

## **HF Workshop: The Adaptation Process, Culture Shock and What Do We Do About it**

Everyone experiences adapting to a new culture a little differently, but generally, it looks like a roller coaster ride: there are lots of ups, downs and curves in the road.

Not everyone goes thru all the stages, but let's take a look at what an AP might experience:

### **The "Honeymoon"**

For most APs, it's been a dream to come to the U.S. They often have high expectations for their AP year, maybe too high! On arrival, everything may seem perfect and so exciting, until one day...

### **Culture Shock!**

The AP may wake up and feel just dreadful. She may:

- Have no energy
- Feel sick
- Cry for no reason
- Feel so homesick that she feels her heart will break
- Feel angry: angry at the "stupid Americans" and at herself for making this decision.
- Not recognize herself. She doesn't know what's going on but it feels awful and she may want to go home!

Culture shock is like a psychological disorientation. It is often called "culture fatigue." The AP is "tired of eating strange food, tired of speaking and listening to a strange language, and tired of watching a lot of strange behavior."

On day her body might just shut down. This stage feels awful and is difficult for the HF to understand, but it will pass if everyone deals with the stress.

When you have a newly-arrived, non-functioning AP, call your counselor immediately! He/she will guide you and the AP through this difficult stage. The counselor will likely do the following and encourage you to do the same:

- **Assess the situation:** When there are indications that the AP is experiencing extreme homesickness and/or culture shock, the CC will meet with the AP

- **He/She will be a detective and** ask the AP if we're "seeing the real her; "Is she usually quiet, is she sensitive?" Usually she's begin to sob, shoulders will shudder, and she will say something like, "...no, I'm usually so bubbly, I don't recognize who I am." **That's culture shock.**
- **Be a good listener:** encourage the AP to talk about herself; why she decided to be an AP, what did she hope to accomplish this year, etc
- Be a cheerleader: remind her how "brave" she is to have made the decision to come to the U.S. Encourage her to remember the sense of adventure that got her to the U.S.
- Be an educator: talk to her about culture shock and homesickness. Encourage her to talk to her HF about it reminding her that most Americans haven't had this experience and therefore don't recognize the signs of culture shock.
- Be a mediator: bring the HF into the discussion sharing information on homesickness, culture shock and the difficulty some people have adapting to another culture. Encourage them to be supportive, good listeners and above all else, PATIENT.
- Be a strategist: put a plan into place to help the AP acclimate to her new surroundings; connect her with the other APs, especially someone who has had the culture shock experience.
- Be a coach: remind her that communication is the key to a successful year. Her HF won't be able to read her mind; the American style of communication is direct and her HF will expect her to be direct too: talk, talk, talk is our mantra.
- Be a social worker: check in every day for the next few days. Your calls/emails/texts will remind her of the great support she has from APIA. While you're at it, check in with the HF too.
- And finally, be a friend-someone to have a cup of coffee with, someone who listens, a shoulder to lean on, a smiling face, an arm around the shoulders, a voice that says, "welcome to America."

### **This too shall pass: Cultural Adjustment**

Little by little, day by day, things start to get better:

- AP will have made some friends
- English becomes more comfortable to her

- She'll understand the HF's routine and expectations
- She'll learn her way around
- And she'll feel more comfortable communicating with the CC and her HF!

