

CROSS CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

American Values and Customs

Life in the United States can be quite different than what you are used to, and sometimes the differences pop up in surprising places. Learning what behavior means can be difficult and interact with Americans can be a major cultural adjustment. Here are some tips to get you started. Keep in mind that these are generalizations in order to give you a better understanding of the culture as a whole. When meeting individuals for the first time, you should use intuition and observational skills to understand their individual values and customs. Remember: If in doubt, ask questions!

Americans value...

... their **INDIVIDUALITY**. Americans are encouraged at an early age to develop and pursue their own goals. There is a high value placed on independence. A person's status usually is determined by their education and individual achievements.

... their **TIME**. Americans take pride in using their time wisely and most people prefer to stay very busy. This is why they tend to plan events in advance. Punctuality is very important and can be an adjustment for many international visitors. If someone is picking you up, you are expected to be ready at the agreed upon time. If you are meeting others in a public place, it is very important to arrive on time. Many Americans feel that arriving late for social events or appointments indicates a lack of respect for the person that is kept waiting.

... their **PRIVACY**. Americans value private space, such as their home or vehicle, and are used to standing a little bit further away from people they are talking to when compared to other cultures. Most people are guarded about what they consider personal information. This includes their income, the cost of their possessions, family problems, etc.

Some things to expect:

INTRODUCTIONS: It is proper to shake hands with everyone to whom you are introduced, regardless of their age or gender. If you want to introduce yourself to someone, extend your hand for a handshake and say, "Hello, I'm . . . [name]" An appropriate response to an introduction is, "Nice to meet you." You will commonly hear people introduced with the titles Mr., Mrs., or Miss (Ms.). The title Mrs. means the woman is married and the title Miss means the woman is not married. The title Mr. does not indicate whether a man is married or not married.

INFORMALITY: The American lifestyle is generally quite casual and this can sometimes be shocking to others who are not used to it. Dress for class is commonly very casual. In the workplace, dress can be formal or informal, and among acquaintances, first names and eye contact are almost always used, regardless of age or position. Many other countries have developed subtle, sometimes highly ritualistic, ways of informing others of unpleasant information. Americans are likely to be very direct in confrontation and anything other than the most direct and open approach is usually considered to be viewed suspiciously.

INVITATIONS: Sometimes Americans say things like "See you later," or "Let's get together some time," and this kind of friendly statement is not necessarily an invitation. If an actual invitation is being extended, the date, time, and place will be specified. It is perfectly polite to say no. If you say yes, you should attend unless you contact them ahead of time to cancel. It is impolite to accept an invitation and not go. It is not mandatory to bring your partner when you are invited to someone's home; however, it is received well if you do.

It is perfectly polite to say, "No, thank you," when you are offered food.

