

U.S. CULTURE

Informality

Americans are often very informal in both their dress and their interactions with others. People frequently call each other by their first names, which should not be seen as a lack of respect. You may call persons your own age and your colleagues by their first names. It is best, however, to address professors and older persons with their title (Dr., Professor, Mr., Mrs., or Ms.) unless they ask you to do otherwise.

Time

Despite their informality in other aspects of life, Americans are very concerned about time. Punctuality is very important, and it is considered rude to be late. Classes, meetings, and appointments generally start within a few minutes of their set time. If you know you are going to be late for an appointment, you should call and give an explanation.

Personal Space

Unlike many other cultures, Americans tend to stand about two or three feet apart when talking to one another, and often feel crowded when closer. If a person feels uncomfortable they may move away to create more distance. This should not be seen as a sign of rudeness, as they are just re-establishing their personal space. Americans also like to make eye contact when talking to each other.

Greetings and Invitations

When meeting someone for the first time, Americans usually shake hands and say "Hi," "Pleased to meet you" or "How do you do?" When greeting someone you are already acquainted with, you may smile or wave. A common greeting is "How are you?" The usual response to this question is "I'm fine, thanks"; the person asking generally does not expect a detailed response. Similarly, phrases such as "See you later" are just ways of saying goodbye, and does not imply an invitation.

When receiving an invitation, it is polite to respond as soon as possible to let your host or hostess know whether or not you are able to accept. If you are invited to dinner, you should arrive on time. You are not expected to bring a gift, but if you wish to show your appreciation, flowers or other small items are appropriate. It is not as important to be on time to events such as parties; guests are often late, as no one wants to be the first to arrive.

Friendships

Internationals often experience frustration in making friends with Americans. While Americans are very friendly, it may be difficult to develop a close personal relationship with them. Americans have many casual acquaintances, but very few close friends.

Dating

Dating is prevalent in the United States, often beginning in the early teenage years. Going to movies, dinner, or to sporting events are popular date activities. Dating in the U.S. is more casual than in some other parts of the world. While a man and a woman may go on several dates, this does not indicate any serious commitment, unless they decide they will only date each other. In the past the man usually paid for the date, although this is changing. Now it is not uncommon for the woman to pay or for the man and woman to share the cost of the date. Nor is it very unusual for a woman to invite a man for a date or to initiate a get-together.

When dating, do not allow yourself to be pressured into engaging in any intimate act that you are uncomfortable with. Be clear about what you consider appropriate and inappropriate behavior. If you have any questions regarding dating or contraceptives, please contact Student Health Services at 852-6479.

Hygiene

While Americans are very casual in their dress, they are preoccupied with cleanliness. Men and women bathe frequently, particularly in the summer, and use a great deal of soap, deodorant, and cologne. While this may seem excessive to those from other cultures, it is important to remember that personal hygiene can play a major role in professional and social success in the United States.

Stages of Adjustment

Adapting to living in a new culture is always difficult, and impacts different people in different ways. The following stages are ones many people experience in their attempt to become accustomed to a new place.

Honeymoon Stage

This stage is characterized by exhilaration, anticipation, and excitement. The individual is generally fascinated with everything that is new. Most people in this stage are concerned with pleasing others. In their enthusiasm to please, however, they may pretend to understand things when they really do not. Once these misunderstandings begin to build up, they will probably experience the second state of cultural adjustment.

Hostility Stage

The hostility stage is characterized by frustration, anger, anxiety, and sometimes depression. The individual becomes frustrated with bureaucracy and weary of speaking and listening in English every day. Sleep patterns may become disrupted, and the individual may be unable to eat.

At this point, people often react to their frustration by rejecting the new environment in which they feel discomfort. The reasoning might be, "If I feel bad, it's because of them." They might feel that their external environment is to blame for their bad feelings. There may be displays of hostility toward the people of the new culture. Some of these hostilities may be translated into periods of anger over minor frustrations, excessive fear and mistrust of the new culture, lack of interest, lack of motivation, and at worst, complete withdrawal.

Humor Stage

The individual begins to relax in the new environment and is able to laugh at mistakes and misunderstandings that previously caused a great deal of stress in the hostility stage. This more relaxed stage occurs after the individual has made some friends and is better able to manage in the new environment.

Home Stage

The home stage occurs when the individual can feel comfortable in the new environment while retaining allegiance to the home culture. The person has successfully adjusted to the norms and standards of the new culture, and should be commended for the ability to live successfully in two cultures.