

## CULTURE SHOCK

Culture shock is a critical factor for a good adaptation to field life. Once the excitement of a new situation has passed away, a number of odd reactions may surface. It is then of paramount importance that you learn to understand this side of the process of adaptation to a new environment.

### Culture shock: the signs

Working in another culture and in an unfamiliar country may give rise to a series of reactions such as:

- Confusion
- Feelings of depression
- Inability to adapt socially
- Feelings of isolation
- Frustration

This is what is called “culture shock”.

### Is it normal?

It is absolutely normal to need a period of adjustment and to experience certain reactions when arriving in a new posting abroad:

- It is tiring to have to try to understand everything and no longer have reference points
- One can get the impression of no longer knowing who one is
- One can feel misunderstood or feel that one cannot understand the local inhabitants
- One can feel lost – our friends and sometimes even our family, are far away

Actually, all our life has changed

### The different phases of adjustment

Culture shock will certainly diminish with time and you will find your own means of adjusting to it.

Four different periods have been identified:

1. The honeymoon phase
2. The shock itself
3. The recovery phase
4. The period of adjustment

#### *1. The honeymoon period*

Everything is wonderful! Everything is new, fascinating, exotic! Your experience is extremely positive and exciting!

Your mind is open to everything and every day you discover new aspects of the country and of the culture.

To some extent you lose your critical judgment; everything is fine and even the minor irritations of delays are overlooked in the light of all the new things you are doing on behalf of the people you have come to help.

## *2. The shock itself*

But little by little, without apparent reason, your state of mind seems to deteriorate and everything appears to become more difficult and more complicated.

You become aware that something is really not going well. You feel disoriented. You do not understand what is happening to you. You sleep badly; if you are a smoker, you may smoke more cigarettes; you become more irritable. You begin to doubt yourself and the choices you have made: why did I come here? You may even develop the extreme reaction of no longer being able to bear the people around you.

The risk then is not to recognise what's happening and to resort to "artificial" solutions such as sleeping pills or alcohol.

## *3. The recovery phase*

After a period of shock, it is important to try and find an adequate response and to give oneself the means to recover from it. Reactions diminish when one starts to realise that there is a problem and that one has to face up to it.

You are going to have to find your own equilibrium between the phases of honeymoon and culture shock; you have to adapt and accept a compromise between your initially unrealistic expectations and the present reality.

## *4. The period of adjustment*

You manage to work efficiently and you feel at peace with yourself. You can recognise your own limitations, your resources and your skills. You adapt and become more flexible.

This period may take several months and you may have to continue to make small adjustments throughout your mission.

## **How to manage Culture shock?**

What's to be done when one becomes aware of suffering from this difficulty?

There are three different areas in which you can take appropriate measures:

1. Analyse your difficulties
2. Manage your emotions
3. Develop a social and professional network of support.

### *1. Analyse your difficulties*

The more you can identify the problems that disturb you, the better you can respond to them. Examine the following issues:

- Am I going to adapt easily?
- What is likely to cause me problems in this context of work?
- Will the style of my new work environment be "patriarchal" or more "democratic"?

- Is the culture of the host country individualist or more collectivist? And how about my own culture?
- What will be the dominant values of my own culture when faced with those of the host country? Materialistic or more human and spiritual?

## *2. Manage your emotions better*

Thinking ahead is the best way to protect yourself. You can prepare by anticipating certain scenarios and ask yourself the following questions:

- How am I going to react and what am I going to feel in this new environment?
- How am I going to face up to the stress of international humanitarian work?
- What emotions am I likely to feel (e.g. fear, anger, distress, love, happiness, guilt etc.) and how can I recognise them?

## *3. Develop your support system*

And then finally, ponder over the following issues:

- On what kind of support can I count? Ongoing or just when it is getting rough?
- Have I been able to establish trusting relationships with one or two people in my team?
- What is my relationship with my family in my home country?