A FISH OUT OF WATER: ADJUSTING TO CHANGE EFFECTIVELY

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Nothing stays still in life, change seems to come whether we welcome it or dread it! Some of the biggest life transitions include going to university for the first time, leaving your home and family or moving to a new place where the language, culture and customs are completely different. As an international student, you are making all of those transitions at the same time! Phew! Is it any wonder that it is hard work?!

Australia is a multi-cultural country with a long history of immigration. Most people here will have some experience of other cultures across generations, either personally or through others in their social circle. The great thing about that is there are lots of other people who can empathise with what you are going through, people who can give you advice and support and also, plenty of “pockets” of a whole variety of cultures throughout Melbourne.

Living in country that is not your home country is a disorienting experience and can feel like being a ‘fish out of water’. This experience is sometimes termed “culture shock”, which is the experience of:

- Feeling disoriented/confused when exposed to a new place and culture,
- Feeling stressed and/or upset due to the effort needed to make the adjustment
- Feeling a sense of loss or yearning for your home country
- Feeling frustrated and losing confidence because you change from knowing how everything works at home to not knowing how anything works in the new place.

Put most simply, it is the anxiety of missing what you know and having to work hard to relearn how things work in the new place. You can feel like a scared little kid at times, with no parent to help you navigate the unknown world out there. But it’s not all bad – you might also feel energised by all the new things you are experiencing and look forward to learning more, especially in the beginning. It is quite normal to feel a spectrum of emotions (excitement, sadness, happiness, frustration, anger, anxiety, confusion, stress and/or a sense of satisfaction at mastering new skills); experience health or sleeping problems; get worried about a whole range of things; or lose confidence.

So, how do you deal with this?

Step one: Allow yourself to adjust in your own time and in your own way

Adjusting successfully requires knowing yourself and how you personally adjust to change. It is just as normal to adapt quickly as it is to adapt slowly – we all are, after all, different. Give yourself permission to adjust in your own way and in your own time.

Step two: Plan what you will need and how to get it.

There are a whole range of things that might be important to you – if you know what you like and what you will miss most, why not make it a priority to find viable alternatives in this new setting? For example:
• If communicating with home is important, invest the energy to research phone companies and/or email providers to get the best price and find out the best times to call home.

• If food is important, ask fellow students or research on the internet to find out where restaurants and supermarkets that have your favourite foods are located and how to get there.

• If connecting with other people is important, get in touch with students to find out about social events and opportunities to meet others through clubs and activities.

**Step three: Build stress management activities into your routine**

It is important to keep your body in the best possible shape for dealing with the stresses of change. This means:

• Eating a diet that is balanced, includes lots of fresh fruit and vegetables and fewer fast foods that are high in fat, salt and/or sugar.

• Exercising regularly to burn some of the excess energy that is generated when you feel stressed or anxious.

• Relaxing using deep relaxation techniques like yoga, deep breathing, and/or meditation.

• Plan your time to ensure that you have enough time to achieve all the study tasks you need to stay up to date in your course, get time to spend with friends and having fun, time to connect with people from home.

• Talk about your feelings and concerns with a friend or counsellor when you need to, don’t keep everything inside. It is amazing how much better you can feel when someone who cares listens to you!

Assistance in this area and many others can be obtained from the RMIT Student Counselling Service. The RMIT Counselling Service offers free and confidential counselling to all RMIT students. Counsellors may help you to explore your concerns, both personal and academic.

The RMIT Counselling Service can be contacted at 9925-4365 between 9am and 5pm.