

Countering Culture Shock

Even though you are serving in the United States, it will be a cross-cultural experience. You may experience frustration, confusion, tension, and even embarrassment. This is normal. You will be living in a very different environment from the one with which you are familiar. Culture shock is not reserved for less spiritual or infrequent travelers; it is an inevitable part of mission life.

But your response is not inevitable. You can choose how to react to differences. You can decide to enter this new culture with an open mind and heart, aiming to build solid trust relationships with new people. If you choose to begin this way instead of with suspicion and fear, you are more likely to work through those frustrating, difficult times and arrive at understanding and mutual respect.

Here are some common cultural clashes and how to manage them:

Eating habits

Everyone has both favorite and disliked foods. Even individual families have their own peculiar eating habits. Combine these preferences with another culture, and frustration is bound to occur. Be open to new cuisine, but if you absolutely hate the food served, politely refuse without commentary. A sweetly offered, "no thank you" is usually enough. If you are uncertain about the taste, try a spoonful. Your hosts will appreciate your willingness to experiment.

Personal space issues

Different cultures have different expectations in encountering people. Some folks are huggers, and others appreciate a polite handshake. Many Latin Americans require less personal space when conversing and may appear "in-your-face" to others. Elderly people often expect respectful poise from younger folks. Offer seats to elder members of the group first. Ask permission to excuse yourself from a place or a conversation.

Language and dialect, voice tone and volume

Although English is the common language, you may experience heavily accented speech or Cajun dialect. Listen with your full attention, and politely ask the speaker to repeat when you do not understand. Some cultures converse at a higher volume. Some are brusque in speech, while others are timid and soft-spoken. Accept the differences as equal, not inferior to your cultural preferences.

Cleanliness issues

Poverty and feelings of hopelessness can cause people to neglect themselves and their property. The workspace may be strewn with litter or piles of junk, but be sensitive. You may want to pick-up and dispose of unsightly items, but this is not your home, so always enlist the residents in decisions to change their living spaces. You have come simply to serve. Jesus did not promise it would always be comfortable or that you would like the folks you have been asked to help. Jesus asks you to simply love and obey him.

