So to start off, what is culture shock? It’s that feeling of anxiety that overtakes you when you realize that the rules that you thought that you knew about how to get things done don’t seem to work in the new culture. In psychological terms this is known as cognitive dissonance which is defined as the sense of discomfort that we feel when our new experiences don’t match what we already know.

This dissonance or discomfort can be expressed in all kinds of strange and unexpected symptoms. Some people develop physical symptoms such as headaches, overeating, and sleep disorders. Other people develop kind of bizarre behaviors or fears like maybe they worry a lot about cleanliness—or they’re afraid of shaking hands with people in the new culture. I have a friend who took his family to live overseas for a year and his son kept complaining that the air smelled funny, that’s a little weird.

Then, there are the emotional symptoms of culture shock such as personality changes, irritation, anger, homesickness, loss of confidence, loneliness, and even depression. You know you wake up in the morning and feel like another person is suddenly living inside your body; this is culture shock.

But as terrible as all of that sounds, there are things people can do to avoid, well not, avoid, but you can minimize the symptoms. So, first of all, it’s important to recognize that culture shock is normal, and everyone living in a new culture goes through culture shock to a greater or lesser degree. It’s also helpful to know that it’s temporary. Culture shock typically lasts three to six months, and then most people start to adjust and feel better.

Research has demonstrated that people who are open-minded, flexible, curious about new things, people who have a good sense of humor, are less affected by culture shock than people who are more rigid and judgemental. Research also shows that people who are more self-aware, who understand themselves in situations, they understand their own strengths and weaknesses, and they’re obviously going to be able to anticipate the effects of culture shock and prepare for them better.