4 Great ways to help cope with change

The culture shock that you are likely to experience when moving to the United States can leave you feeling disoriented, confused, depressed, and lonely. Culture shock is a completely normal reaction when moving to a new country. Your image of the U.S., for example, may have been formed by watching Hollywood movies. Movies present a highly idealized and unrealistic version of American life, which can lead to disappointment and disillusion once you actually get to the U.S. The fact is that the U.S. is a vast and complex country and, like all countries, it has its share of problems and difficulties. As a foreign exchange student you may find some aspects of American life strange, bewildering, and even, at times, offensive. While coping with the change of living in a new country is difficult, there are steps you can take to minimize the impact.

1. **Keeping an open mind**

The first step to dealing with the big change of moving to a new country is recognizing that difficulties are completely normal. Living in a new society is bound to challenge your most deeply held beliefs and assumptions, and such challenges can feel painful and disorienting. What will help is to keep as open a mind as possible and to try to remain non-judgmental about aspects of American culture that at first seem unusual. You don't have to accept other peoples' opinions and beliefs while in the U.S., but you are expected to respect every person's right to choose the life he or she wants to lead.

2. Stay social

America is a diverse country and Americans are generally encouraging of immigrants striving to maintain their cultural identity. While integrating is very important, you should always try to keep in contact with family and friends back home while also reaching out to other students who are in a similar situation as you are in. Many colleges have student associations for people from specific nations, ethnic groups, or regions. These associations can give you a sense of continuity between your home country and the American way of life. There is also an abundance of other groups and activities that can put you in touch with fellow students and the broader community. Sports organizations and student groups, for example, can help you develop a new social circle. Most colleges also have an orientation week during the first week of classes that are designed to help new students meet one another and familiarize themselves with their new surroundings. Having friends to rely on for support while in the U.S. is extremely important to helping you overcome feelings of loneliness and alienation.

3. Stay healthy

Physical health has a big impact on your mental and emotional wellbeing. Eating a healthy and balanced diet will help combat stress and depression and give you the energy needed for staying ahead on homework and assignments. In most cities and large towns it should be fairly easy to find food that is similar to the food you are used to back home. Staying physically active will also help you feel better. Plus, it can be a great way to meet new people.

4. Campus resources

Culture shock is such a common experience for foreign exchange students that most colleges and postsecondary educational institutions have resources dedicated to helping exchange students cope with the adjustment. The admissions or international student offices on your campus will usually be able to provide advice on where to go for help coping with culture shock. Most schools also have counselling services, which are extremely useful since the information shared during such services is often confidential.

Change is difficult for most people, but there are steps that can help you lessen the impact of culture shock. By keeping an open mind, staying social, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and relying on dedicated campus resources, you will be well equipped to deal with some of the most common difficulties foreign exchange students experience when adapting to life in the U.S.