Culture shock

Most people who look back on their experience of living and studying/working in a new country and culture will tell you that the experience was positive and full of opportunity and personal growth. At the same time these individuals can tell you that they had to cope with the challenges of adaptation which ultimately gave them a sense of confidence and resilience, as well as new perspectives and appreciation of the world around them. They dealt with cultural adaptation and culture shock and came out stronger and more confident.

Culture shock is the expected confrontation with the unfamiliar.
Reverse culture shock is the unexpected confrontation with the familiar.

R. Michael Page (Maximizing Study Abroad)

Definition of culture shock

Culture shock describes the reactions people go through in response to the psychological disorientation (feeling of being lost) they experience when they move away from their culture of origin. Existing skills that help you function at home on a day-to-day basis don't fit the needs of the new country. You will have to unlearn some behaviors that were effective while at home and learn the way things are done in your new home.

Your knowledge about the US may be limited or based on information sources that only show you a bit of the culture. This unlearning and new learning and educating takes energy and an on-going awareness of your actions. You might be confronted with negative reactions or misunderstanding by the people around you. Friends and family back home might not understand how natural (and necessary) the change is in order to do well at school and socially. They may feel rejected or offended by your new behaviors and insights.

As a consequence you may experience fatigue, frustration and confusion while you are learning the way of things in the US. You may feel resentment at what appears to be the need to redirect skills and knowledge that are an enrichment of your abilities and talents.

Culture shock can cause intense negative feelings, for instance feelings of discomfort, irritability, bitterness, resentment, homesickness and depression. In some cases people develop distinct physical symptoms of psychosomatic illness. While living abroad gives you great experiences and broadens your horizon, culture shock can result when you leave your culture of origin.

When a person relocates to a new country culture shock is expected. When you go home for a visit or at the end of your studies, reviewing your experiences with culture shock in your host location, you'll recognize that you are going through similar phases in adjusting and settling in back home. The good news is that you can know what is happening, you know it is transitional and normal and you have experience in overcoming the reverse culture shock.

Coming to the US

Research has identified common and normal phases that people go through when they go to live in a new culture and environment. Each person goes through these phases in their own way and at their own time. Below are the common phases of cultural adaptation:

1. **Initial euphoria.** This is the spirit of adventure and expectation; positive mind set; similarities standout. The tourist phase.
2. **Culture shock**. Irritability and hostility (and other possible symptoms) as newness wears off; attention turns from similarities to differences, disorientation, frustration and culture fatigue are some reactions; edgy, impatient, blaming, depressed. It is very common for people to lose some of their self-confidence during this phase. At this time you are learning a lot of new behaviors and unlearning a lot of old behaviors that worked back home and this can lead to some self-doubt.
3. **Adaptation**. The worst is over and things start moving forward again; comfort in understanding begins; sense of humour settles in.

4. **Adaptation and Mastery.** The willingness to adjust; acceptance. Comfort zone. Tolerance. All the new skills and impressions have become normal and you are feeling at home and confident in your new environment.
5. **Reverse culture shock.** Visiting or going home at the conclusion of your studies; when visiting home or returning home for good, it is normal to experience similar phases of adaptation to when you relocated to the US. You have changed while away because you have matured and in order to do well in school and outside of school, you have incorporated the local way of life and perspective. Back home old friends have also matured and had unique experiences that you have not been a part of. You may also find that memories, images, tastes, smells etc. are not what you remember them to be.
Normal and common phases of going home are;

1. **Initial euphoria.** Reconnecting with familiar sights and sounds. Meeting extended family members and old friends. Spirit of adventure and expectation; positive mind set towards the future.
2. **Culture shock.** You find out that you have become a blend of different cultures and experiences. Common experiences include:

- Feeling like an outsider
- Feeling critical of you home culture
- Irritability, hostility , boredom
- Feeling criticized and misunderstood when you adopt parts of host culture
- Loneliness and isolated. No one wants to hear about your other life abroad
- Lowered self confidence
- Struggle to concentrate and to apply new knowledge and new skills

1. **Adaptation**. The worst is over and re-adaptation begins; comfort in understanding begins; your sense of humour settles in. You are finding your place and identity as a global citizen who is carries more than one culture and you are starting to feel self-confident again.
2. **Adaptation and Mastery.** Willingness to adjust; acceptance. Comfort zone. Tolerance. By now you have again created a new normal, but this time in your home country with a social network and regular routines.

Tips for coping with culture shock and reverse culture shock

1. Make an effort to put closure on your experiences by having a farewell dinner or writing a good-bye letter to your home or US-based friends.
2. Recognize that culture shock and reverse culture shock are normal and temporary.
3. Do not make any hurried or important decisions while you are experiencing culture shock: put off making decisions about going home until you have gotten through the culture shock phase.
4. Allow time for grieving the loss of the home culture and the people when you arrive in the US and the other way round when you go back home. Lessen some of the personal demands that you place upon yourself at this time.
5. Take time out for lots of communication between family members.
6. Guard your health: eat well, avoid excessive alcohol or substance use, drink plenty of water, exercise, get enough sleep.
7. Find other expatriates or those that have lived/moved overseas to associate with – is there an international student club at your college or university in the US? When home, can you find others who have travelled and lived abroad?