs because of the VUCA environment brought on by social distancing, quarantine, "safer at home" or "stay in place" orders and the constant changes brought on by this global pandemic. If you can recognize your unmet needs or expectations then you will be better able to do something to get these needs met and avoid getting into your stress behavior.

3. Do something productive – get your gifts in gear.

Cross-cultural workers learn that the best thing to do to start getting out of stress is to do SOMETHING. Show an act of random kindness. Bake a loaf of homemade bread and share it with a neighbor. Get involved in a hobby that allows you to share with someone else. Do anything that might be the least bit productive to give you a sense of accomplishment and value. Get creative and search for ways to engage your spiritual gifts in ministry to someone else. If you need help identifying your spiritual gifts, go to www.gripbirkman.com to get started on a spiritual gifts assessment. Consult with a minister, mentor, or coach to help you discover your place in the body of Christ—even the *scattered* body of Christ.

We have been amazed at the creativity many people are showing in this current extended period of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Many people seem to be thriving because they see this as a time of opportunity instead of oppression. Now is not the time to sit back and sulk, wishing and waiting for things to return to the way they were. Get up and get your gifts in gear!

Standing firm in a VUCA world

As you learn to manage the stress of the changing world in this coronavirus pandemic, you can help to change your world:

- From Volatility to Stability - Minimize culture stress by establishing a new routine, finding ways to connect with the new, examining what remains constant, and practicing the spiritual disciplines.
 - Spiritual focus - There is a Solid Rock on which we can stand. He never changes.
- From Uncertainty to Certainty – People experiencing culture stress are forced to reexamine their long-held beliefs about what is right or wrong, what is true.
 - Spiritual focus – We can be certain that God is still in control and He cares for us.
- From Complexity to Simplicity – When we are bombarded with so many changes, we can become paralyzed, unable to deal with it all at once. We need to break the complex down to simple components and then start with simple solutions, eat the elephant one bite at a time.
 - Spiritual focus - The simple truth of the gospel is that God loves us and sent his Son as proof. You cannot solve the world’s problems, but together we can each contribute our small part to become part of the solution as we mobilize our gifts for ministry.
- From Ambiguity to Clarity – People want clear answers to their questions, but leaders appear to be obtuse or vague because of the constantly changing circumstances. The messages continue to change as the situation changes. Another part of the problem is the fact that we don’t have any mentors who have walked down this path before us. Our leader/mentors are also experiencing the same global culture stress.
 - Spiritual focus - We might not be able to predict tomorrow, but we know the ultimate future as God has planned it and clearly communicated it in his Word. We can share a clear message that God loves you and has a plan for your life, even now, and you can understand that with “no ifs, ands, or buts.”

Because of this clear, simple certainty, you can stand firmly on the unchanging Solid Rock that is Jesus. As you learn to trust in him and cast your cares on him, you can then begin to adapt to the new normal and make adjustments to your own perspective. Now is the time to move...

- from worrier to Warrior.
- from victim to Victory.
- from fear to Faith.

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