Cultural Issues

Culture is the shared knowledge, behavioral norms, values and beliefs that help people to live in families, groups and communities. Different cultures have different patterns of behaviours and norms of living. Hence, what is acceptable in one culture is not necessarily acceptable in another. This sometimes causes misunderstandings between people of different cultural backgrounds.

Culture Shock

Culture shock is a phenomenon many people experience when they arrive in a new location. The greater the cultural difference, the more difficult the adjustment may be. This phenomenon is complicated by the fact that for many international students, this is the first time they have left their home country and may be missing that familiar family support.

Eastern vs. Western Culture

The culture values in the eastern part of the world are very different from the west. While there are certainly individual differences within any culture, in general...

- Eastern cultures may value collectivism and group accomplishments...while Western cultures tend to value individualism and personal accomplishments

- Eastern cultures may value interdependence...while Western cultures may place greater value on independence

- Eastern cultures may have a clear hierarchical family structure...while Western families may have more of an ambiguous family structure in which roles and expectations are not as clearly defined

- Eastern cultures may place great emphasis on maintaining in-group harmony...whereas Western cultures may value assertiveness and directness (even if it does create conflict or tension)

The Process of Acculturation

When people move away from home to live in another place with a different culture, they cannot help but react to all the new stimuli and influences in their lives: foreign language, dress, food, and customs.
Many believe that this adjustment is like jet lag, it’s over within a short period of time. In fact, the experience is better defined as acculturation, a process which can last from months to years.

At first, there might be a sense of excitement as they explore the new environment. Then they might make comparisons between home and the new city, and find that daily tasks can be complicated as they’re different from back home.

They start getting homesick. At this stage, they tend to associate only with others from their own country. Later on, they might try to take on a new cultural identity, and make friends with people from the new culture as they feel more comfortable with the new customs and beliefs. Some may reject their own cultures; others may refuse to take on the new cultural identity. Still others will reject both the old and the new culture.

However, no matter how much a person changes outwardly, he or she cannot completely shed his or her roots. Culture is embedded in a person’s thinking and behaviour. One simply cannot abandon one’s cultural roots and transform into a totally different person. Ideally, people continue the natural course of acculturation, and integrate the two cultures. With an open mind and a desire to learn, it is possible to respect and appreciate both their own heritage and a new way of life.

**Asking for Help**

Unlike Canada, many cultures do have access to counsellors, therapists, psychologists, or mental health specialists. As a result, many international students do not seek help when they are struggling with setting into their new home. Seeking help may even be a sign of personal failure or shame. As a consequence, they struggle in silence when there are people on campus who may be able to assist them.

Are you having difficulty adjusting to your new home in Halifax? The Counselling Centre offers individual counselling to help with this issue. For more information, call The Counselling Centre at 420-5615 or drop by our office on the 4th floor of the Student Centre.

For more information on cultural issues and to make the adjustment to living in Canada easier, make sure to visit the International Centre right here on campus: [http://www.smu.ca/administration/intercen/welcome.html](http://www.smu.ca/administration/intercen/welcome.html)