

# Navigating Cross-Cultural Adjustment

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## Why is Living in a New Culture Challenging?

- There are two types of factors to consider: External and Internal
  - o “External Factors” include things like: language, food, values, climate, etc. These things are mostly outside of our control and things we need to learn about and adapt to.
  - o “Internal Factors” include things like: personality, cultural familiarity/knowledge, genetics, mental health challenges, internal skills/knowledge. These things we have more control over, but we don't have control over everything (e.g., genetics).
- Our brain creates a “map” or “template” of our dominant culture, so things like language and values become automatic to us. We don't have to consciously think about things to function.
- When we encounter a new culture, our current “map”/“template” no longer works. This creates stress.

## Common Reactions to Culture Shock

- Physical
  - o headache
  - o sleep issues
  - o muscle tension
  - o low grade fever
  - o heart palpitations
  - o loss of energy
- Emotional
  - o grief
  - o sadness/depression
  - o doubt
  - o homesickness
  - o impatience
  - o anger/frustration
  - o resentment
  - o obsessions
  - o apathetic
  - o inadequacy
  - o hopelessness
  - o anxiety
  - o suspicious
  - o large mood swings

- Behavioral
  - o avoidance/isolation
  - o under/over eating
  - o loss of energy
  - o increase drug/alcohol use

### **Stages of Culture Shock**

- One model explains 5 stages of culture shock:
  - o Honeymoon: focus more on similarities and aspects that are better than dominant culture. Strong feelings of excitement and joy. Romanticizing host culture and rejecting home culture.
  - o Distress: Realization that things are different and not as good as first thought. Realization that there will be challenges because of differences from dominant culture.
  - o Frustration: Emotional distress, large mood swings, romanticizing dominant culture and rejecting host culture.
  - o Adjustment: Decrease in “black and white” thinking. Gradually increasing understanding of new culture and acceptance that having a blended cultural identity is possible.
  - o Adaptation: A general sense of well-being and sense of control. Feeling confident in understanding and navigating host culture. A blend of accepting dominant culture and host culture.
- This model is biased towards immigrants who are moving to a new culture mostly by choice.
- This is a model, so it’s inherently flawed. Each individual will go through these stages in different order and some individuals may not experience certain stages.

### **4 Types of Responses to a New Culture**

- Assimilation: Reject dominant culture and only accept/adopt new culture.
- Integration: Accepting and blending dominant culture and new culture.
- Marginalization: Rejecting home culture and new culture.
- Separation: Rejecting new culture and only accepting dominant culture.

### **Key Concept to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy**

- Three variables influence one another: Feelings, Thoughts, and Behaviors
  - o All three things influence one another. Don’t happen in isolation.
- Automatic Thoughts: Most of our thoughts are automatic and out of our control. Some of these thoughts can be weird or even scary. Thoughts don’t necessarily reflect “who we are” or our values.

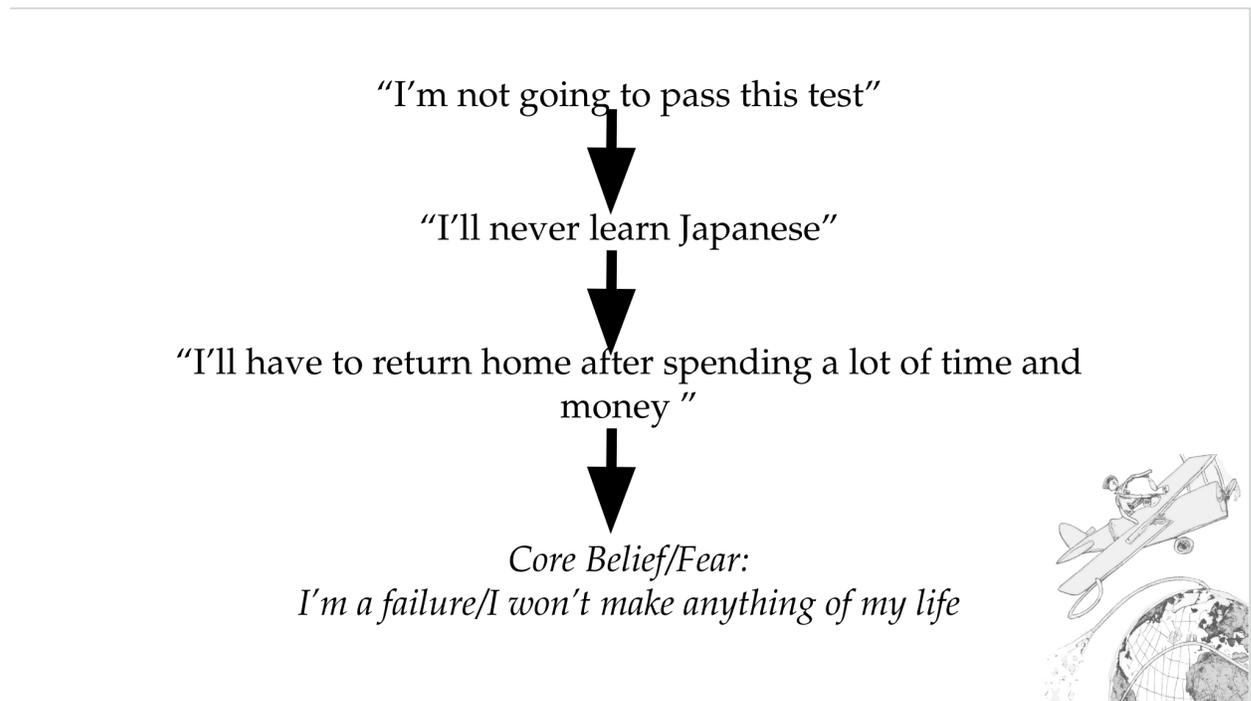
- We can influence thoughts or “inject” thoughts into our head. But, we can never gain full control over the automatic thoughts.
- Our brain has the ability to watch itself. Imagine one side of the brain is the “Monkey Mind” and the other is the “Observing Mind.”
  - o The Monkey Mind does anything it wants
  - o The Observing Mind watches the Monkey Mind rather than participates in it.
  - o Being an observer of our thoughts rather than a participant can increase our awareness, which increases our control over our emotions and behaviors.

### **Cognitive Distortions**

- Black and White Thinking
- Personalization
- Catastrophizing
- Emotional Reasoning
- Mind Reading
- Negative Filter
- Should Statements

More info: <https://socialanxietycounseling.com/cognitive-distortions/>

### **Downward Arrow Technique**



## **Rumination**

- Rumination is circular thinking that does not lead to problem solving or productive behaviors.
- It's the illusion of problem solving.
- Oftentimes rumination comes in the form of questions that can't be answered with certainty and is seeking certainty. For example: "Did I say something inappropriate?"
  - o This question is mostly focused on others' possible interpretation and opinion.
  - o If you ask many people, you will get many answers. Which one is right?
  - o There is always doubt and never certainty.
  - o The question isn't focused on action or solutions. It's focused on the possibility of danger.
  - o This leads to circular speculation, not problem solving. It's the illusion of problem solving.
  - o It feels productive because the brain is busy.
- We can't stop automatic thoughts, therefore we shouldn't try to stop them. For example, try to not think about a pink elephant.
- Instead, it's often better to:
  - o Become aware that you are ruminating
  - o Resist the urge to try to stop the thoughts
  - o Focus on changing your relationship with your thoughts:
    - Stop trying to answer the question
    - Don't try to solve the "problem"
    - Focus on action and behaviors, not more thinking and engaging with the question.
- Analogy: Sitting at a cafe with a friend and there is music in the background (your thoughts). You don't have control over the music. In fact, every time you ask the owner to turn down the music, he turns it up louder. Instead of trying to turn down/off the music, try to focus on the goal: talking with your friend. Continue with the behavior you value DESPITE the thoughts being present.

## **The Anxiety Cycle**

- Anxiety helps us stay safe. But, anxiety sends us false signals all the time
- Anxiety urges us to avoid or escape. It can be intense and urgent, making it hard to resist.
- When we escape or avoid, we get a reward: relief and "safety."
- If we escape or avoid a situation that feels dangerous, but is actually safe, we reinforce unhelpful anxiety long-term.

## **Anxiety & Our Brains**

- The "Reactive" brain keeps us alive
  - o It's fast, but not smart
  - o Example: You see a twig, think it's a snake, and jump without control
  - o It can't be taught through language or self-talk; only by experience

- o It can only be taught when it's triggered
- The "Thinking" brain helps regulate the "Reactive" brain
  - o It's slower, but smarter. We use it to solve complex problems
  - o The thinking brain can help regulate the "Reactive" brain after the "Reactive" brain is triggered, but it can't teach the "Reactive" or prevent it from reacting.
- Haunted House example
  - o If you go to a Halloween haunted house, even though your "Thinking" brain knows it's safe, your "Reactive" brain will still get triggered.
  - o No matter how much you tell the "Reactive" brain that it will be safe, it will get scared.
  - o The only way to teach the "Reactive" brain is by going back into the haunted house over and over.

### **Getting Out of the Anxiety Cycle**

- If a situation is safe and we experience anxiety, we need to do the opposite of what it urges us to do.
- We need to take small steps to confront the situation that triggers the "Reactive" brain and not give into the urges of escape or avoid.
- Slowly by confronting the anxiety provoking situations, the "Reactive" brain learns that it's not in danger and will stop or decrease the amount of alarm signals in the future.

### **Sadness and Depression**

- Very similar paradoxical approach to anxiety.
- When feeling sad or depressed, it's common to wait until the feeling of motivation hits to do something. Motivation rarely comes.
- Instead, we engage in the behavior we value even though we don't feel like it. Many times, by engaging in the behavior, this changes how we feel, and motivation can follow.

### **General Tips**

- Schedule worry time
- Get thoughts out of your head, when they stay in your head they stay vague. Vague thoughts are hard to challenge. Instead, write your thoughts down regularly.
- Opposite action / paradoxical interventions
- Breathing while you wait for anxious feelings to pass. Not with the attitude, "I need to breathe to escape this feeling," which is likely to increase the same feeling.
- Meditation
- Label your thoughts
- Exercise and eating right
- Neuroplasticity: our brain has an amazing ability to make new connections. The more we think a certain way, the more automatic it becomes. By making an effort to think in new ways and challenge automatic thoughts, our brain makes new pathways. These new pathways become more automatic and old pathways become less frequent/automatic.

- Patience: it's very normal to experience stress from culture shock. In fact, it's unavoidable. Remind yourself it takes time.
- Persistence: focus on your goal, the "why", your values.
- Reach out for help if you are feeling a sense of being out of control, persistent loneliness/isolation, alcohol/drug abuse, persistent self-criticism/guilt, suicidal thoughts.

### **Book Recommendations / Resources**

**The Art of Crossing Cultures, Craig Storti**

**Third Culture Kids, David C. Pollock, Ruth E. Van Raken, et al.**

**International Mental Health Professionals Japan - <https://www.imhpi.org/>**

**TELL Chat and Hotline - <https://telljp.com/>**