

# ***Please Try This at Home***

## ***Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life***

### **Are You a Victim of Relational Culture Shock?**

Most of us have probably experienced culture shock at some point. It's that disorienting feeling that happens when we encounter a community of people whose fundamental assumptions about how life should go are so different from ours that things we usually take for granted suddenly take a lot of learning, communication, and effort. With such unfamiliar people, we have to re-learn how to do many of the basics of life before we can relax with them and feel like we have anything important in common.

What I love about the movie *My Big, Fat, Greek Wedding* is how well it highlights that culture shock is not just something that people experience when they travel somewhere and encounter strangers. It also happens between people building relationship within the same town, people similar enough to want to marry each other. If you haven't seen the movie, it's about a Chicago woman who comes from a big, loud, passionately Greek family, and who falls in love with an English teacher from a stiff upper lip, small, quiet, Caucasian family. When the families first meet each other at what was supposed to be a "small family gathering," about 20 people from the Greek family show up to roast a goat on the lawn and eat abundant amounts of food with lots of commotion. The two staid Caucasian parents show up and are immediately overwhelmed by the commotion. The Greek family is shocked that the Caucasian parents are so darned quiet and brought only a Bundt cake—a cake that has a *hole* in it—not abundant at all! Both families live in the same city, in the same country, with children similar enough that they want to marry each other, and culture shock reigns!

In therapy, I *constantly* see ways in which relationships suffer from the culture shock that happens between people, often of the same race, gender, religion, etc., living in the same town, or even married to each other for years. And rather than seeing it for what it is—the disorientation that comes from engaging with a person whose "culture" of life experiences are quite different than our own—so many people end up taking it personally and blaming the other person for being insensitive, boorish, selfish, rigid, bad, or whatever.

### **What Relational Culture Shock Can Look Like**

Let's take a closer look at how this works. Say Ellen has a problem. She tells her boyfriend Dave, who immediately tries to fix it. Ellen gets frustrated because Dave tried to fix it rather than just being there with her. Dave thinks Ellen is crazy for not wanting to solve the problem. Both retreat to their friends who understand their "culture" to talk about how odd the other is. Ellen and company wonder how Dave could possibly not know how to just listen for goodness sake and not offer solutions as if he thought Ellen was an idiot and couldn't think of options about what to do. How could he miss that the worst part of a problem is feeling alone in it, *not* being mystified as to what to do!? Dave and company, meanwhile, are wondering how Ellen can be so darned touchy and miss the obvious care Dave was offering by trying to help things be better in short order. Why can't she just receive the solution and move on, for goodness sake?

What Dave and Ellen are missing is that they both grew up in different "cultures." Ellen's culture assumed that problems were an occasion to show togetherness through listening, validation, and shared emotion. Dave's culture assumed that problems need to be solved ASAP so that the

good parts of “togetherness” and life experience could be returned to without being mucked up by a problem.

Here’s another one: Whenever Alex and Ryan go camping, Alex is on time with everything ready to go at the time agreed upon. Ryan shows up missing things so they’ve gotta stop at REI and the gas station and the liquor store “on the way.” Alex hates how long this delays their arrival and it always makes him grumpy. He feels like Ryan is being selfish and irresponsible. If Ryan really cared about their time together, Alex thinks, he’d be on time and ready. Ryan can’t understand why Alex is always so short with him on their first day of camping. He has no idea that in Ryan’s “culture” of experiences, lateness meant lack of respect. Ryan’s family argued constantly over his mom’s lateness and there was no peace until they arrived at their destination. Ryan has no idea that one of the things Alex’s family loved most about trips was going to stores together to pick up exactly what they wanted for their time together.

Thinking along the lines of these kinds of examples, we are probably *all* victims of culture shock, probably several times each day, depending on how many people we encounter and how closely we engage with them. Often, it’s not a big deal. We think, “Wow, that person was odd,” and then we move on. But it can be a big deal in close work, friend, or love relationships. When we don’t make the effort to understand the “culture” that leads to behavior that confuses or irritates us, and instead we remain content to just labeling the person as insensitive, weird, ill-mannered, touchy, etc., eventually, we start thinking about the person more and more along those negative terms. “Kind of insensitive” can harden into “selfish butthead” and then to “stubborn, heartless \*#@\$” and pretty soon we’re looking at divorce, estranged friendship, or job termination. So what keeps us from doing the cultural investigation that can preserve our most important relationships?

## **Shock Blocks: Don’t Know and Scared to Ask x 2**

Some of us have been enmeshed in our own “culture” for so long that *we don’t actually know what exactly our own culture involves*. We’re too *in it* to see it. We only know become aware of it when someone does something that goes against what we are accustomed to and we feel frustrated. But we’ve never taken the time to actually think about the way of going about things that would *not* frustrate us. We just assume that everyone should know.

Or, we may know exactly what our “culture” is like—the way we’d like others to behave with us—and we can articulate it clearly, but we have *no idea what the other person’s “culture” involves*. It would have to dawn on us that what is irritating about the other person might be part of their “culture,” not a moral or personality flaw, and then we’d have to ask them about their past experiences related to the part of the conflict that annoys us to find out what assumptions they are working from.

But that leads us to the next hurdle: *the fear of asking to understand someone’s culture and finding out they really are as bad as the labels we put on them*. What if we ask the other person nicely about their experiences around this issue, what they feel is important about it and what they assume to be true, and then they say something like, “There wasn’t anything about my family or experience related to this. I just don’t like the way you do things.” Yikes! Then we would know for sure that that person, who is important to us, actually *doesn’t* like us or actually *wants* to irritate us. And what would that mean about the relationship? Would we have to leave it or change it a lot? Ugh.

Our second asking fear has more to do with *making the effort to help someone understand our culture and finding that they won't change to accommodate it*. Let's say we figure out what we want in various situations based on our life experiences and took the initiative to tell the other person why it is that we prefer things to be a certain way and they say, "That's still stupid. I'm not changing for you." Yikes #2! Followed by those same fears about permanently damaged relationship.

I will grant you, with great sadness, that there *are* people out there who have been hurt to the extent that they respond hurtfully to us in the ways we most fear. But I will also challenge those fears of learning and asking with my observation that about 9 times out of 10, when I've heard of people persisting in showing genuine interest in the other's culture and genuinely helping the other to understand their culture as well, that the other responds by being appreciative that someone took the risk to move beyond labeling into real relationship. Often, people *do* soften after they feel another really wants to know them and eventually, if not right away, they *are* more willing to find good compromise and better understanding.

So unless you are pretty darned certain that the person who is irritating you is hurt to the extent that they are absolutely closed to finding a better way of meshing cultures with you, here's one way to give your loved ones the gift of closer, smoother relationship:

## 7 Steps to Overcoming Culture Shock

1. Take some time to think through what you generally want in the situations that have caused irritation and conflict, and which life experiences have helped you to want those things.

*Example: Ellen realizes that her Dad made her feel stupid for having problems, but her Uncle Albert was really good at making her feel understood and supported. When she hears solutions to her problems, she hears her Dad telling her, "You should have thought of that already." With Dave, she wants to feel like she did with her uncle, not with her dad. She wants to feel not alone and smart.*

2. Write out what you would want the other person to do or say in which particular kinds of situations in terms that are so specific and clear that the other can follow your instructions successfully even when coming from a totally different culture. Really set them up to succeed.

*Ellen writes:*

*When I tell you about a work problem or a problem with my mom, I want you to write these things on a card that we keep on the fridge. I'll ask you to take out the card and use things that sound like this to respond to me:*

*That sounds awful.*

*What did you do next?*

*How did you feel about that part?*

*It sounds like you did the best you could with that situation.*

*That must have been painful/frustrating/challenging.*

*When I have a problem with something in the house, I will tell you about it and then I will say, "What should I do about that?" Then, I want you to give me ideas and I will thank you for them.*

3. Prepare to have a discussion with the other person about the area of culture conflict. Tell them you've noticed times where both of your assumptions about what to do or say seem

pretty different and that you'd like to talk with them about it. But first, you'd like them to have the chance to think about what feels important to them about the situation and some of the life experiences they've had that have helped those things be important to them. See if you can find a time to talk after they've had the chance to think through this, preferably when you are both fairly well rested with minimal chance of being interrupted by distractions.

4. Begin the conversation by asking to hear what they have thought about. After hearing them out, ask if there are some things they would like you to do that fit more with their culture than what you have been naturally doing.
5. After hearing them out, tell them you'd like them to understand the experiences you've had that relate to this as well. Share your experiences with them to help them understand where you are coming from. Then share your list with them and see if they would be willing to try some or all of the things that you request.
6. When they do something that is on the list you gave them, focus your attention on the fact that they loved you enough to do what you asked, not on the fact that those behaviors do not come naturally to them, based on their cultural experiences. Thank them for responding with the list as genuinely as you would if they had come up with it on their own.
7. When they fail to do what you ask, as gently as you can, tell them that you'd really like them to respond in the way that you discussed. Their return to their old ways is a sign that they are experiencing culture shock! It will take a long time for your culture to feel natural to them, and you will probably need time and reminders to adjust to what they want as well.

As you make the effort to engage in this difficult cultural exchange program, may you be richly rewarded with fewer conflicts, deeper understanding of one another, and the comforting knowledge that culture shock, not lack of love, is behind a healthy chunk of your relational conflicts!

If you or someone you know would like help working through some relational culture shock, feel free to *call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email [info@jenniferdiebel.com](mailto:info@jenniferdiebel.com).*

Thanks for reading!

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