

# Handling Culture Shock

There are some well-documented stages that expats and their families go through when they move overseas. This factsheet will look at some of these, and suggest some ideas for making the experience a fundamentally positive one. It will cover:

- The shock of the new
- Being resourceful
- Cutting yourself some slack

## THE SHOCK OF THE NEW

Most experts say it takes a good six months to adjust to living in a new country. Here are some of the stages people commonly go through, along with some suggestions on how to deal with them. It might help just to know these feelings are 'normal'.

- There's usually a 'honeymoon period' when it's like being on holiday — everything's new and exciting. Use some of this positive energy on turning adjustment into an adventure, rather than just taking family days out. Explore local resources, get to know neighbours, or look into sports clubs.
- After the early excitement, reality can hit hard. Initial denial can quickly lead to anger at all the things that aren't going well. Remember that there are good and bad things about most places — it's all part of the adventure.
- The desire to escape hits many expats, particularly spouses, from time to time. It's easy to get into extended trips home. If at all possible, these are best avoided, as they can unsettle the whole family.

## BEING RESOURCEFUL

Having signed on for a foreign assignment, most expats are already adventurous and resourceful. However the reality of the experience requires adjustments, particularly after the logistics of relocation and the realities of your home-away-from-home become clear. You may find aspects of that reality difficult at first — language and shopping challenges and lack of familiar support. And, adjusting to your new home is often more difficult for family who may accompany an employee who's wrapped up in work.

Whether employee or family, give yourself time to get to know as much as you can about your host country. Focus on all the opportunities it offers, rather than on the more challenging aspects. Read newspapers and join the library. Visit the local embassy which often assists others making adjustments to the area. Resources like these can help break through unfair stereotypes that even the most thoughtful expats can hold, and can help you stay in touch with what's happening locally.

Look on the internet for expat resources — there are many support, social and special interest groups if you want to meet some compatriots. For example:

- [www.transitionsabroad.com/listings/living/resources/expatriatewebsites.shtml](http://www.transitionsabroad.com/listings/living/resources/expatriatewebsites.shtml)
- [www.expatexchange.com](http://www.expatexchange.com)
- [www.alloexpat.com](http://www.alloexpat.com)

Explore opportunities to get to know people other than work colleagues. It's healthy for employees and spouses to broaden their social network.

You may want to consider some of the following:

- Join a local place of worship
- Join a local gym
- Volunteer at your child's school or another organization
- Take a course at a local high school or college
- Attend a lecture on a subject that interests you
- Join a local sports club

## CUTTING YOURSELF SOME SLACK

- It's likely that the whole family will be busy and preoccupied when you first arrive. Make time for each other and talk as often as you can about how things are going.
- Living overseas might mean something different to everyone. Be aware that other family members might feel more or less positive than you do. Try to support one another.
- People experience strong emotions when living away from home. Homesickness, resentment, guilt, excitement, relief — they're all valid, so don't give yourself a hard time. If things get out of hand, consider arranging to talk to a professional, such as a counselor, to help you work through your concerns.

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