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|  | Expat Journal |

**Culture Shock**  It's A Good Thing |
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| Frankfurt/Main-Skyline Foto & Bild | architektur, stadtlandschaft ... |

 **by Ines Hofmann**Cathy was a lawyer in the United States. She accompanied her husband to Frankfurt where he was sent to work for a German car company. I met her after she had been there six months, when she finally stepped into the newcomers’ coffee morning at our international women’s club. She said that she was experiencing the blues – feeling without energy and that every small step outside of her apartment seemed to be a great effort. Strange, this might seem to some, given that Cathy had been working as a competent lawyer in the US just a few months ago. I experienced the same in Rio de Janeiro. To live at the sea was always our dream, but as an expat in Rio country , I felt totally lost, disoriented and without solid ground under my feet. I lost my identity. I fulfilled my daily duties one step at a time but felt like I was not my true self. It was hard to make friends. I felt useless and without goals. While my husband’s career soared, I felt sad and lonely. I wanted to go home to Germany. I was suffering from culture shock. **What Is Culture Shock?**Culture Shock characterizes an emotional disorientation, caused by continuously unexpected reactions from the new culture. Culture shock can manifest in: anxiety; sadness; depression; migraines; burn out; reduced energy levels; new and/or increased tensions and sometimes aggression in the family; isolation and more.Culture shock occurs due to the unfamiliarity of the new environment and the stress factors within family units which increase enormously during a move. For example: lack of skills in the new language; difficulties dealing with authorities and governmental red tape; settling into a new home; trouble with transport at first; sometimes, the threat of greater crime in the new location, lack of close friends and family; issues at the children's new school; different foods and shopping needs; long travel commitments for the working person, homesickness; inability to work in your previous profession; gossip; envy in your own cultural community; misunderstandings with local residents in your new location… the list goes on.Importantly, the challenge to settle into a new country is a process that involves each member of the family. The ease at which one family member deals with new circumstances affects the ease at which the rest of the family adapts successfully. As far as the cultural difference is concerned, when we first arrive we do not know much yet about the values, traditions and norms of this new culture.  We tend to interpret situations that feel strange based on our own cultural background – our own norms and values. Misunderstandings and conflicts with people from different countries are often the result. This leads to more frustration and an even greater sense of insecurity. Which behavior is right, which is wrong? It starts a kind of vicious circle, where you want to give up and return home.**The Culture Shock Model**Psychologists put this dynamic of culture shock into a model with four stages: |
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| Stage One: | Honeymoon Period |
| Stage Two: | Crisis Period |
| Stage Three: | Adaptation Period |
| Stage Four:  | Stabilization Period |

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| The culture shock model represents the adaptation process when you are moving to a new country and culture. When being confronted with a new culture, the duration and intensity of culture shock differs individually. **Culture Shock: It's A Good Thing**Culture shock should not be seen as a negative period that should be avoided, but exactly the opposite: it should be seen as an important step in the process of achieving intercultural competence. Each of the four phases of the model have to be lived through, psychologists say, in order for intercultural competence to be achieved.For example, once you have lived through the tough days and learnt more about your new culture, arguably you have developed: greater empathy for your surroundings and those around you; the ability to think and act in a new cultural frame; greater cultural patience; an openness for international friendships; a more critical mind that can see through myths of prejudice and racial stereotypes; and you have probably fine-tuned your organization skills.**Tips For Dealing With Culture Shock** |
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| 1. | Do not think that you are the only one going through culture shock: remember that it is a normal process for everybody moving to a new country – regardless of how many countries they have lived in before. |
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| 2. | Do not give up when things get tough: Be courageous and try to find an international women's club or similar support network in your new location. Understand that things will get better. |
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| 3. | Increase your circle of friends to include people from all over the world. Restricting your social circle to only people from your own cultural community might turn out to be a limitation, because if you are living in Italy but only mixing with English-speaking friends, how are you ever going to learn Italian? |
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| 4. | Use your time abroad for personal projects that you never had time to do back home. Brainstorm all possible ideas. Write down your skills, hobbies and professional background. Then choose your most favorite areas and focus on those – as they will most likely bring you the most personal satisfaction.  |
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| 5. | Think about the future: If you career-focussed, find out what additional courses or certificates might be useful to pursue your goals when you repatriate and start studying now. Research long-distance universities, online universities and/or local universities. Volunteer in non-profit organisations and/or work (or if you cannot work, volunteer) in relevant job sectors in your new location. Take positions with responsibility, learn, and then ask for references. They might all help later. |
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| 6. | Know that self esteem comes from within yourself, so do not fall into the trap of expecting (and becoming dependent on) positive affirmations from others – especially when those around you have enough stresses of their own. |
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| 7. | Determine your new identity and role and then accept it. Your identity and role can still evolve, but for now, it is important to mentally accept your situation to be able to move forward and to get past your culture shock and ‘relocation blues'.  |
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| 8. | Try to better manage your stress levels (via positive thinking, exercise, specific goals, sleep, a healthy diet and so on), as your stress levels really do affect those of the whole family unit. |
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| 9. | Try to maintain great communication within your family.  Set up family meetings (or meal times) for open discussions and leave space for everybody's concerns. Try to be patient and try to find solutions for/with everybody. Keep in perspective the importance of each ‘problem' compared to the importance of the family overall, as sometimes families inadvertently allow the smallest things to eat away at their happiness. Be careful this does not happen to you.  |
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| 10. | If you find yourself (or any other family member) suffering from depression, seek the help of a professional counselor or psychologist, rather than taking self-prescribed medicine, drinking excessively and/or isolating yourself completely. |

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| **Things Will Get Better**So do not give up when you are going through your crisis period(s). Remind yourself that culture shock is a good thing – and that you and your family will get through it – and most likely, be better for it. Honest. |
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| **Ines Hofmann** is German and lived as a long-term expat in Hong Kong and Brazil. She has two daughters. Ines has expat women friends all over the world. She is a coach for expat families, holds a degree in Business Administration (Human Resources) and a Bachelor in Psychology. Certified Business Trainer. Her business is [**Global Mobility Consulting GMC**](http://www.ines-hofmann.com/en-index.html). Ines offers intercultural coaching for expats in Germany. | Ein Bild, das Person, Im Haus, Frau, Anzug enthält.  Automatisch generierte Beschreibung |

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