

SOS Détresse

The emotional chaos of cultural shock

By coming to live in a culture which is not our own, we can experience a “cultural shock”. **The first months after arrival, or even the first years, can be sprinkled with “highs and lows” and be full of emotions.** We feel destabilised, powerless and frustrated in a country where nobody speaks our language, nor understands our culture. Like in an emotional turmoil, we can experience a variety of feelings: loneliness, absence, nostalgia, confusion, irritation, disappointment...

Anxiety and disorientation

Growing up in a certain culture, we are used to doing things in a certain way. Culture has a definite influence on the way in which we think and it rules many aspects of our lives. Thus it has an effect on the way in which we interact with others: when to shake hands, what to say when meeting people, when to accept or refuse an invitation, when to take words seriously. All these signs, customs, norms, words and gestures in relationships occur naturally without one realising, and help us to orientate in everyday life.

When we change cultural surroundings, we lose our familiar signs, and our innocuous gestures have to be re-learnt. Finding yourself thrown into an environment that is both strange and foreign can cause anxiety, because the benchmarks and indicators which used to orientate our daily actions no longer exist. Surrounded by everything new, we can feel disoriented and powerless. We no longer know how to behave. All of this can create the impression of being apart, dismissed or misunderstood in the new society.

Solitude and isolation

Feelings of separation, of being uprooted and abandoned appear in the new context of life. A feeling of non-belonging can also be felt; as if we were more part of the world we just left, without yet being integrated into the new one which is hosting us. Faced with the difficulties experienced in the new country, we can feel alone or incapable of trusting our feelings. Maybe the people who were there to comfort you in the past are now far away, and the activities which made you happy have gone. We miss everything that we loved in our home countries, relatives and friends. Being so far from our own is a painful feeling. By remembering our previous life, feelings of regret, homesickness and sadness can surface.

Hopes and disillusion

It is particularly difficult when our life in the host country does not correspond to what we expected. We can encounter many obstacles along our path, such as difficult access to education, work, or even accommodation. We can lose the higher status we used to have in our home country, being forced to work in another field, or to carry out auxiliary work. Sometimes we find ourselves in difficult working conditions or have to remain inactive. What a disappointment then, when you realise in the end that the new possibilities are limited, or that the new society is not the place you had hoped for!

Disappointment can lead to a withdrawal into our community or our family, as well as idealising our home country and wanting to return there. We begin to question the decision to migrate: was it a good idea to come here? Should I leave? Seeing projects not succeeding here, we can have the impression of failing and lose confidence in ourselves.

Devaluation and rejection

The obstacles and possible failure experienced in our new countries can awaken in us a feeling of rejection towards the society. The things that may have won us over in the beginning now weaken our self-esteem. This can relate to difference in language, way of behaving, ideology...We can have difficulty in learning a new language or recognising ourselves in the values and way of life in this country.

At the same time, we can no longer recognise ourselves in the values of before, or are led to devalue our own culture and, through that, devalue ourselves. By noticing that others behave differently to what we know, we can feel different. This can feed a critical attitude in us, or a sense of rejection towards certain aspects of the host culture. During this period, clichés and stereotypes frequently pop up.

Don't hesitate to seek support

Feeling frustrated, unstable, depressed or regretting your previous life can all form part of the numerous feelings experienced in a situation of exile. These feelings are stress reactions from adapting to a new society, which requires a lot of effort.

It is mostly the everyday problems which lead to us feeling discouraged and in need of support: difficulty finding a job, or accessing a decent accommodation, financial difficulties and uncertainty regarding the future, but also the fact of not feeling integrated in the host society, or experiencing conflictous interactions with others, whether this is within our group and family, or outside. In such conditions, where we are unable to provide for our basic needs, it is impossible to give the best of ourselves and invest as we would wish to in the host country.

Sometimes, the unhappiness is also felt on a physical level in the form of pain, headaches or stomach cramps, loss of appetite, sleeping problems or tiredness at the end of the day due to excess stress.

It is completely normal and understandable to encounter difficulties in the face of all

these challenges, and the emotions felt are part of adapting to change. But sometimes, someone listening or accompanying you can be useful before difficulties turn into real suffering. It is sometimes necessary to go against a possible discomfort or defensive attitude that we could have developed following an experience of contempt or misunderstanding towards our values. By talking to someone in confidence, acknowledgement and respect of our cultural identity can always help us to rediscover direction and courage, and thus to better deal with the situation.

And why not also get in contact with SOS Détresse...