

***Leave Your Shoes at the Door:
Reggie Pawle Discusses How to Adapt to a Foreign Culture***

My brother-in-law, Juan, is an Argentine by birth who earned a Ph.D. from an American university, and has become an American citizen. Still, after living in the States for more than 25 years, he says he feels “a half a step out of step” with America and still has to adapt regularly. This is a common story for people who choose to live in foreign countries. Adjustment and adaptation are ongoing psychological experiences.

The well-known phrase “culture shock” is what hits a person when they first arrive. Adjusting to differences in basics like language, food, housing, etc., can be shocking and the stories are numerous. I remember Henry’s humorous story of trying to sit down on a squat toilet the first time he encountered one. Such simple differences can be very disorienting.

Those who stay as expatriates partly do so because they have learned to handle adjustment. Part of this is learning new behaviors and social skills. Part also is shedding old behaviors, ones that don’t fit with the new culture. Horace, an American, said, “I was much louder and expressive back home. However, Japan softened me up.”

People take different approaches to adjustment. One way of considering this is to look at the degree of cultural distance the foreigner has with Japan. John has immersed himself in Japanese culture. He is a Buddhist monk, has his own temple, and has become a Japanese citizen. For some this way of adjustment can be difficult. Mary became confused about her identity. She said she became adept at playing roles and fitting into situations, but began to wonder who she really was. She said she felt like an onion, nothing but the sum of her layers. Another difficulty can be a sense of insecurity that can come from not really being “Japanese.” Even though he is now a Japanese citizen, John still considers what he would do if he had to leave Japan.

An opposite approach to immersion are those who separate themselves, limiting their interaction with their adopted culture. Some expatriates are only in Japan for their job and don’t particularly like Japan. Michael said he gets out of Japan every vacation he has. Others like being “outside” society. They feel freer to live as they please and create their own world. When I walked into Ann’s house, I was amazed. It was like suddenly stepping back into an American 1960’s house.

A downside of this way of adjustment is the limitations of living in a foreigner bubble. One very common dilemma is limitations in work. When a person is limited in participation in a culture, engaging work can be hard to find. John found his purpose in Japan. However, Stanley’s story is a common one I’ve heard. A long time English teacher, Stanley didn’t have John’s opportunity. His boredom and malaise at work gradually permeated his whole life. He said, “I don’t feel like I am alive anymore.”

There are certainly unhealthy ways to adjust. One effect of being a foreigner can be feeling like one is outside laws and ethics. This is a kind of delusion that can result in behaving in ways that one wouldn’t back home - a “be crazy and jump in the fountain” syndrome. In her English classes Noriko had only met this sort of American. When she actually went to America, she was relieved to find Americans different from this. Another unhealthy result is becoming narcissistic in response to seemingly being put on a

pedestal by Japanese. Bruce's story is not so uncommon. He found everything in Japan easy – easy to get money, easy to get women, easy to party. He lost touch with reality in a certain way and had a friend back home mail him some drugs. Very quickly the party was over.

However an expatriate adjusts to Japan what is important is to keep in touch with what is ... important – what kind of a person do you want to be, what do you want to realize and/or do in life, who do you want to be with. These are important considerations for anyone, but an expatriate often needs to look harder for ways to engage them. Activities, friends, resources - seek it all out. Check out the activities sections of this magazine, community centers, YMCA/YWCA, anywhere people gather.

Difficulties in adjustment tend to aggravate any other psychological difficulties a person is already having. Sometimes all that is needed is simple information about common difficulties of adjustment. This helps a person to understand the bigger picture and handle the stresses better. For some difficulties in adjustment can aggravate other difficulties, like depression and anxiety. In this case consultation with a psychotherapist can be helpful. For foreign therapists in Japan, check www.imphj.org, or contact Reggie Pawle, Ph.D., 075-724-1356.