

# **EUFASA CONFERENCE MADRID 2010**

## **COMING HOME**

### **Sub-Group Culture Shock**

#### **Members: Finland, Greece**

## **INTRODUCTION**

This report on culture shock and reverse culture shock focuses on the situation of the "trailing spouse" as was decided by the Prague conference in 2009. Though it is by no means exhaustive, the report was prepared with the goal of providing some insight and help before and after repatriation.

## **WHAT IS CULTURE SHOCK**

Culture shock refers to the anxiety and feelings (of surprise, disorientation, uncertainty, confusion, etc.) felt when people have to operate within a different and unknown cultural or social environment, such as a foreign country. It grows out of the difficulties in assimilating the new culture, causing difficulty in knowing what is appropriate and what is not. This is often combined with a dislike for or even disgust (moral or aesthetically) with certain aspects of the new or different culture. The term was introduced for the first time in 1954 by Kalervo Oberg.

(Source: Wikipedia)

Cultural shock can be put into four stages. Once you become familiar with the stages you will be better able to combat it.

- Honeymoon Stage
- Frustration Stage
- Understanding Stage
- Acclimation Stage

Some of the physical symptoms of culture shock include:

- too much sleep or too little sleep
- overeating or loss of appetite
- frequent minor illnesses
- upset stomach/headaches

Some of the psychological symptoms of culture shock include:

- loneliness or boredom
- homesickness, idealising home
- feeling helpless and dependent
- irritability and even hostility
- social withdrawal
- excessive concern for health or security
- rebellion against rules and authority
- feeling like you have no control over your life
- feeling unimportant and being a foreigner
- crying
- negative stereotyping of your host country people

(Source: 2000/7 Volunteer Africa - a charity registered in England & Wales)

## **REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK**

There is also what is referred to as **reverse culture shock**. This occurs when you return to your home country (HC) after having lived in a foreign country for an extended period of time.

In many cases the adjustment to returning home is more difficult than the adjustment to the foreign culture on a posting. Some of the reasons for this can be

- the feeling that no one understands your experiences abroad
- less income
- no proper social network, as can be found among diplomats/expats abroad
- difficulties in dealing with administrative issues (no support as provided by embassies abroad)
- getting no support with finding housing
- no support with finding and funding schools for the children
- former friends have moved on or have little time to spare
- no job
- former friends and colleagues have advanced in their careers
- the civil servant spouse has not yet been assigned a “proper” job, which takes its toll on the family

The following factors also influence how one copes with reverse culture shock:

- Has the return to the HC been voluntary or involuntary?
- was the return to the HC planned or unexpected ?
- the period of absence from the HC
- the amount of interaction one had with the culture of the country/countries of posting (degree of involvement)
- how great the cultural difference is between the country/countries of posting and the HC

## **FOREIGN BORN SPOUSES**

For foreign born spouses (FBSs), the process of settling in the civil servant's home country can be particularly difficult. Apart from experiencing all the aspects of culture shock, the FBSs may not speak the language of the home country and have to manage on their own without the support system that can be provided at an embassy abroad. Furthermore, they do not have their own family members living in the HC and family members of their civil servant spouse may not even live in the same city. Having lived abroad for a prolonged period of time, the returning civil servant may no longer have a strong social network that could help the FBS to adjust. In some cases the situation can be aggravated by the fact that the civil servant partner is now back in his/her home culture and the FBS is in a foreign culture.

## **SOME GENERAL TIPS TO LESSEN THE IMPACT OF CULTURE SHOCK:**

### **Before repatriation:**

- Consider your home posting as a new posting.
- Take into account that you can go through the same “Cycles of Change” such as honeymoon, disorientation (reverse culture shock), denial, frustration and adaptation (integration) as when going out.
- While abroad keep in touch with your HC by reading newspapers, magazines and books of your HC and, if possible, arrange for satellite TV with channels from your HC so you know “what's going on at home”
- if possible, plan a holiday to your HC before your transfer to “get re-acclimatised”.
- Say goodbye properly, not only to your friends but also to places that you visited, the food you ate, etc. Make pictures of your everyday places and circumstances. Later this makes valuable memories.
- Know what to expect when “coming home”: what will you find there and what will you expect to miss. How have you changed? What have you learnt? What can you do with this at home?
- Do this also for your partner and children.
- Try to find housing in an area, where more ‘repats’ and expats live, so that you find “soul mates”.

### **After repatriation:**

- Try to contact other repats; there are often clubs.
- Try to keep up the language you learned abroad.
- Give yourself and your family time to get settled.
- Be reluctant with your stories about the expat life and don't complain about your “boring” life in your HC. People, who have never lived abroad, can't relate to this.
- Don't forget that you are used to changes; use this experience and ability also when coming home.
- Eventually, use this opportunity to start something new and challenging
- Don't fret over the things you now miss from your expat life, but try to enjoy the things from “home” that you missed when you were on post.

- FBSs should learn the language and customs of the HC; this will be of great help in the adaptation process. Don't assume that you are only on home posting for a short period and that you "can manage", for example, in English or that there are only so few people in the world who speak the HC language. Without language skills you will miss out on a lot of opportunities
- For retirees, don't get involved too soon in all kinds of activities. Give yourself time to get used to the idea that there is no difference between working time and free time, but that there is just "time".

### **WHAT MINISTRIES FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS (MFAs) CAN DO TO HELP.**

- Organise 'Coming Home' seminars which include practical, administrative and psychological advice for returning families
- Arrange / finance home country language courses for FBS. This will enable FBSs on their next foreign posting to better represent and understand the customs of the HC.

### **WHAT SPOUSE ASSOCIATIONS CAN DO TO HELP:**

- Arrange 'Coming Home' coffees or other social events for spouses, including FBSs, to meet one another and to enable them to build up a support system.
- For some of these events, use English as the language of communication to enable FBSs with no home language skills to participate and meet other "locals".

### **CONCLUSION:**

Be prepared that culture shock and reverse culture shock affects most of us to some degree. Many experts think that it affects the trailing spouse more than the working partner because the trailing spouse lacks the sense of belonging to a team, a project, an organization. Still many MFAs do not pay enough attention to provide training and preparation for the spouse before a posting and after repatriation.

According to an article from Wikipedia on culture shock there are three outcomes on the Adjustment Phase: about 60 % of the people find it impossible to integrate into the foreign culture and they also have the greatest problems re-integrating back home after their return. About 10 % integrate fully and take on all parts of the host culture while losing their original identity. Approximately 30 % manage to see the host culture positive while keeping some of their own and creating a unique blend. They have no major problems returning home or relocating elsewhere. These are the so-called Cosmopolitans.

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