

CULTURE SHOCK

Do I really need to read this? **YES!**

Do read this commentary, even if you have been on a mission before. We want you to have a satisfying mission and make a profound difference to the lives we hope to influence. During the mission, some of the things you will see and be a part of will affect you deeply, and your gift of warmth and generosity of heart may be misunderstood, or you, yourself may become vulnerable if you are not prepared.

*First, we would recommend that before the mission, all volunteers read: **Mountains Beyond Mountains** written by Kidder which details the life of Dr. Paul Farmer who worked in Peru and Haiti and experienced the same difficulties and challenges which **Cardiostart** volunteers face. If this work were easy it would not be work and everyone would want to do it. This book gives many illustrations, which resonate with our experiences in mission work.*

Volunteers seek mission work for many different reasons. Attrition is common after meeting one's goal or experience. Very few are able to continue the work on a daily basis with no pay. We do have to make sacrifices for the people we are trying to help. There are many issues in dealing with the situation, both for the volunteer leaders and the volunteers themselves. Those who see an opportunity and take initiative to follow through with any chance they can, will gain most. As with education, we get out what we put into it. Each of us must rise to the occasion and respond creatively. We must also be supportive of the leadership, and recognize that it is not their responsibility to hold our hands and ensure an unchanging agenda. Schedules have to be reasonable, and respectful of the pace of the local teams. The country we are agreeing to assist has its own uncertainties. In fact, they live with the day-by-day expectation that that feature of their lives is the only certainty.

For those involved in the Cardiac surgery part of the mission, it is important to remember these are not field clinics, so standards of behavior, decorum, patience, professionalism and kindness must be at the forefront of our interactions. Please read below, to help you make this mission your personal success.

What is Culture Shock?

It is easy to think we are immune until it happens to us, leaving us feeling embarrassed, frustrated and humiliated. It is not a rare phenomenon only occurring in neurotic individuals, but is a typical and normal response that may affect us all. Almost everyone who has ever traveled or relocated has experienced Culture Shock, either consciously or subconsciously. It is most evident and we are most susceptible to it when we travel to a foreign country in which poverty, language barriers and accommodation issues, and close interaction with people we have not met before are pushed at us in a short space of time. It is an emotional disturbance or ailment with which we become afflicted when we relocate, encounter a new culture, begin to adapt to it and lose important elements of support and our own culture in the process. Culture Shock can negatively affect our wellbeing quite severely during this new experience. It usually occurs when those things that are a normal part of our lives - often things that we take for granted - are either altered or suddenly unavailable to us. These things include the many mannerisms, customs, material objects, creature comforts and other symbols and cues with which we identify and use to communicate.

Some examples:

- In the Western cultures people commonly shake hands in greeting
- Women commonly embrace or hold hands
- We shake our heads up and down as a symbol of "yes" and back and forth to symbolize "no".

These, as well as other similar symbols and cues, are important to us because through them we express ourselves, gain a sense of security, status and belonging. They reflect what is important to us and *do* reflect our culture in some way. Although we are not always conscious of the symbols and cues we use, our degree of contentment and effectiveness within our culture depend upon them greatly.

In a different culture, however, they may have different and sometimes opposite meanings when used. It is easy to become confused and embarrassed when these gestures or patterns of behavior fail to be appreciated or understood. At home such familiar communicative techniques, such as voice intonations, words, gestures, facial expressions, style of clothing or the model of car we drive help us to identify and understand each other in our own culture. Alternatively, we may find ourselves becoming frustrated by the absence of the comforts, conveniences and little luxuries to which we normally give little or no thought; for example, a particular television program, bathroom or bedroom ritual or having to share facilities. Without the sense of security that these familiar cues provide, we become anxious, fearful, unsettled, hostile or aggressive. **This is Culture Shock.**

The early symptoms

As with any ailment, there are progressive stages associated with Culture Shock, as well as certain signs and symptoms. By remaining alert and observing for the appearance of these signs and symptoms, we can better understand and support the condition. As a team, we should also try to watch out for these features in our friends so that we can react gently, sympathetically and supportively when they are struggling with any part of the mission experience.

For example:

- Excessive concern about cleanliness, drinking water, food, personal hygiene, living conditions
- Inability to take decisive action; withdrawn
- A feeling of suspicion or distrust towards local people
- Undue concern regarding one's own health
- Unreasonable anger over relatively minor frustrations or delays
- Refusal to learn local customs or language
- Constant criticism of the local people;
- Suspicion of theft or mal-intent by colleagues or local team leaders
- General hesitancy or fear to have direct contact with people in the host country.

The four behavioral features that may produce Culture Shock:

1. *Honeymoon*

The first, or honeymoon stage, begins upon arrival. We are excited, curious and interested in making the most of our adventure with all its new sights, sounds and experiences. Exploring the new surroundings keeps us busy and entertained.

2. *Hostility*

The second stage begins when the *real* and sometimes harsh conditions of our new environment begin to affect our ability to carry on. The novelty wears off and frustrations begin to build. It is commonly initiated by negative or stressful encounters with the details of the new daily routine. We may then only see the negative and ignore the positive and become critical of the conditions and the people. We may easily fall into forming stereotyped ideas and impressions of our new colleagues and/or the local people. Our awareness of negativism and our attempt to remove it from our attitude are critical to getting through this. Our ability to live through the negative experiences and proceed into the third stage will determine whether our adventure in a different culture will be pleasant and successful - or a miserable experience best forgotten. It may even determine whether we make it through the whole mission at all. This is a critical stage during which our ultimate success or failure, our positive or negative attitudes and our acceptance or rejection of the value of the mission will be determined.

3. *Deciding to 'hang in'*

The third stage of Culture Shock commences at some ill-defined time when we start to become accustomed to the frustrations and inconveniences. We begin to joke about them and feel less hostility and distrust towards the local people and their behavior. We discover we can laugh at ourselves. Despite the communication difficulties, the language usually becomes 'less foreign' and if we make an effort, we learn to speak a few words - well enough to be understood by the local people. We develop positive attitudes and acquire a genuine interest in and respect for the local people and customs. If this change does not occur, the newcomer may pack up and go home early, (regretting an 'ill-made decision') or, will 'stick it out', but sulk, regressing into a concealed anger, frequently complaining and despondent. Unfortunately, this can be contagious and when the afflicted person seeks solace and companionship amongst others similarly disposed, this can be very destructive to the team morale.

4. *Harmony*

In this fourth stage we have not only learned to tolerate cultural differences, but we are also beginning to appreciate them. Some of the once weird and alien cultural symbols, cues and practices begin to make more sense and we may find we can learn from them. We enjoy participating in the culture of our hosts and enjoy new foods, attend social events, take an interest in their families, the local art music and handicrafts and may even start to speak the language well enough to communicate comfortably and be understood! How long does this take? Some very quickly adapt, others take a few days, while others falter, but do pick up what they missed on the first mission, the second time around. Do not worry. You will be

reassured to learn that almost all *CardioStart* volunteers “make it” very successfully, and the team leaders will work hard to support you throughout, without judgment or rebuke. Our primary goal is to be good to each other and with that team support, we will *then* make some significant changes in the people we are trying to help. Our teamwork skills will positively affect them.

What to about Culture Shock if and when it hits – our attitudes to our hosts

- Look, listen and learn, and try to learn everything possible about the new culture, *before* actually encountering it or as soon as possible when you arrive i.e. the religion, language, beliefs, and economy.

- Make an effort to understand your hosts *without* surrendering your own position or view. Depending on their recent political situation they may be very distrustful, superstitious or openly aggressive towards your country’s political position. A sense of hopelessness may prevail. If this happens try to show them what we are attempting to do. Many negative attitudes melt away when the containers are unloaded and the work begins. Despite some very fine values in the communities we visit, lying, deception and bribery are common – usually because they have reached a level of desperation we can scarcely imagine. Never appear judgmental. Each day, spend a few moments thinking about your attitude toward the team, the local hosts and the people in the country and do make an effort to talk to other members of the team. Try everything you can to remain patient.

- Avoid asking sensitive religious or political questions and also, do not allow yourself to become “cornered” by local people’s comments on your own country’s political leaders.

- Avoid asking children’ “what do you want to be when you grow up” unless they introduce the subject. Many children will have no answer – especially if they have been orphaned, and be reluctant to mention their dreams. A few may see your innocent question as a cruel attempt to ridicule. Some sections of the community, particularly in communist cultures, are expected to follow enforced, prescribed norms, conforming to a collective society, not a pluralist one.

- In securing your personal comfort, take care not to offend our hosts. Many ‘westerners’ are wrongly perceived to be pre-occupied with ‘self’, personal pleasure and gratuitous violence, as Hollywood film themes regularly project this illusion. These films seem to reach quite inaccessible countries and it is sometimes presumed that ALL westerners live like this. It is entirely reasonable for you to be concerned about the housing, food and safety for you and the group, to protect our mutual needs. Before the mission we will advise about the accommodation, its facilities and limitations. Whenever you are in doubt, ask the *CardioStart* Mission Director.

- Learn and use as much of the language phrases as possible and as soon as possible. This can contribute much to the promotion of trust and bonding with the host medical team.

- Endeavor to maintain a positive, sunny disposition and attitude and refrain from snap decisions or judgments. Be cheerful as much as you can - your good humor will infect and disarm others in a very positive way. Remember, your hosts will follow *your* leadership style in many situations and its desirable that they learn how you remain calm in difficult situations, and how you interact with colleagues under stress, long after you have left. You will also learn many things from them. We always marvel at their immense patience and endurance, and ability to survive under much more severe conditions than we would normally have to cope with. Life is usually hard in the country we are visiting, so be cautious in regard to references to “the way we do it back home” etc. so as to avoid embarrassing our hosts.

- Remember that certain behavior and actions can have different meanings in different cultures – be conscious of this throughout. *Be especially cautious when making jokes in English with your own team members, to lighten the mood.* Even though they are usually well intentioned and harmless, our hosts may incorrectly read them, or perceive them as jokes about themselves or the local people, and this may cause embarrassment and hostility during the training periods.

- Be adventurous. Try new and different things, such as food, beverages, and clothing. Relax and enjoy the process of adapting to and learning about the culture of others. You *will* get tired at times. Simply let the appointed team leader know you need some quiet time and arrangements will be made.

- Be **very** cautious about offering promises of help to individuals such as “I can get you introduced in a job, back home etc”, unless you intend to follow through **fully** with the offer.

Attitudes towards your own *CardioStart* team colleagues –some helpful hints

- **First: Kindness!!** From the moment you meet your team colleagues, and particularly when you arrive overseas, take an interest in other members of the team as much as possible but be careful to avoid appearing patronizing, especially if this is their first time. Remember that everyone makes mistakes. Be patient during the waiting periods. Make it part of your role to help the others adapt to the new routine and to foster better understanding and tolerance within our group.
- Help make sure that your team colleagues get adequate breaks and meal opportunities during the mission. Some of us may get held up. It’s probable that you will not have necessarily worked with a particular *CardioStart* team colleague before. Use this opportunity to find out about **their** practices, before insisting on your own.
- Some of the medical team may do a night shift under certain circumstances. Be **especially considerate** in returning to the hotel or residence early in the day when night staff may still be sleeping.

Special comment regarding the family and orphanage assistance programs.

- During the mission, some of us will have the opportunity to give detailed assistance to families of those receiving specialist care and those confined to orphanages. Although superficially, this may seem easier work, it is, in many ways much more challenging and emotionally stressful. In the family units of those undergoing operations, the other family members endure many social hardships, which may strain the relationships in unusual ways, or may make care of the patient, visitation or post-operative care more difficult.
- In the orphanages, the children have varied and different reasons for being there. In many of the countries we visit, few of the children are truly orphans, adoptable. Some are wards of the state because their parents are in prison or psychiatric hospitals. Many of the children come from abusive backgrounds, and more than anything they want to be loved. Some have been taken from alcoholic or drug-dependent parents. Some have come from families that have been financially negatively effected by one family member’s severe illness/ Some, just don’t have the means of support and find the meager offerings of the school, such as food, a bed, shelter from the weather is a better option for their child than what they have to offer at home.
- Some government orphanage workers are more compassionate than others. It’s a hard job with little, if any, pay. Some can be very harsh and cold. The range of intelligence, educational level and comprehension may also be very varied. Children can grow up feeling very unwanted and worthless. Some have significant learning as well as physical disabilities, or mild to severe emotional problems. For most of them we cannot change the circumstances or the surroundings they live in, but for the short time we are there we can offer our love to them. It doesn’t take knowing the language to do this, it just means reaching out at their level.

The last word!

Don’t let yourself become discouraged by this step into a new adventure. Even if you have done a *CardioStart* mission before, each visit or country will still be a new experience. Whatever happens on the mission, give the Mission Director your full attention and support at all times. Be patient if you cannot do all that you had wished to, and be adaptable. Enter into the spirit of the international mission with enthusiasm, patience, understanding, a positive attitude, a spirit of sharing and a willing acceptance of the experience that awaits you. Always keep in mind that it is not a vacation; *CardioStart* cannot compete with the efficiency of a package tour company, but we will work hard to make your generous support of this mission be rewarded by a life-altering, uniquely valuable experience. Finally, do remember our primary requirement of you for this mission.... Enjoy yourself!

*“How far you go in life depends on how you respond
to the strong & the weak,
the young & the old,
the rich, the poor,
the infirm, the dispossessed
or the desolate...
Because there will probably have been one time in your life
when you may have been each of these”.*

George Washington Carver

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