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## Acculturation: To Stress or Not to Stress?

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*As relocating employees and their families prepare for international assignments, they begin to wonder what to expect from the experience. Will it go well? Which bumps in the road can be predicted and which can be avoided all together? When the assignment occurs and they begin to immerse themselves into the new culture, it is inevitable that they can expect changes. Aside from those involving daily habits such as foods to eat and times to eat them, they will witness different ways of thinking, communicating and behaving in everyday life. Comparing these ways with their own, they may find it necessary to keep some of their own habits while adjusting and adopting new ones from the host culture.*

## Acculturation Defined

In the field of cross-cultural psychology, these changes are a part of acculturation—the process an individual goes through in response to a new cultural environment. As individuals adjust to living in a new culture, they develop their awareness of the values, norms and behaviors of the host culture. They may learn the host country language, make friends with locals, initiate work relationships, and/or attend formal schooling in the host country. These experiences may at times enrich our lives and, at other times, may cause stress.

## Types of Stressors

When coming into contact with a new culture, stimuli are undeniably encountered, which can be potential stressors. According to psychologist John W. Berry, there are several categories of stressors. Physical stressors are the changes in weather, housing accommodations, strange new settings, and safety of the surroundings. Feelings of loneliness, homesickness, missing family and friends, difficulty relating to others and making new friends compose the social stressors that may be experienced. Cultural stressors include differences in cultural values and attitudes between home and host countries and racial discrimination. Changes in mode of transportation, languages used daily, work and study conditions and financial situations compose the functional stressors. Finally, there is potential for negative reactions to biological stressors such as different foods and illnesses or diseases. Despite the type of stressor, when a person reacts to these stressors negatively, stress is produced.

## Stress Manifestation and Effects

The stress associated with acculturation can manifest itself as depression, anxiety or psychosomatic problems. When the familiarity of home is gone and the social rules that one is used to following do not exist in the host country, the potential to become lost is great. Since individuals have a tendency to attach their identities with their culture, relocating employees may feel that they do not belong to the culture they are living in and, hence, will develop a degree of identity confusion. Stress behaviors that occur during acculturation can manifest into alienation, as they feel left out of the normal functioning of the host society.

There are several psychological factors that affect the level of acculturation stress relocating employees experience. If prior knowledge is acquired regarding the host culture and language, they are likely to

experience less stress than if they had no prior knowledge. Past experiences with intercultural encounters also contribute to lower levels of stress. Whether cultures were crossed for the purpose of vacation or for international assignments, these encounters can be referenced and relied upon. However, how the first encounter is viewed can also affect how a relocating employee will evaluate the acculturation process—the perception of how well it went is likely to influence future stress reactions. If expectations were high the first time, there may have been more stress. In future assignments, if expectations stay high, there is likely to be further stress associated with the adjustment process.

### **Stress Coping/Avoidance Strategies**

But the good news is that not only do these problems decline as more time is spent in the host culture, there is also the potential for avoiding some of the stress, depending on the strategy that is chosen. There are four strategies (modes) that individuals may or may not choose based on their responses to two basic questions:

1. Is it considered to be of value to maintain your own cultural identity and characteristics?
2. Is it considered to be of value to build and maintain relationships with other groups?

Based on the answers to these two questions, we can identify a person's level of participation in the host culture. The four strategies are separation, marginalization, assimilation, and integration.

#### **Separation**

Separation is the choice for those who answer 'yes' to the first question and 'no' to the second question because they want to maintain their home culture and not participate in the host culture. This may be a very logical choice for those who relocate frequently and who find more emotional stress in constantly settling down in the local culture only to have to pack up and move again. When people voluntarily choose separation, they tend to find others from their home culture and form cliques. The danger in this strategy is the tendency for the clique to reinforce negative stereotypes based on limited contact with the host culture. In addition, with this strategy comes little opportunity for 'real learning' of the ways of the host culture.

#### **Marginalization**

Another strategy, marginalization, occurs when people answer 'no' to both of the basic questions. Here newcomers release ties to their home country, but do not embrace the new culture. This strategy may come about not by choice, however, as the host society may choose not to accept the culture of the newcomers.

#### **Assimilation**

Assimilation is the choice someone makes to abandon ties to the home culture and fully adopt the ways of the host country. This strategy may come naturally to children, as they quickly learn the host country language and have an instant social network through school. The downfall of this strategy is that more stress will be experienced when individuals with this strategy return to their home country. There is also the danger of adopting a negative view of the home culture.

#### **Integration**

When answering yes to both questions, an individual chooses integration, the most successful mode of acculturation, which may lead to minimal stress.

## **Integration Provides a Winning Combination**

Of all of the modes of acculturation, integration is the preferred strategy because it is a balanced approach. By integrating, an individual gains the benefit of increased capabilities of functioning in the new culture and a deeper understanding of the host culture, while still maintaining their own values and cultural identity. In integration mode, an individual chooses which behaviors to adopt from the new culture, while keeping the behaviors they value as important from their home culture.

Research has found that social support of friends and spouses acts as a buffer to the potential negative reactions that might occur during the process of acculturation. Increased support leads to less stress and better adjustment. Spouses of employees on international assignments were also found to experience higher adjustment with the support of their families. By choosing integration as a strategy, relocating employees will be able to maintain their home country social network of support, while gaining a new social network—the best of both worlds.

## **Self-Efficacy**

When an individual chooses to become involved in the process of change by seeking out contact with the host culture, they take an active role in understanding and becoming part of it. Every individual has cognitive control over the acculturation process. People who perceive changes as opportunities can manage and have better mental health than those who feel overwhelmed by changes. It is not the acculturative changes themselves that are important, but how perceives them, and then decides what to make of them. Here is where the concept of self-efficacy plays an important role.

Self-efficacy is our belief in our personal ability to get things done. If an individual believes that they have the power to produce results, they are more likely to attempt the required action. Self-confidence can positively effect how an environment is viewed—including: safety, transportation, housing, social encounters, and all of the potential stressors mentioned above. It is the belief in personal capability to exert some control over these potential threats, not the capabilities themselves, which determine how change is judged. With increased self-efficacy, an individual may judge the negativity of daily life events at a lower level and, therefore, imagine fewer problems. Viewing oneself as positively being able to cope with the changes that come with international living, equates to finding the new environment less potentially hurtful. What was once deemed a fear of the unknown or discomfort with ambiguity has now turned into a feeling of adventure, challenge and fun.

## **The Perfect Balance**

As relocating employees learn to cope with the changes that come along with an international assignment and the acculturation process, they will find that creating a balance between host and home cultures through integration is the most beneficial, as is developing a strong sense of self-efficacy. Leveraging both can lead to a more positive attitude and better enjoyment of the entire intercultural experience.

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