

Cultural Rehydration: A Layman's Guide to Dealing with Culture Shock

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CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction	4
Why the Metaphor?	
Chapter 2: The Cultural Adaptation Cycle	8
The Evaluation Stage	
The Interpretation Stage	
The Application Stage	
The Readjustment Stage	
Chapter 3: Pre-Departure	20
Chapter 4: In Country	27
Cultural Rehydration Therapy	
Chapter 5: Returning Home	37
List of Figures	43
Works Cited	44

Chapter 1: Introduction

Life does not always go as expected. One day friends were coming to a dinner I had planned and I realized after the first guest arrived that I needed more money for the occasion. I asked my friend to wait at my apartment for the other guests while I went to the bank to make a withdrawal.

In the country where I was living at the time, families commonly use bicycles for transportation rather than cars. I hopped on (not in) my vehicle and rushed off to the bank. I turned on the “heat” (that is, I started to pedal faster) and after a few blocks, I arrived. I descended from my bicycle, grabbed my lock, and fastened it around my back tire.

I ran into the bank as fast as I could so as not to keep my guests waiting too long and quickly handled my banking matters. When I came out, I reached for the key to unlock my bike. In my left trouser pocket there was only loose change. The right pocket was empty. Finally, I examined my back pockets only to realize that I did not have my key. It had not fallen out of my pocket, but was back in my apartment.

I weighed my options. Should I call my friend for the key and listen to mockery for a few hours or try to get the locked bike home somehow? Sad to say, I chose to move the bike. Unfortunately, I have my pride. Because the rear wheel was locked, I raised the back of the bike, tipped it forward and pushed. It was like being in a three-legged race with no competition.

As I walked down the street everyone stared at me and whispered, “Look at that foreigner! What is he doing?” It was as if they were in the US or Western Europe watching someone try to hotwire a car on the street. Yes, it must have seemed that I was

stealing a bike! I just ignored the comments and continued walking faster trying to make it home. I arrived at the door sweating and out of breath. My shirt was three shades darker from my perspiration and my hand was beet red from gripping my handlebars. After listening to my adventure, my friend laughed and said, “Why didn’t you just call me?” I knew why. There was one reason and one reason only: all because of my male pride. (Anthony, 2007).

Expatriates are people who voluntarily live outside their native countries. I have been an expatriate since 2002 and have experienced quite a number of cases where therapeutic processing would be helpful, not only to me, but to fellow expats around the world. This book examines struggles in preparation, living, and returning to different countries and strategies to effectively increase coping mechanisms and survival¹ through the use of real-life stories (labeled Hydration Checkpoints), personal psychological application exercises using an accompanying workbook, and a very practical metaphor – Cultural Hydration.

Why the Metaphor?

Our bodies need water to survive. The majority of the human body is water (an average of 60%) so it is vital that we replenish this resource frequently in order to maintain our ability to function. **Dehydration** is a medical condition in which the body lacks an adequate supply of water to function properly. Our bodies lose water as we breathe, sweat, urinate, or suffer from vomiting or diarrhea. When the amount of water

¹ In case of emergencies, this book does not substitute for professional counselors. Please contact a professional counselor if you are dealing with an emergency.

we lose is greater than the amount we take in, we become dehydrated. This is usually a process that happens over time and not a sudden event because, in the short-term, if our body lacks water, we have natural defense mechanisms to compensate. We get thirsty, signaling the need to drink. Our kidneys reduce the water in our urine; it becomes more concentrated and darker in color when we are dehydrated. Other symptoms of dehydration include dry mouth, headaches, increased heart rate, inability to sweat or produce tears, muscle cramps, vomiting, lightheadedness, and confusion. Dehydration can be treated by gradually increasing the amount of liquid in our body by repeatedly drinking small amounts or through IV drips; however, the greatest cure for dehydration is prevention. Without proper hydration, the body will break down and slowly cease to function (Medicine.net, 2009).

Cultural paralysis is a condition experienced by expatriates that causes them to feel unable to function in a foreign environment. Like dehydration, it is usually a process that has developed over time, and can cause changes in the mind and body. The body can compensate for the discomfort of the environment for short-periods of time, but if not properly handled, the body and mind tend to break down. Once paralysis takes place, recovery takes place through frequent small doses of therapeutic exercises. Because of its similarities to dehydration, cultural paralysis can be considered **cultural dehydration**, and the cure is cultural rehydration.

To determine how much of our body composition is water, there are various formulas that take into account age, height, and weight. Similarly, there are key variables we can use to calculate how culturally hydrated or dehydrated we are. Expatriates

planning to live in or visit a new culture must understand the reality of both obvious and subtle factors that will allow them to thrive in an overseas environment.

The first step to overcoming dehydration is to understand the normal process of hydration. If we do not understand that our bodies need water, how can we solve the problem of dehydration? The same is true for cultural dehydration. If we do not first understand the natural processes that our minds and bodies go through when we enter foreign cultures, then it will be hard to remedy cultural dehydration and allow cultural rehydration.

In the next chapter, we will discuss the Cultural Adaptation Process that expatriates experience in a new cultural environment. The stresses of that process can and often do lead to cultural dehydration. In the three chapters after that, we will learn techniques that will serve as hydrators in cases of cultural dehydration.

Are you ready to get culturally hydrated?

Chapter 2: The Cultural Adaptation Process

The Cultural Adaptation Process (or Hydration Cycle) is a four-stage process that occurs within individuals as they adjust to a new culture and experiences in that new culture. The four stages are: (1) The Evaluation Stage, (2) The Interpretation Stage, (3) The Application Stage, and (4) The Readjustment Stage.

Hydration Checkpoint

I once had the pleasure of being the local contact for a group of new expatriates arriving in the country where I resided half a world away from their home. These individuals had been contacting me for weeks with various questions on just about everything imaginable. Their arrival day came and I picked them up at the airport and took them to their respective homes after a good meal. During dinner that evening there were various emotions at the table. Some people were excited, others were anxious, and others were absolutely terrified. It was all normal.

One week later I decided to make a surprise visit to each new expat to make them feel welcome with a small house warming present of fruit. As I went to each person's home, they were thrilled to see me. I would chat a while, see how they were adjusting, and then move on to the next residence. When I arrived at the last one, I knocked on the door and waited for a response. There was none. I knocked again thinking maybe nobody was home. After the second knock, I heard a faint voice. It seemed as if I had disrupted an afternoon nap. The door opened and my mouth dropped. Was this the same person I had picked up from the airport? I handed the basket of fresh apples, oranges, bananas, and local exotic fruit to the new expatriate. Without even inviting me in, the

person snatched the bag of fruit from my hands and began to devour each piece of fruit one by one, chunk by chunk. I stepped inside and sat down on a short wooden stool. When the expatriate was finished, I asked in a voice mixing sarcasm and disbelief, “So, how was the first week?” After a deep breath and a wipe of the mouth with a shirt sleeve, the expat said, “Thanks for coming by. I haven’t eaten in a week!”

The Evaluation Stage

The first stage of the Cultural Hydration Cycle is the Evaluation Stage. When an individual arrives in a new culture, or discovers a new facet of the culture, the first action that takes place is an assessment or evaluation of resources and environment. Resources can be divided into three main categories: (1) Personal Resources, (2) Social Resources, and (3) Material Resources² (Schultz and Schwarzer, 2001, p. 4).

Personal Resources include characteristics and experiences of the individual, such as personality, mental processes, and working experience. Social Resources include all formal and informal relationships. Working and professional relationships are formal relationships; family, friends, and all other relationships not defined as formal are informal. Finally, Material Resources are all tangible resources that can be consumed by the individual, such as food, shelter, and money. These three types of resources will be evaluated immediately upon entering a new culture or a new cultural situation.

In addition to evaluating resources, the individual also evaluates the environment, which can be divided into two aspects: (1) Flexible and (2) Relatively Inflexible. Flexible refers to aspects of the environment that can be changed in the short term by an

² See Exercise 2 in The Cultural Rehydration Workbook.

individual or group acting in the environment, like the economy, fashion, and slang. Relatively Inflexible refers to aspects of the environment that change only very slowly over long periods of time, like the fundamental culture or national language, and would include population and climate. Since you can't expect to exert much influence over Relatively Inflexible aspects of the environment, you are better off trying to accept and adapt to them. Figure 2.1 graphs the Evaluation Stage of the Cultural Adjustment Cycle (Anthony, 2009).

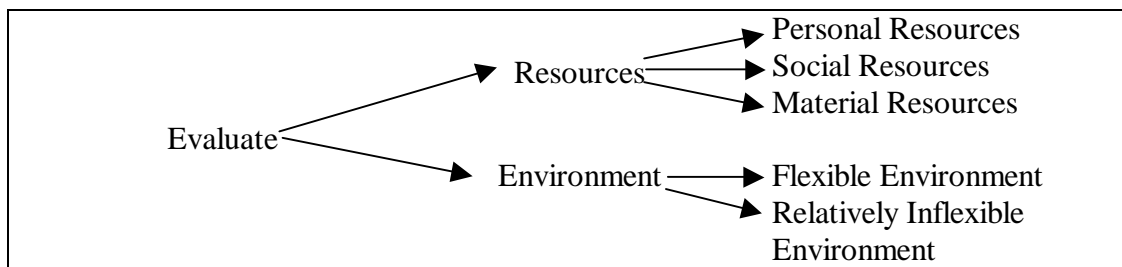


Figure 2.1 The Evaluation Stage

The individual evaluates resources and the environment primarily through observation and secondary informational resources (information shared personally by others or found in written form). After evaluation, the individual continues to the next stage, the Interpretation Stage.

Hydration Checkpoint

Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus. Americans are from America and Patagonians are from Patagonia. These two sentences contrast different people and places, but with the same meaning. I experienced this one night when I was out dancing with some coworkers.

We entered a room about one hundred square meters in area. This was the local club. To us foreigners it looked more like a vacant office. In the front of the room was a

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