From Culture Shock to Cultural Transitions: Eliminating Language of Catastrophe in International Education
Session Overview

› Problematizing Culture Shock
› Reframing the Narrative
› Strategies for Practitioners
› Application & Discussion
› Questions & Call to Action
1. Problematizing the Culture Shock Construct

The current narrative of international education
IE Current Narrative

Common Language:
Culture shock
W-curve or U-curve
Reverse culture shock
The Problem of Culture Shock

- No clear definition or meaning
- Crisis and catastrophe “911 Approach”
- Inevitable/Expected
- Predictive - sets expectations of shock happening

- Reactive & Unavoidable
- Implies that intense feelings are abnormal or unhealthy
- Dismissive of individual experiences

The “W” Curve
Critiques of the “W” Curve

Stage Inaccuracy

Students with language experience adapt earlier, but report difficulties with sociocultural adaptation later (Savicki)

Students often feel confused and disoriented in initial weeks in a new culture, not euphoric (Ward, 2003)

Initial difficulty, improved adaptability in the middle, difficulty at the end – inverse W-Curve (Savicki)
Critiques of the “W” Curve (cont.)

Student Differences

Most students do not recognize culture “shock” symptoms on arrival or re-entry until later reflections.

Students with language abilities may have more intense exposure to host culture; those without may be blind to cultural difference (Savicki).

All students have unique and individual experiences.
Why is this important?

Neuroscience brain research shows brain response to extended arousal and stress can cause reasoning, planning, language skills to “shut-off” – leading to heightened emotional response, confusion, irritability, etc. (Abarbanel)
Learning is not likely to occur when an appropriate balance of challenge and support is absent (Sanford)
2. REFRAming the Narrative

From *Culture Shock* to Cultural Transition
What’s Up with Culture?

2003 FIPSE Grant funded project awarded to Bruce LaBrack at University of the Pacific to support and enhance student’s cultural adjustments related to international education

Defined 5 common reactions to cultural adjustment: surprise, stress, irritation, fatigue and shock

http://www2.pacific.edu/sis/culture/
Social Desirability Bias

The tendency of research subjects to give socially desirable responses instead of choosing responses that are reflective of their true feelings. (Grimm 2010)

If students are told they will have culture shock. They will report culture shock.
Abarbanel - Eliminating the language of culture shock

› ‘Just having culture shock’
› An awareness of strategies to handle stress reactions has not often translated into practice.
› Stigma of ‘mental health’
› Easy to relegate ‘emotional’ challenges to crisis interventions
Preparing students with tools to manage cultural transition

› Moving from symptoms to signals
› Supporting skills for emotional regulation
› Help students learn to identify and anticipate feelings or ‘signals’ of discomfort when exposed to new challenges.
3. STRATEGIES

Preparing Students for Cultural Transition
Butler Model of Cultural Transition

6 Types of Cultural Transition

Culture Surprise
Culture Exploration
Culture Stress
Culture Adjustment
Culture Fatigue
Culture Conflict
Discussion

What examples from your personal or professional experience aligns with these six phases of cultural transition?

SEE HANDOUT
Cultural Negotiations

- Cultural Conflict
  - Uncertainty
  - Fatigue
  - Disengagement
  - Stress

- Cultural Exploration
  - Surprise
  - Interest
  - Excitement
  - Awareness

- Cultural Adjustment
  - Acculturation
  - Assimilation
  - Practice
  - Adaptation

Home → Cultural Transition → Host
Comprehensive Emotional Wellness

**PRE-DEPARTURE**

**WHILE ABROAD/Critical INCIDENTS**

**RE-ENTRY**

(Educators) can better serve their student population by integrating wellness practices into program planning.

(Abarbanel 2009)
Pre-departure orientation

Engage students in conversations about emotional health:

› Previous Transition Experiences (e.g. going to college)
› Logistical Concerns
› Interpersonal Skills
› Coping and Stress Management Skills
While Abroad: Emotional Health

Critical Incidents
“cultural faux pas (behavioral, linguistic, or assumption based) that actually happen[s] to a student while abroad” (Bathurst and La Brack 2012)

Self-Care
Skills for noticing and regulating energy and moods

Other-Care
Skills for awareness of one’s connection to a community
Re-entry Transitions

Similar to outbound transitions, use the same strategies to promote emotional wellness upon return.
4. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Incorporating change into current practices
In your experience...

Consider these four areas of international education.

› Advising
› Orientation
› Time Abroad / Incidents
› Re-entry

Discuss with your table:

What are your current practices around preparing students for and supporting students through cultural transitions? How could you incorporate this new information?
5. DEBRIEF

What? So what?
Now what?
Reminders

› Avoid Crisis/catastrophe language
› Experience of intense feelings is normal
› Proactive Focus on coping strategies

QUESTIONS / COMMENTS

Paige E. Butler, Ed.D.
pbutler@miis.edu
David Smith
ds1@miis.edu
Christopher Adams
c tadams@miis.edu

Session Resources available at:
tinyurl.com/CulturalTransitions
Moving from Culture Shock to Cultural Transitions
Eliminating the Language of Catastrophe in International Education

Encountering Cultures: A process of negotiating home and host cultures

Figure 1. Six Types of Cultural Encounters

- Culture Surprise
- Culture Exploration
- Culture Stress
- Culture Adjustment
- Culture Fatigue
- Culture Conflict

Encountering Cultures: A process of negotiating home and host cultures

Figure 2. Three Cultural Negotiations

Cultural Conflict
- Uncertainty
- Disengagement
- Fatigue
- Stress

Cultural Adjustment
- Acculturation
- Assimilation
- Adaptation

Cultural Exploration
- Surprise
- Interest
- Awareness
- Arousal

Cultural Transition

Home

Host
Cultural Transitions

The six transitional phases below are normal psychological responses to a new cultural context. It is important for sojourners to prepare themselves for these transitions and learn how to recognize and minimize the effects. These are cumulative responses to extended exposure to a new culture and may not be triggered by any particular event. Not all individuals will experience all phases, and responses differ.

Culture "Surprise": Early, typically positive phase of transition to a new culture in which you become aware of new, exciting, visible, surface-level and startling differences. While this may be initially energizing, it can also lead to overstimulation and fatigue.

Culture “Exploration”: Phase of transition that is focused upon seeking out understanding of a new cultural context. Typically starts at the more superficial level and works toward deeper investigation of a culture (e.g. food, history, etc.). This also includes intercultural and linguistic study and practice. This may include discovering elements of a culture with which one agrees and disagrees.

Culture "Stress": Encountering difficulty in daily living can lead to frustration or annoyance, this transition phase is a common response to being highly stimulated for an extended period of time. Can lead to withdrawal or stress response behaviors such as excessive sleeping or higher than usual emotional responses. Generally mild response that may appear and fade away, depending on daily activities.

Culture “Adjustment”: This stage includes trial and error of making conscious and unconscious decisions that reflect an ability to navigate daily living in the host culture. This phase may be characterized by overcompensating to adjust to the new culture, and then recalibrating in efforts to find a balance of adapting the home and host cultures into patterns of daily living.

Culture "Fatigue": This transition phase occurs in response to a high level of stimuli for an ongoing time period. Cultural fatigue often happens when continuously processing new cultural information and making efforts to respond to the behaviors of the new culture. This can lead to a decline in interest in the new culture, an increase in irritation, high levels of emotional response. This is often accompanied by “language fatigue” for individuals making effort to primarily use a second language.

Culture “Conflict”: This transitional phase may manifest in response to observable behaviors in the host culture that may irritate or annoy an individual (e.g. street harassment, staring, etc.) or it may be in response to a critical incident that occurs challenging our values and behaviors or encountering a difficult situation that is exacerbated by the unfamiliar cultural context.

Common stressed behavior signals (not symptoms) of culture transition:

- Homesickness or boredom; withdrawal/isolation
- Feelings of helplessness/dependency
- Depression and sadness
- Loss of focus and ability to complete tasks
- Excessive drinking or recreational drug use
- Sleep/eating disturbances (too little or too much)
- Hyper-irritability, may include inappropriate anger and hostility
- Excessive critical reactions to host culture/stereotyping
- Excessive concerns over sanitation, safety (even paranoia), and being taken advantage of
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transition Phase</th>
<th>Observations/Notes/Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culture Surprise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture Exploration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture Stress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture Adjustment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture Fatigue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture Conflict</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Engaging students in conversations about emotional health:

Here are 12 questions to consider in conversations with students about the importance of sustaining emotional health during “away” programs. Consider using one or more of these on program applications, as part of pre-departure or onsite orientations, and/or as part of the transition “home”.

1. Describe skills you already have that might make it easier to settle into your program? (or, to settle back “home”, or into your home campus)
2. Reflect on an experience where everything was new, and you figured out/had help with ways to get comfortable. (camp, a new school, a family move, parents’ divorce or re-marriage, etc.) What was the challenge? How did you approach the situation? What worked? Who helped you? What was especially hard? Something learned?
3. Describe a time you asked for help. Whom did you approach? What happened?
4. Describe an experience when you relied on others. What was it like?
5. How do you know when you feel overloaded or stressed? What strategies work for you to facilitate shifting into a calmer place?
6. Describe what in your daily routine helps you get things done and stay focused. What would help you maintain your best self abroad – what do you need in your routine?
7. Describe a time when others disagreed with you. How did you respond?
8. Who and what will be particularly hard to leave? How will you prepare?
9. What skills do you have/know about in yourself that help when you feel confused, when others seem hurtful, when you want to be alone?
10. Describe ways that you take care of yourself when you run out of energy? What ideas do you have that could expand your list? What do you know about your program/site that could support self-care?
11. What do you imagine it would be like be without access to social media for a day, a week? What would you do with your energy and time? Have you ever experienced this situation before?
12. If you are in counseling now (pre-departure), what plans do you have for continuing this support? Have you asked about available counseling resources abroad?
Below are some other ideas to facilitate disengagement from high arousal. One can develop one’s own toolbox and practice.

- Create periods when cell phones, computers, and other electronics are off limits.
- Support healthy eating, minimizing high sugar intake.
- Mindful awareness: through breathing, shift attention to the present. This increases capacity for self-soothing. If you are present in the moment, you are not worrying and feel less helpless.
- Exercise moderates the impact of high arousal, but be sure to include additional strategies to supplement your toolbox.
- Yoga: a nice complement to aerobic exercise.
- Tree-forest images: practice stepping back and taking stock of the moment.
- Half-smile. Try it!
- Change the channel: Visualize a set of images ahead of time so that they are a resource, e.g. Channel 8 could be the immediate imagined catastrophe, and Channel 4 (pre-selected) is ‘you’ sitting on your porch at home watching the sunset.
- Dial down: put your fist on your forehead and ‘dial’ down your high intensity to a lower level. This is a re-set to a quieter place and provides a pause to begin clearer thinking.
- The arts: use a variety of possibilities around the arts – music, painting, dance, singing, poetry, pottery, all provide respite from high arousal.

The capacity to calm down – self-regulate – in the face of strong reactions to uncomfortable or even disturbing events is a dynamic process. With a refueled brain, there is more energy to sit with negative thoughts and feelings. Calmer, one can then begin to put things into perspective and embrace multiple points of view and alternative interpretations. Working with this process is part of what one can offer young sojourners.
For Study Abroad Professionals, Supporting Resilience in Transition
A Guide for Conversations with Students about Emotional Health

Janice Abarbanel, PhD, Psychologist and Health Educator,
Study Abroad and Emerging Adulthood

Introduction: Why it’s important to discuss emotional health with all students.

An essential and holistic best practice for study abroad and Gap Year programming includes staff training about the life stage of Emerging Adulthood. Understanding the gifts and challenges of 18-25 year olds is key. Knowing who our students are broadens professional skill sets for preparing students and staffs for successful learning experiences in new and different contexts. Characteristics of Emerging Adulthood (J. Arnett. 2004) include a long period for exploring a wide range of possibilities for career choices and relationships. Of particular note is that Emerging Adulthood is a stage of optimism and possibilities.

The desire to “head out” and explore provides positive energy for students seeking abroad experiences. At the same time, when commitments are few, the age is normative for instability and high-risk behaviors. For many, the transitional period into adulthood is prolonged, often allowing years for sorting out future choices, quite different from the more conscribed expectations experienced by their parents’ generation.

In addition, neuroscience tells us that the developmental time period of Emerging Adulthood includes significant brain changes, a time when the capacity to plan and reflect is strengthening, but when the emotional charge to take risks and “head out” continues to lead.

This guide focuses on building skills for study abroad professionals to support the emotional health of all our students during this life stage. These skills are part of what this writer calls the “Emotional Passport”, an overarching and collaborative mind set and skill set in which each of us learns to recognize rising anxiety or shifting moods which come with significant transitions into and out of cultures. When intensities are high, we develop ways to shift away from stressors towards calmer moods so that, when we feel re-balanced, we have more energy to attend to our focus, be it studies, projects, or relationships.

What is emotional health? Some people think that emotional health means being in a good mood most of the time, regardless of the situation. Many assume that everyone is OK, unless they have “a mental health problem”. This negative attitude is normalized in many cultures and keeps staff from developing helping skills and students from seeking help. The reality is that
emotional health reflects a strong capacity for resilience, the capacity to bounce back from life’s disappointments and challenges, emerging stronger than before. Shifting into new cultures, in the US or abroad, taps into our emotional skills. Just transitioning to a place where everything is new puts us on alert to our emotional responses and behaviors.

Here is a list of skills that describe emotional resiliency: each should be considered in the context of a holistic or “big picture” model that integrates wellness practices, intercultural learning, and safety.

1. flexible thinking and behaviors
2. capacity to pause, consider, reflect
3. considered care of self and community
4. capacity to lean in with curiosity, with perspective
5. feeling safe asking for guidance and help
6. self-care to regulate shifting moods – normal when everything is new

Emotions drive learning – a key concept. When you feel well, you are likely to learn well and engage positively with new experiences. Being resilient is based on emotional capacities -- to notice a challenge and then take steps to seek support for creating next best steps.

As study abroad professionals, we have a particular responsibility to attend to supporting and guiding the emotional health of all of our students. Crisis and safety preparations are essential, yet, often overlooked by staff are preparations for connecting with all students about ways to develop and sustain emotional health. Remember, Emerging Adulthood is a life stage of opportunities and vulnerabilities, a critical dynamic of our students’ lives.

Positive emotions energize communities. So, as leaders, it’s essential for us to stay mindful of our own emotional health. Our own self-care contributes to our ability to encourage healthy connections with our students and host cultures. Integrating wellness strategies into programming, staffs can contribute to quieting the normal insecurities and varied moods that students bring to arrivals, departures, and daily life abroad.

From the outset, we can describe to students the role emotions play in living and learning in places that are new. Co-regulation – the calm and knowing guidance of staff -- builds the students’ capacities for self-regulation.

Students and staff together create learning communities where emotions are shared – when staff welcome with positive language and understanding the arrival of excited and likely overwhelmed students (all normal), then it’s likely that students will be more open to reaching out for support.

Arriving in a place where everything is new requires checking in with one’s strengths, leaning in with curiosity, and having capacities to shift into an
emotional framework where difference is interesting and where support is expected and reliable. No one is an expert at shifting cultures – preparing for and engaging in experiences where everything is new involves a large emotional investment for everyone.

Most students are surprised about how intense they feel as they transition into programs abroad. It’s normal for moods to shift when cultures shift. And it’s normal for everyone to experience the shifts in his or her own way. It’s important that staff stay open to a wide corral of student responses.

Engaging students in conversations about emotional health:

Here are 12 questions to consider in conversations with students about the importance of sustaining emotional health during “away” programs. Consider using one or more of these on program applications, as part of pre-departure or onsite orientations, and/or as part of the transition “home”.

1. Describe skills you already have that might make it easier to settle into your program? (or, to settle back “home”, or into your home campus)
2. Reflect on an experience where everything was new, and you figured out/had help with ways to get comfortable. (camp, a new school, a family move, parents’ divorce or re-marriage, etc.) What was the challenge? How did you approach the situation? What worked? Who helped you? What was especially hard? Something learned?
3. Describe a time you asked for help. Whom did you approach? What happened?
4. Describe an experience when you relied on others. What was it like?
5. How do you know when you feel overloaded or stressed? What strategies work for you to facilitate shifting into a calmer place?
6. Describe what in your daily routine helps you get things done and stay focused. What would help you maintain your best self abroad – what do you need in your routine?
7. Describe a time when others disagreed with you. How did you respond? Who and what will be particularly hard to leave? How will you prepare?
8. What skills do you have/know about in yourself that help when you feel confused, when others seem hurtful, when you want to be alone?
9. Describe ways that you take care of yourself when you run out of energy?
What ideas do you have that could expand your list? What do you know about your program/site that could support self-care?
10. What do you imagine it would be like be without access to social media for a day, a week? What would you do with your energy and time? Have you ever experienced this situation before?
11. If you are in counseling now (pre-departure), what plans do you have for continuing this support? Have you asked about available counseling resources abroad?
Be Ready for Departure!
Believe in your ability to solve problems and know when to ask for help. Rely on staff support.

Expect surprises, learn to anticipate challenges, and practice finding difference interesting.

Stay curious.

When interpersonal problems arise, focus on your contribution.

Practice getting comfortable with periods of feeling uncomfortable. It takes time to develop skills in your host culture.

Wellness and Study Abroad
Make the most of your study abroad experiences.

Helping Resources:
Your program:

Emergency phone:
* * * * * * * *

Developed by
Janice Abarbanel PhD
Study Abroad Psychologist and Health Educator

DEVELOP AN EMOTIONAL PASSPORT
Did you know?

Cultural Transitions Intensify Moods: Highs and Lows

Higher levels of stress accompany cultural transitions. The brain's logic/language centers can be diminished by the power of mood shifts. Learn to calm yourself down and manage your energy. You will be a more effective learner and on your way to achieving your study abroad goals.

Study abroad is a process, not an event. Welcome the whole journey, integrating pre-departure, in-country, and transition experiences. There are adjustments and surprises along the way.

Moods shift when cultures shift.

Some Common Signals That You Have Shifted Cultures:

- Homesickness
- Irritability and hostility
- Boredom
- Withdrawal
- Need for excessive amounts of sleep
- Compulsive eating or drinking
- Stereotyping of host culture
- Loss of ability to work effectively
- Physical ailments

Some Effective Culture Shift Strategies:

- Consult with mentors and peers.
- Develop a support network.
- Stay alert to the signals as signs of change.
- Eat well, exercise, keep a mood journal.
- Breathe! Slow down. Walk in the park.
- Build in quiet time.
- Minimize catastrophic thinking by turning “What if’s” into “What else…”

Pay attention! Be prepared to get help if “signals” turn into persistent and worrisome behaviors.

It's a strength to ask for help from peers and advisors.

Learn to Culture Shift: the normal capacity to transition into another culture with healthy expectations and skills for change and adaptation. With culture shift strategies, you can make the most of your intercultural experiences.

Practice noticing and regulating the intense emotions that are so often part of the study abroad experience.

Mood cycles are common. Notice your moods as “information”. Build quiet spaces into your busy days as a way to integrate the emotional highs and lows.

- Stress is critical for growth. Learn to build in recovery periods for optimal learning and performance.
- Stay curious as your center of gravity is challenged.
- Review your goals for studying abroad – if you experience low moods, try to put things into perspective.
- There is no need for “shock” as you transition abroad.
Intercultural Education
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title=content=t713393965

Moving with emotional resilience between and within cultures
Janice Abarbanel

Online publication date: 27 November 2009

To cite this Article Abarbanel, Janice(2009) 'Moving with emotional resilience between and within cultures', Intercultural Education, 20: 4, S133 — S141
To link to this Article DOI: 10.1080/14675980903371035
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14675980903371035

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Moving with emotional resilience between and within cultures
Janice Abarbanel*
Portland, Maine, USA

Having an ‘emotional passport’ means acquiring skills to regulate intense emotional challenges experienced in cultural transitions. This paper addresses ways to help young travelers become more resilient problem-solvers, better at tolerating ambiguity, and more competent with cultural difference. It points out how the intercultural field misses opportunities to prepare learners for the emotional highs and lows of cultural exchange, relying instead on language of catastrophe (‘culture shock’) and crisis preparation. Instead, strategies can be taught to help regulate the normal stressors that come with crossing cultures. Crisis planning alone does not meet the psychological needs of most sojourners. This paper encourages a shift in language and practice from ‘culture shock’ to ‘culture shift’ by outlining how our brains process and integrate new information, and describes life stage issues facing young adults, demonstrating how these challenges interface with the emotional competencies necessary for crossing cultures.

Keywords: resilience; intercultural; self-regulation; culture shock; culture shift

Introduction
Edward T. Hall, anthropologist and founding-father of intercultural communication, writes that the Tewa tribe of New Mexico used the same word for ‘learning’ as for ‘breathing’ (Hall 1991) This is remarkable, for today we know that the best learning requires the capacity to slow our breathing in order to calmly attend, focus and integrate information. Best ‘learners’, or best problem-solvers, could be described as those who have a capacity for emotional resilience, a capacity the author calls the ‘emotional passport’. The author believes that the resilience necessary for positive intercultural exchanges involves important psychological variables that are often overlooked by students, faculty and host families.

The ‘emotional passport’ is a dynamic toolbox of skills learned and practiced during the full circle of intercultural exchange: pre-departure, on site and re-entry. Those who carry an emotional passport recognize that moving between cultures can contribute to high emotional arousal (discomfort, irritability, anger, homesickness, sadness) and understand that disengaging from emotional overload to quiet the mind will contribute to improved focus. In fact, ambiguity tolerance, a skill most noted as a building block for mastering intercultural transitions, is at the core of the emotional passport. The capacity to calm down – self-regulate – in the face of strong reactions to uncomfortable or perhaps even disturbing events is a dynamic process. Sitting with negative thoughts and feelings, perhaps feelings of discomfort in the face of

*Email: j.abarbanel@yahoo.com
‘difference’, and embracing multiple points of view is not easily developed. Providers can ensure that young sojourners acquire healthy strategies to understand and regulate intense emotional experiences.

This paper challenges the intercultural field’s reliance on the language and concept of the term ‘culture shock’. Cultural transitions are often a part of learning and maturing, of becoming effective global citizens. To be able to seize opportunities when crossing cultures requires a toolbox of healthy strategies acquired as part of the emotional passport. The culture shock vocabulary, which in itself imagines overwhelming stress as something students and faculty should expect, is not a healthy model. The ability to tolerate normal mood shifts that can arise when making a move into a different culture requires adult support. Without it, students’ experiences can be de-railed from the beginning. Emotional roadblocks, such as the inability to regulate emotional highs and lows, can contribute to poor rather than successful outcomes. Crossing and integrating cultures is a process and, like breathing, not a single event.

In the intercultural adjustment process, a student can shift from periods of curiosity and enthusiasm to periods of withdrawal, self-doubt and sometimes self-destructive behaviors such as compulsive eating, drinking and/or drug use. Helping students and faculty to understand the context of these low periods and offering tools to self-regulate the normal intense emotions that come from cultural transitions are key to students becoming invested learners. This paper discusses how a mental health or wellness perspective can contribute to students becoming better learners, and to programs becoming more able to facilitate healthy intercultural transitions.

Interculturalists and mental health professionals have some important things in common. They share a curiosity about the ways in which people organize their experiences – they want to understand how people make meaning from their lives. The author believes that it is the job of these professionals to help young adults sharpen their lenses to interpret better and make meaning of intercultural contexts. This involves helping them to understand the meanings behind the high levels of emotional arousal (varied moods) that tend to accompany intercultural exchanges – all steps toward a healthier, more flexible adulthood.

**Crisis (medical) lens to the wellness lens**

The long-held idea that culture shock is an inevitable part of the cross-cultural journey is challenged by Colleen Ward’s important contribution. She describes the history linking immigration into the US and assumptions about mental illness. In the early twentieth-century, 20% of the US population were immigrants, yet 70% of the population in mental institutions were immigrants. The assumptions were that either dysfunctional people were likely to emigrate, or that intercultural contact itself produced mental illness (Ward 2004, 33–36).

By the 1980s, Ward relates, with better research, that there was a move away from a medical model towards an understanding that education in culture learning and coping skills could alleviate stress reactions. The intercultural journey began to be seen as an ‘ongoing, dynamic experience, not just for the traveling student, but also for the host culture’. The emphasis began to focus on adaptation and active coping strategies in a process that ‘occurs over time’ (Ward 2003, 36) This has been a healthier model.

Yet, the ‘shock’ word and crisis focus prevails in study-abroad materials, and programs continue to use catastrophe ‘shock’ language. From a twenty-first century mental health point of view, ‘shock’ is not a normal emotional state, and the use of
language that predicts catastrophe sets up students, advisers and host families for problems. What is communicated with ‘shock’ language is that the expression of intense feelings can be serious or abnormal, and yet intense emotions (verbally or non-verbally) are commonly part of transitions. The process of growth and change, which is built into international exchanges, demands emotional adjustments which rarely are without challenges, but also rarely shocking or catastrophic.

The mental health focus for international exchange, often centered on safety and crisis, makes clinical sense. But such focus reflects a small portion of what the mental health contribution could be for the field. The crisis message is: ‘Be prepared for those very few who might develop a psychiatric disorder’. The field’s standard of attending to the mental health of students seems to be ‘no problem unless a crisis problem’, becoming a ‘911’ approach, not a message of prevention. This deficit can leave students more symptomatic and at risk than need be. It is one thing to offer sound intellectual challenges but, without the integration of emotional support and academics, programs become vulnerable to de-railing their goals. A crisis lens alone is a twentieth-century way of looking at human beings as ‘troubled creatures in need of repair’ (Lambert 2007).

Continuing the use of culture shock vocabulary reveals how negative language can inhibit healthy support for students. Many exchange programs still present the culture shock model of four stages, or the U-curve. The first two stages of Euphoria and Irritability/Hostility describe intense emotions: ‘Euphoria’, on arrival, the part students have anticipated, and ‘Irritability and hostility’, when students later discover that initial positive energy has turned negative. The research shows, however, that many students do not necessarily feel euphoric in the initial weeks – in fact, many students feel confused and disoriented (Ward 2003), but varied and intense mood reactions overall are what is important. Words such as ‘shock’ and ‘hostility’ portray a dire situation, and expectations for ‘shock’ can become behaviors experienced as emergencies. Shock is not healthy and should not be called normal.

Even though the field has developed alternative ways of understanding and supporting students (e.g. J. Bennett 1998), the crisis model prevails. It becomes easy to dismiss a student as ‘just having culture shock’, and to miss opportunities for healthy intervention. An awareness of strategies to handle stress reactions has not often translated into practice. The phrase ‘mental health’ itself continues to conjure up for many providers images of depressed or ill people, and these misperceptions end up contributing to poor service. Since there is rarely training for prevention, or the active inclusion of mental health professionals in intercultural exchanges, it has been easy to relegate ‘emotional’ challenges to crisis interventions.

Moving from symptoms to signals

There is a more useful lens from which to describe the emotional transition process. Instead of shock ‘symptoms’, the author suggests re-labeling the clinical language and calling stressed behaviors ‘signals’ – to alert the adult support system that a student has been affected by the host culture and the loss, even temporarily, of home. Moving away from the language and expectation of ‘shock’, one’s lens can be better focused on noticing, even expecting, mood shifts as a starting point for responding. Reframing ‘irritability and hostility’ as not ‘just part of a phase’ reminds us that strong emotions might come and go throughout the journey, and that these feelings can be a normal part of the emotional transition.
Here are typical behaviors that can get the attention of faculty, host families and resident directors: homesickness, boredom, withdrawal, need for excessive amounts of sleep, compulsive eating or drinking, stereotyping local people, reduced ability to work effectively and physical ailments. These *signals*, not symptoms, are not an endpoint. They are ‘clues’ that a student is on overload and needs to pull back and re-balance. In fact, any of these behaviors can ‘signal’ that a student has been affected by changing cultures.

It should be kept in mind that, initially, one may not know the meaning of signal behaviors – early intervention requires knowing the students well. When in doubt, one should seek consultation from a licensed mental health professional and a medical doctor.

**Stress and coping: a wellness model provides a more normal frame of reference**

Following are some examples of normal experiences which illustrate some challenges for the intercultural field.

- The author recently received an email forwarded from a friend’s daughter Stephanie, who is studying in Prague for the year. She had been away for three months and wrote home expressing doubts about her decision to study abroad. Stephanie feared speaking with peers or advisers about her boredom, loneliness and confusion, worried that it would ‘break a rule’, or appear weak to admit that she was unhappy. And she felt her academic work had been negatively affected by the emotional burden. Unfortunately, she assumed little tolerance from staff for her low moods. Just toughing it out, even if one is miserable, seems a poor policy.

- In interviews with American faculty who lead overseas programs, it is not uncommon to hear the following phrases describing some of their students: ‘having a hard time of it’, ‘sheltered and tentative’, ‘intimidated by new experiences’, ‘unprepared for things that aren’t comfortable’, ‘self-medicating with alcohol’, ‘entitled and not hardy’. In general, these are ‘normal’ students who come to programs with no diagnoses or medications, young adults with little practice in self-care around emotional arousal. Faculty do not feel prepared to help students regulate emotional intensity, often finding themselves angry at students who do not ‘behave’.

New learning, especially the overload brought with crossing cultures, can bring exhaustion and negative moods. A healthier model would include attention to supporting skills for emotional regulation. It is not easy to acquire an ‘emotional passport’. In fact, as Milton Bennett writes: ‘Intercultural sensitivity is not natural. It is not part of our primate past, nor has it characterized most of human history. Cross-cultural contact usually has been accompanied by bloodshed, oppression, or genocide’ (M. Bennett 1993, 21)

Part of the training for intercultural sensitivity must go beyond cognitive and behavioral information transfer. Becoming better skilled to expect and regulate emotional overload can add enormous benefit to students’ mastery of ‘difference’. First, they can learn to identify and anticipate feelings or ‘signals’ of discomfort when exposed to new challenges. It is a skill to acknowledge that one feels uncomfortable, and it takes practice to calm intense emotional responses that are elicited when one
feels separated from the usual comfort zones. Typically, people will choose to dismiss, deny or over-react to feeling aroused. (And lack of awareness and skills can lead teens and young adults to manifest those ‘signals’ that have so often been attributed to ‘culture shock’.)

The author believes that the intercultural field will be strengthened by incorporating skills to address the mental health needs of what one could call the ‘normal’ study-abroad student, those who might have extended homesickness, those who are away from family and friends for the first time, those who were used to success and who melt down because they cannot ask for help, or those who annoy staff by seeking a high quantity of attention (and just might be anxious).

Another layer: how adolescence and young adulthood affect the acquisition of the emotional passport

Keep in mind that there are specific and complicating layers of emotional challenges for the college and high school population, more so than with sojourners of other age groups. In general, students from ages 17 to 23 are in a vulnerable period in human development. The psychosocial tasks of this life stage, consolidating one’s identity and exploring relationships, can contribute to seeking out the kinds of opportunities international exchange programs offer. Students might choose to study in a new culture because they are eager to explore ways to sort out who they are and what they want to become, and in this process of exploration, at least for Western students, there can be emotional ground swells: normal mood swings, challenges to authority, changing one’s mind or relationships, becoming ‘someone else’.

With identity development come questions about one’s own culture, or decisions to dismiss rules set by those representing ‘new parents’ abroad. Questioning one’s role in one’s home community can be transferred to doubts about ‘belonging’ in the host community. There are often many transitions into and out of groups and relationships. As a normal period of experimentation, of practice, trial and error, a life-stage transition becomes layered and interfaced with a cultural transition. In addition, faculty are often at mid-life, possibly experiencing their own reassessment of life choices.

So the normal young student embarking on an intercultural journey experiences age-appropriate challenges layered with the expected intense emotional arousal that comes with facing and feeling ‘difference’. Because there are so many uncertainties in cultural transitions, some anxiety would be expected. For example, exposure to so many new experiences requires maintaining a high level of alertness. So, the initial discomfort or confusion might signal the beginning of settling in. Your body is putting you on notice that you have arrived. In order to keep an open mind, to be flexible and curious, and to have tolerance for differences, students must learn that regulating high arousal, the practice of getting comfortable with change, is part of self-care. Adult support is critical, so that a student’s highs and lows will not contribute to de-railing positive goals. Unregulated stress can overload one’s capacity to think clearly and make good decisions. Part of anticipating challenges requires the use of strategies for self-care.

What is behind the variety of stress ‘signals’ that contribute to the process of transition? Research in neuroscience offers guidance to the intercultural field.

By attending to the way in which the human brain processes intense emotions, one can support students’ process from an informed and helpful position (e.g. Siegel 2007)
The human brain operates a bit like a battery through an oscillation of energy—energy spent and energy renewed. We consume energy during periods of activity or concentration and renew energy in periods of quiet or disengagement. This cycle is essential to the process of learning. As psychologist Jim Loehr (2003) writes, maximum performance requires periods of emotional disengagement. After a period of concentration, the brain needs to recover, and then another focused period can begin. As result of intense and new learning experiences, fatigue sends our body signals to disengage. If we ignore the need to re-fuel, behaviors that have been called ‘culture shock’ can follow, e.g. irritability, withdrawal, hostility. Fatigue from high arousal has consequences, contributing to difficulty concentrating and decreased performance.

American culture works against promoting the stress and recovery cycle because it encourages little practice with self-regulation. Taking time out is seen as a weakness. Understanding that best performances come with the practice of disengaging from high arousal, providers can better serve their student population by integrating wellness practices into program planning.

For young travelers, the excitement at each stage of pre-departure, arrival and re-entry uses high levels of energy. With so many uncertainties in transitions, maintaining a high level of focus is necessary, yet difficult. To maximize learning, stress and recovery must be balanced. A significant goal for cultural transition, then, is managing energy not time (Loehr 2003). Providers should ask themselves and their students: ‘How are we spending our energy?’ The focus for providers should be emotional regulation—not to send an alarm of ‘shock’. Young people need support to value and acquire skills for self-regulation.

So the context of intense arousal is linked to exhaustion and failure to disengage. Providers can help students to soften the highs and lows, supporting a more gradual adjustment. They must watch for the early warning signals, then support a variety of disengagement strategies—individualized and integrated into programming. Without adult support, students might disengage ‘without permission’, seeking out self-destructive behaviors that can de-rail their goals and the program’s success. Calming down, one feels more in control, more able to make informed choices, and more ready to take in the rich culture learning available. A quieter mind promotes the capacity to tolerate discomfort, uncertainty and ambiguity, leading to better problem-solving and greater potential for intercultural sensitivity.

The ‘aroused brain’ and wellness practices

To return to Stephanie, the student in Prague: generally, she is a good problem-solver, planner, optimistic and tolerant, but today, three months into her year abroad, she is feeling fatigued, irritable, confused and worried. Negative emotions are clouding her thoughts. This is what is happening: it is known that, with high levels of arousal, the language/problem-solving center of the brain’s left hemisphere goes ‘off line’, and the right hemisphere, the seat of emotional expression, without language, takes over (see Figure 1). Feeling upset, Stephanie has little capacity to make good choices. For her, the signals to disengage are sounding. She needs time out to reduce her anxiety, quiet her mind and get back on track. It is not a good learning day for her. Remember, her capacity to be fully engaged depends on her ability to disengage periodically (Loehr 2003, 38 and 97). Adult support is essential. She must trust that seeking help for
emotional overload is expected, normal and easy to come by. Adult providers need to
demonstrate preventive interventions, not dismiss Stephanie as ‘having culture
shock’. Growth and development requires facing and solving problems – building
skill sets. There are opportunities here for Stephanie and the adults around her. With
practice respecting her oscillating energy, her highs will be more moderate and her
lows not so deep.

**Opportunities with disengagement**

There are opportunities when worries emerge. How does disengagement work? How
does one refuel? What are some ways to self-regulate those normal intense emotions
that come with cultural transitions?

If self-calming provides the space to problem-solve, one’s toolbox should
contain a variety of ways to meet students’ needs. Think of the opportunities as
building scaffolding, because the capacity to self-observe and reflect comes with
practice. Students must be sure to practice at pre-departure, reinforce and add to the
toolbox on site, and review again at re-entry. Skills need to be rehearsed along the
way so that one feels more in control when those out-of-energy and anxious
moments arise.

There are many ways to harness wellness practices to support positive moods and
focused learning. The author usually starts with encouraging breathing practices (what
the Tewa tribe knew long ago about learning). Deep breathing slows the heart rate and
lowers blood pressure, both of which can be elevated if the body feels ‘danger’ in the face of ‘difference’. Fatigue can exacerbate a sense of helplessness. The sympathetic nervous system is triggered quickly, like a light switch, as the fight or flight response. The counterbalance to escalation, the parasympathetic response, is slower in coming. One can quickly lose the capacity to think clearly, and regaining one’s thinking cap takes time. Sitting quietly, closing one’s eyes, and taking in deep belly breaths takes practice. Students and staff should be encouraged to practice this simple skill along the way, so that it is easily accessed when needed.

Below are some other ideas to facilitate disengagement from high arousal. One can develop one’s own toolbox and practice.

- Create periods when cell phones, computers, and other electronics are off limits.
- Support healthy eating, minimizing high sugar intake.
- Mindful awareness: through breathing, shift attention to the present. This increases capacity for self-soothing. If you are present in the moment, you are not worrying and feel less helpless.
- Exercise moderates the impact of high arousal, but be sure to include additional strategies to supplement your toolbox.
- Yoga: a nice complement to aerobic exercise.
- Tree-forest images: practice stepping back and taking stock of the moment.
- Half-smile. Try it!
- Change the channel: Visualize a set of images ahead of time so that they are a resource, e.g. Channel 8 could be the immediate imagined catastrophe, and Channel 4 (pre-selected) is ‘you’ sitting on your porch at home watching the sunset.
- Dial down: put your fist on your forehead and ‘dial’ down your high intensity to a lower level. This is a re-set to a quieter place and provides a pause to begin clearer thinking.
- The arts: use a variety of possibilities around the arts – music, painting, dance, singing, poetry, pottery, all provide respite from high arousal.

The capacity to calm down – self-regulate – in the face of strong reactions to uncomfortable or even disturbing events is a dynamic process. With a refueled brain, there is more energy to sit with negative thoughts and feelings. Calmer, one can then begin to put things into perspective and embrace multiple points of view and alternative interpretations. Working with this process is part of what one can offer young sojourners.

Conclusion

When students arrive, we should like them to have ‘packed’ their ‘best brains’. We can help them build in rest cycles to maximize their intercultural experience. We can guide them to recognize uncomfortable feelings which might emerge in the face of ‘difference’, and we can teach them strategies to support a readiness to become more sensitive to intercultural challenges. We have a responsibility to be aware that emotional highs and lows will be a part of the intercultural journey and to help our students trust that the adults around them will welcome conversations about the emotional passport.
Note

1. The brain’s left-right division, for the purposes of this discussion, are schematic. Van der Kolk’s (1996) work with trauma patients revealing brain functioning under stress has been adapted in this paper. This is not to infer that students are experiencing trauma, but to link ideas about high emotional arousal with the impact on language. ‘When people are frightened or aroused, the frontal areas of the brain, which analyze an experience and associate it with other knowledge, are deactivated … At the same time, high levels of arousal interfere with the adequate functioning of the brain region necessary to put one’s feelings into words: Broca’s area. Traumatized people suffer speechless terror.’ Quoted from http://www.dana.org/news/cerebrum/detail.aspx?id=1490.

Notes on contributor

Dr Janice Abarbanel is a clinical psychologist and family therapist. Her focus is the interface between mental health practices and intercultural exchanges. She was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Romania in 1997. After a long career in Washington, DC, she now resides in Portland, Maine, where she consults with AFS, college faculties, study-abroad advisers, and international schools.

References


Shifting Cultures: the Emotional Passport
Staying Mindful of the Big Picture
Janice Abarbanel PhD Psychologist and Health Educator

Emotions drive learning.... If you feel well, you are likely to learn well. Emerging Adults, by the nature of their age, experience simultaneous layers of changes and challenges. Studying abroad is usually anticipated as a positive opportunity. In addition to adjusting to “everything new” when away, 20 year olds experience significant neurobiological brain growth -- the active pruning and strengthening of brain neurons. The brain becomes more efficient during these years, able to plan, reflect, organize, and reason. So, physically, psychologically, and practically (just by leaving home), students studying abroad can at times feel overwhelmed and less skilled at quieting a variety of intense feelings which may or may not be familiar. Such normative mood shifts can impact staff personally and professionally. Positive language and guidance supports the community, such as: “How are you using your energy?” or “Moods shift when cultures shift.” Reflecting back encourages self-reflection.

This chart presents two significant skill sets which will contribute to your and the students’ ability to harness energy, keep an eye on the “big picture,” and engage a successful study away experience.

Self-Care:
Skills for noticing and regulating energy and moods
- Capacity to take perspective, the big picture
- Routines!
  - Exercise
  - Eating well
  - Sleep
  - Mindfulness practice
- Managing Media use
  (Social, Skype, Time )
- Consideration around friendships
- Travel self-care
- Comfort seeking support:
  - Student Life
  - Wellness
  - Faculty
  - Friends/family

The Big Picture
- Successful care of self and community
- Successful academic performance
- Successful steps towards professional goals/internships
- Successful cultural learning

Other-Care:
Skills for awareness of one’s connection to community
- Bystander noticing and responding
- Connecting with classmates, roommates
- Responsible drinking
- Family and friends outside of abroad site, media
- Sensitivity to diversity, anti-harassment support