

CULTURE SHOCK FOR REFUGEES

Starting a conversation
among people
moving out of need
not out of choice

by Chris Carrier
Victoria, BC

Dear Newcomers to Canada,

We welcome you to our country.
After your long journey,
We offer your family safety and security.
We offer you confidence and belief in a future.

Immigrants have enriched all parts of Canada.
We welcome you with open arms and hearts.
We welcome you to share our schools,
our communities and our work places.

Canada is a country of great opportunity,
but it isn't heaven.
Life is difficult for many Canadians.
So life may be difficult for some newcomers.

Life will be less difficult for you
once you become familiar with our culture.

Culture shock happens when
you move to a new culture.
We want to tell you what is normal to feel
as you get comfortable in your new surroundings.

Our advice is simple:
Mix with People and Learn the Language.
Simple but not easy.

The goal is for you to become independent.

THIS BOOKLET DOES NOT REPLACE
MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELLING.

The trauma of escaping a war zone may go beyond culture shock and grief. Multiple losses, sustained stress, anxiety, continued severe depression, frequent nightmares, flashbacks to traumatic events, or suicidal thoughts must be addressed by trained mental health providers.

You can receive qualified mental health assistance through the Immigrant and Refugee Wellness Centre by calling the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society at

250-999-8170

website: ccfir.ca

or email: aacarter9@shaw.ca.

Services are free and confidential.

What Does Culture Shock Look Like?

Culture is how we interact with people. In your previous culture perhaps you didn't mind if a new friend hugged your children or offered them sweets. Perhaps you were accustomed to seeing children stand when their teacher enters the classroom. Perhaps it is different that police in Canada are seen as good guys. These are customs that define how a community looks, acts and communicates.

Culture shock is happening when people and events unfold in unexpected ways. You can't figure out the patterns. The language, social roles, family values and foods are all new to you. Your inability to function is a shock. People often react to shock in similar ways.

Briefly the cultural adjustment cycle is:

first happiness and excitement with all that is new,
followed by disillusionment, aloneness and loneliness,
followed by frustration, anger and perhaps hopelessness,
and finally, acceptance of differences in cultures and
a feeling that you again have some power in your life.

These stages for adjustment were not created with the refugee in mind. Refugees may bring sustained stress, trauma and exhaustion which may make the pathway to adjustment unique for a family.

How Can I Tell If the Process has Started?

Many people realize something not right is happening when they feel themselves becoming disillusioned with their new country. Their feelings may include some of the following:

- sadness
- fear of going outside
- feeling left out
- extreme homesickness
- loss of confidence
- developing negative views
- loneliness
- anxiety
- frustration
- feeling misunderstood
- want to return home

Your three best friends in the culture shock process are:

- **companionship**
- **patience**
- **a calm manner**

Discussion Game

Imagine everything is reversed. You are now the sponsor of a Canadian refugee family in your country before the war. How would you advise them in their culture shock? What attitudes might block their progress? What would be the most meaningful supports for the family?

What Are the Stages of Culture Shock?

Most people believe that there are stages to cultural adjustment, but no one is sure if the stages are the same for refugees. It is clear that experiences such as war, risking your family and grieving the loss of loved ones will complicate the stages described below.

Nevertheless, it can be helpful to see the big picture.

Step 1: The Honeymoon Stage — "Wow! Canada is wonderful!"

One may first have a feeling of euphoria. You feel very good about the life you foresee giving to your children.

You meet your sponsoring family and express your gratitude. Some things in Victoria may look familiar, some things may be new and some may stand in stark contrast to your personal culture and morals.

Be happy, but go slow.
Do you feel that people are asking you
to replace your old culture
with everything new you are seeing?
Is that actually possible to do?

Also for the refugee, the excitement of finally arriving in Victoria may be dulled with the memories of family still in camps. You recall your responsibilities. At this stage, we may make promises which we simply cannot fulfill at this time.

While in your honeymoon stage, let's consider some daily interactions, daily customs of your new community.

People in Victoria shake hands both for business and to greet friends. If a immigrant man meets a Canadian woman, he may shake hands or explain why he can't. For women whose religion forbids shaking hands with a man, the responsibility is the lady's to tell the man, "I'm sorry. I can't shake hands, but I'm happy to meet you."

Canadians usually make eye contact when speaking with others. If this is not your custom, please start practicing. So much is said to most Canadians by not making eye contact. Making eye contact works in conversations, getting across streets safely, getting a clerk's attention, and in many places.

Ask Canadian friends if you need to smile more. Smiling is an instant way to encourage politeness and gain assistance.

It is uncomfortable to be stared at. One reaction is to smile at the person and nod hello. A more daring response is to ask the person for directions even if you know where you are going.

Personal space is culturally set. For most Canadians, an arm's length is a good distance from others for visiting, lining up at the store or waiting for a light to change. Saying "excuse me" is expected if you accidentally bump into someone.

Ask for directions when uncertain. Most people will help.

Step 2: The Distress Stage — "Opps. What's this?"

All things change. You may think about promises that weren't kept. You may feel confused, alone and discover that the support systems are not easy to find or aren't what you hoped they would be. You may feel like a wall is closing around you.

**You must find the strength
to step forward.
With just one step forward,
you will see the wall is an illusion.**

This stage is characterized by becoming upset with others. Being upset is a mild form of being angry. And being angry can be fear in disguise. To work through this stage, you are being asked to start turning lose of unreasonable fears. This step is very difficult. It is similar to learning to trust again.

It is normal to be extremely homesick. You may think adjusting to Canada is not worth the trouble, and you want to go home. A good companion may listen for a while, but complaining without a goal is like treading water. It is exhausting for everyone.

The friends you will need are within your family, your place of worship, your sponsoring family and refugee centres. You must talk to people if you feel the strong desire to withdraw.

Step 3: The Despair Stage — "I got tricked!"

Disillusionment may change to anger, frustration and hostility toward others. You may start thinking life back home before the war was "almost perfect", and Canadian culture is inferior.

Refugees who hear about this phase often say, "Oh no, not me. I'm so grateful to Canadians." Just wait. This is normal.

The good news is friends who stay with you to visit and to go for walks want you to succeed. These will be friends for life because at this stage it is not so easy to be your friend.

Parents may suffer terribly at this time. They may be experiencing culture shock in several environments at once: the parent needs a job, the job needs English, English might be learned faster in an English as a Second Language Program, those programs are full, and still the parent must present a confident face to the children.

When frustration builds, people seek relief.

A word about alcohol or drugs may be useful because people sometimes turn to these as a form of relief. The lives of many Canadians as well as newcomers often are made more difficult rather than easier by abuse of these substances. At this stage of culture shock, the newcomer is very vulnerable. Hopefully a word to the wise is sufficient.

Step 4: Autonomy Stage — "This might work."

You start to rise above problems and see solutions. You feel more confident and are coping with life. You have a circle of friends from the new and old cultures. You feel less isolated.

Again you start planning your dreams. The earlier negativity is less, and you feel a new, more mature confidence growing in you. Your children seem to be adjusting, staying out of trouble and enjoy their friends and school.

For the refugee, this stage may feel better than even the honeymoon stage because you have earned this happiness. Your dreams are closer and tempered with wisdom.

**You have learned
that there is no urgency.
You pace yourself better
and count the small successes.**

It is a comfort to be positive again, but you remember family members still in camps or whom you learned died horrible and unfair deaths. You call upon your growing wisdom to change what you can and accept what you can't.

**You will help others
by first helping yourself.
You aren't abandoning anyone.
You just can't help them yet.**

Step 5: Independence Stage - "Hi mom, I'm home."

Step 5 does not start with a parade and fireworks celebration. Often you don't know it has started until you suddenly notice how relaxed you are.

In this stage you feel comfortable, confident and able to make decisions based on your preferences. The days of feeling isolated, powerless and irritable happen less often. You recognize strengths in each culture without losing your balance. You believe Canada will be a good home.

However, the refugee may also notice that Step 5 doesn't come with any money. Previous status and income may not transfer to your new life, and the newcomer may feel it is demeaning to work below his education. Your self-confidence may falter. Your impatience may show.

Canadians recognize this impatience. We value people who are determined to create opportunities for their families. The immigrant's road is difficult to walk, but it is the road that the ancestors of every Canadian has walked. That's the road we have to offer. That's the only road we know.

"The Immigrants' Prayer"

**I didn't immigrate for myself.
I immigrated for my children.
Twenty years from now
I may still be poor,
but let my children prosper.**

A TIME LINE FOR THE CULTURE SHOCK

Evaluate your assets:

How strong and adaptive is your circle of friends?

How comprehensive is your support network?

Do you feel comfortable moving about your community?

Simply said, the smaller your assets, the longer the process.

There are considerations which may speed up adaptation.

- Awareness of the stages may reduce time and anxiety.
- Adults who can learn from children may progress faster. While it is a generalization, children often mix with others, experiment with the language and laugh at themselves more easily than adults. Clearly there are moments of rejection and teasing of our children that break our hearts, but most children put on a brave face and get back into the game. So should we.

There are considerations which may slow the process:

- Not all stress can be set aside simply by talking to a counsellor or friend. A person who once controlled his/her future but who now has little control will suffer. The stress of not knowing where the extended family is or if they are alive can only be eased with information.
- Violence often lingers in our minds. Truthfully, mental health professionals struggle to bring light back into the lives of persons who have experienced a war.
- Not having grieved the loss of relatives may slow the adjustment process.

Some Tips to Help You Adjust

1. Again, being aware that culture shock is a process gives a person perspective. It is nice to know you will be okay.
2. Mixing with other people is the single best thing you can do for yourself. You may begin by socializing with people who have the same language as you. As soon as possible, start visiting with people outside your culture. Start off with walking in your neighbourhood, saying "Good Morning" to people you meet.
3. If the weather is agreeable, spend time in your front yard, porch or balcony. If you are going to read a book, read outside. Plant a garden. Look after the kids outdoors. Conversations will happen more easily outdoors.
4. Find a host country friend to explain things and a same-culture buddy who understands your frustrations.
5. Every day look for something positive about the community — maybe something that makes you laugh.
6. You can use self-awareness to stall for time and not react.

If someone seems to be upset or impatient with you, tell yourself, "if this person is upset with me, I don't understand why. I feel like running away but I won't."

If a process at a bank or self-serve confuses you, tell yourself, "I want leave, but I'll ask for help first." 13

7. See things as they are. If you experience joy, stop and say, "That filled me with joy." When difficulties appear, say, "This may be difficult so I must prepare."
8. See racism for what it is. It **always** speaks about the racist, not you. Ask trusted Canadian and same-culture friends how to deal with spoken comments. Physical racism is called assault and should be reported to the police. Photos and license plate numbers help police.
9. Maintain your own culture. Please read page 15 for ideas.
10. Consider volunteering in your new community. A list of places to volunteer in Victoria are on page 21.
11. Avoid idealizing your life before the war. Certainly we depend on good memories of friendships and of our children's successes. Use these memories to make you stronger and more determined to carry on. Those comforts can happen in Canada also.
12. Your willingness to trust people outside your family may have shrunk if you had a difficult journey here. Not trusting others is tiring. Adjustment will go faster when you decide at least a couple things about trusting others:
 - (1) you are so tired at having to watch every move from every person and expecting the worst. You make the decision to begin trusting at least in small ways at first, and
 - (2) You see a difference between not trusting and being cautious. Being cautious, quiet and watchful is smart. Not trusting is a harsher decision and must be used sparingly.

Having Two Cultures is a Blessing in Canada

Canadians give great importance to multiculturalism. We do more business with the world if we understand other people better. Canadians are better able to work toward peace, bring medical care and teach around the world. Canadians' lives are enriched by the literature, art and music of other cultures.

Your home culture is important to you and to Canadians, so...

1. Stay in contact with family and friends from home.

Keep in touch with important people in your life. The library has free internet service for social media.

2. Participate in your religious community.

Our traditional places of worship provide comfort through familiar ceremonies and language.

3. Join cultural activities in the community.

Join the refugee/immigrant community to organize festivities and community outreach programs.

4. Maintain cultural traditions.

Maintain your personal culture traditions. Finding the exact foods that were available in the home country isn't as important as sharing the food you have and hearing familiar greetings, blessings, words and songs.

Helping Children Settle into a New Neighbourhood

Go for walks in your neighbourhood. Children will approach to say "Hi." Also you will learn where your child's friends live.

During your walks point out safe places and safe people for your child to go to for help — store workers, parents with a child, bus drivers, policemen including running to a police car.

Visit the neighbourhood park with your child. Ask neighbours if they think the park is safe.

Joining the library is free. It has internet so you can read news in your home language and use social media.

Canadians love second hand stores and you might also. Ask your sponsors to take you to the better ones.

A word about teasing is necessary. Teasing can be only words or it can be physical assault. For words only directed to children, the easy response is no response. The child moves to a teacher or a group of kids. Bullies won't follow. Physical abuse includes being hit, getting our clothes torn, having things thrown at us, or our property damaged. For children every incident of physical harassment should be reported if it happens at school **and** the parent should document what happened and when. Serious incidents should be reported to the police. Smaller incidents that keep happening also should be reported to the police or school principal. These authorities will act.

A Word About Starting High School

The challenges of high school are usually of two kinds: academic success and fitting in socially. For most immigrant families, academic success is all that counts. The children don't always see it that way.

Children often benefit by having a home base in high school, a comfortable place to meet friends in the morning. This is often the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom.

Ask your sponsor to come with you to register your child in school and meet the counsellor and ESL teacher. A stronger step some families take is to tell the counsellor he/she can communicate with the family through the sponsor.

If your journey here was traumatic, your child may benefit from extra emotional support. The key contact will be the school counsellor. The counsellor is your child's advocate.

Your daughter may want someone to walk with to school. If a neighbour has a daughter in the same school, either you or your sponsor can speak to the neighbour and ask their help.

Extracurricular activities include clubs, choirs, bands, theatre groups, and sports teams. These activities are part of the school but are not requirements. Talk to the counsellor to learn if an activity might break a rule in your religion or a family rule such as dancing or wearing make-up.

A Note on Grieving and Loss

These suggestions are not intended for and may delay effective treatment for difficulties such as trauma, multiple losses, sustained stress, anxiety, depression, or flashbacks. These must be addressed by trained mental health providers.

Grief is two things. First, it is our reaction to loss of a loved one. We may collapse in sorrow. Children may become mute. Also grief is the process of coping with the loss. The process is described as a series of conditions from shock, to denial, to anger and eventually to acceptance. If that process isn't allowed to happen, we can become stuck.

We can get stuck in physical, mental, emotional or spiritual reactions. Physically we may lose weight and cry easily. Mentally, the loss of a parent may bring fears about the future. Emotionally, we may move quickly between extremes such as from love to anger or hope to despair. Spiritually, we may rediscover the depth of our faith or turn away from our faith.

A refugee may think it is too late to grieve. The difficulties of the journey have delayed grieving for too long.

It is never too late to formally remember your loved ones. Sometimes people want to hold onto their heartaches so the loved one feels closer. Please ask yourself if your loved one would want you to live in sorrow. Welcome the grieving process. It is important to experience the comfort of talking about your loss, how you will remember loved ones and how you can release them to resume your family responsibilities.

People grieve differently. Please accept some ideas.

Children may be guided to create memory books of their loved ones. Photos can be put into the book, and friends and relatives can write memories they feel will benefit the children. Drawings can show how the child wants to remember the person. For younger children, drawings can show their life now which they wish to share with the person who has died.

Ask at your place of worship for help with a memorial service. Welcome the help from others to set up pictures and food. People may talk to you about their loss because they also need to heal. You have sought comfort for your grief, and through the memorial service you have helped the community.

A memorial service doesn't mark the end of grieving. Holy Days, birthdays and death anniversaries will renew your memories. Months after the service you might find the loved one's scarf or some extra shoestrings. The good memories and the difficult journey melt together. The heart is large enough to hold your memories and to move forward.

Some people may want to grieve without a big fuss being made. They stay alone hoping that time is all they need. Healing happens more easily if you have a companion with you. A companion just listens. A companion doesn't give advice or judge anyone. Companions just listen. If you already know this is true, you can become a companion to others who need to talk.

Three Canadian Laws with Implications for Culture Shock

Punishment of your child

Parents can have their children taken away from them by the government if parents use excessive violence when punishing their children.

This includes hitting, restraining or denying supports such as food. The Department of Child Protection Services will investigate. The government people will determine what is excessive violence. Anyone working with children can be investigated for child abuse.

It may be that culture is deeper than laws, but will you risk losing your children to prove the point?

Assault

In Canada, assault is enforced for **domestic violence** and **sexual assault**. Domestic violence usually means violence toward the spouse. The violence may be physical, emotional, financial or psychological violence real or perceived. Police may arrest the assailant. **Sexual Assault** refers to a wide range of offences. Leering, unwanted touching, sexist jokes or showing explicit pictures are examples of what Canadians consider sexual assault. While these offences may be culturally defined, they remain serious offences and may be investigated by the police and/or school officials.

A Note on Volunteering in Your New Community

Volunteering is an excellent way to enter into the social culture of your new country. You make friends, practice English and learn work skills.

Your place of worship is an excellent place to volunteer. You may help set up chairs for weekly meetings, gardening or helping new families.

Volunteer Victoria (many different types of work)
620 View Street, # 306
250-386-2269

Capital City Volunteers (many different types of work)
1004 North Park Street
250-380-0620

Victoria Women's Transition Housing Community
3060 Cedar Hill Road, #100
250-592-2927

Our Place (Homeless Centre)
919 Pandora Avenue

Victoria General Hospital
1 Hospital Way
250-727-4134

Volunteer Royal BC Museum
675 Belleville Street
250-356-7226

Cool Aid (Homeless Services)
749 Pandora Avenue
250-383-1977

Resources of Interest to Immigrants and Refugees in Victoria

The Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society (VIRCS)
637 Bay Street, 3rd Floor
Victoria, BC V8t 5L2
(250) 361-9433 (phone)
info@vircs.bc.ca

The Immigrant and Refugee Wellness Centre
website: www.ccfir.ca
(250) 999-8170
email: aacarter9@shaw.ca

The Intercultural Resource Centre
930 Balmoral Road
Victoria, BC V8T 1A8
(250) 388-4728

Masjid Al-Iman Mosque
2218 Quadra St.
Victoria, BC V8YT 2C7
(250) 995-1422

A Brief Word to Sponsors and Friends of Refugee Families

Applications may need to be filed for transfer of or credit toward trade and professional licenses from the home country. If a transfer is possible, the process will take time and documentation. Ideally, the paperwork for meaningful jobs will be completed by the time the family is comfortable with the new culture.

The author may be reached at: jchriscarrier@gmail.com