

The Low Point of Culture Shock

Sunglasses and hats. These days I often hide behind them, thinking as if in some way they'll conceal my dirty-blond hair and blue-green eyes -- features that stand out starkly here in Japan. Then again, if you've spent some time in Japan, you know how ~~un~~common baseball caps and sunglasses are among young women here. I usually justify them as covers for my three-day-unwashed mom hair and the dark purple clouds accentuating my lower eyelids from a year of nightly baby wakings. But deep down I know that lately, it's also a bit more than that.

The end of July this year marked four years in Japan for me -- my first time ever in Japan, and abroad, unless you count Mexico and Canada, both of which sandwich the United States, where I'm from. It was a transition I was more than ready for -- I spent five years after high school working, volunteering, and a little school (to finish my bachelor's degree). And then I hit a wall. I needed to get out of my comfort zone. And a foreign country - Japan - was the ticket for me.

I've told my going-to-Japan story in interviews before, so I won't go into it here. When I first arrived though, I clearly remember stepping out of Narita airport and being hit instantly with a wave of hot, sticky air. I could even smell the humidity.

The weeks followed were a blur of the "honeymoon period." Everything was so new, different and exciting. Things a lot of newbies and tourists might think, such as:

THERE'S COLD TEA IN THE VENDING MACHINES! THERE'S DELICIOUS SUSHI EVERYWHERE! THE TOILETS HEAT UP AND SQUIRT WATER AND ARE SO HIGH-TECH!

Yes, the things that are quite boring or normal after even just a year of living in Japan.

Adding to my honeymoon period, and essentially extending it, was a (serious) marriage proposal. That's another story, but it wasn't some random guy I had just met, but rather my best friend of several years prior, who had moved to Japan a year before me.

So I got engaged. Then I got married the following year. Then I had a baby just last year.

I experienced a lot of lifetime highs during my initial years here, and as a result I never felt like I had hit any of the culture shock lows everyone talked about and said **WOULD** happen to me in the first year. I waited for them, but they just didn't come.

Sure, it wasn't all unicorns and rainbows. There were, and are, things that frustrate or annoy me just like any other person. I had an overbearing, control freak supervisor who made work difficult at times during my first year. And it had nothing to do with her being Japanese and me being American. She really was like this with everyone, even the students, and I tend to make mistakes constantly when I'm micromanaged, so that was stressful at times.

At the beginning of my second year in Japan I had a **ridiculously long illness that no doctor in my area could diagnose** and we ended up not getting a diagnosis until we visited the States.

We had some problems finding a decent OBGYN to help birth our daughter. One **doctor made a comment** towards the beginning of my pregnancy that I was gaining weight too fast, despite it being normal in the US.

And I struggle with the speaking/listening side of Japanese learning, because I am NOT an audio-type learner (visual is more my thing) and so while my reading improves, I get stuck speaking. It bothers me. And I do try, with all the struggles that come with it.

And **giving birth**. It was, to say the least, difficult. I tried my best, but that didn't really make things "easy". My second night in the clinic left me completely traumatized. And after weeks spent crying in trauma and guilt after the fact, and yes, even when I could laugh about it a few months later, I realized as time went on that the negative parts about the experience gave me PTSD. And the mom guilt I've had for things, I tell ya, it's hard. I'm sure some of you parents can understand this one.

Then I had to take care of a high-needs baby full-time. All day. Every day (minus weekends or days my husband was home). And then work as much as I could in the

evenings and on weekends.

This led to the monotonous days. Day after day of feeding, cleaning, getting baby to sleep. Trying to go out when I could and had the courage to do so with the little one. To the grocery store, at least. And that started the constant choruses of "kawaiiiiiiiiiiii-iiiiii!!!!" (cute). Everywhere we went. People coming up, asking to take pictures, wanting to touch her cheeks or hair, saying they want a foreign baby. I mean, I was stared at before and all, all the time, while my dark-haired husband is usually ignored, but with a little blond baby, it's like you're carrying a celebrity around. A demanding, high-maintenance, celebrity.

At first it was cute. Endearing. Made me feel like a proud parent and all that. But after months of this I wanted to hide. And hide my baby. Run away from anyone trying to come up and interact with us. It was like any sort of bubble I had (which wasn't necessarily much) had been popped when I brought this baby into the world. Japan-world, that is.

And I felt myself feeling more and more down. Very out of sorts. Not myself. When I came to Japan I usually tried to roll with the punches and I could easily just go with things and didn't care what people thought (in a polite way). If you go to a foreign country and can do this, believe me, it will help your adjustment and dealing with all those "unexpected" things that come up.

But it started to change with different experiences I've had here, slowly eroding that "go with the flow" mentality. And perhaps mixed with the trauma of my birth experience and whatever postpartum hormones I have, it's brought me to this strange point of feeling negative, withdrawn, and disconnected.

I thought it might get better with the hot, sunny summer weather (as I hate winter and the cold and I'm 98% sure I have SAD). But then there was finding an apartment, packing, moving, and taking care of baby and working, so, stress. After moving, even more stress, even though I was looking forward to a change.

And then I realized that, in addition to my issues with the birth, postpartum hormones, etc., I think I've finally reached the lowest point of culture shock. I looked around online for a good model of the stages to share here, but it seems there are sev-

eral models varying from three to five stages and having different low points.

But that said, I don't think it helps that most of my work revolves around thinking, researching and writing about Japan and how to live here. Japan to me right now is kind of the like the significant other that you spend all your waking moments with, and all you do is talk about each other and to each other and everything revolves around this "other". Not the healthiest of relationships.

I don't think I ever thought about the U.S. this much when I was living there. At least, not directly.

I'm sure some people might read this and think, or possibly say, "so go home," or "you wanted to have a baby." Or something like that. But I'm not regretting or even trying to complain about my choices. You won't see me going around badmouthing it to people or whining about how horrible my life is (because it's not, and even in my darkest days when I might want to say that, I know ultimately I'm blessed).

Japan IS my home now, at least to some extent. I don't dwell in negativity and find that doing so just makes me bitter and resentful. And there aren't any good reasons for me to feel bitter about Japan, even though there are things I don't like here in general. But there are things I don't like in the US, where I was born and raised, as well. I think it's best to not view any country as some kind of ideal that sits on a pedestal that all other countries should emulate.

I'm just trying to say that culture shock happens. Different stages of it. And that I'm struggling with some low stage of it myself right now. I have good and bad days. Sometimes I feel like going to the US for a break, even though that's not possible at the moment.

With all that said, though, I do love Japan. I might not love everything about Japan, but I love it. I've had a lot of meaningful experiences here. I've met so many wonderful people.

But I think it's ok to go through periods when you feel like you don't love Japan. Or maybe you love it just fine but you're just feeling annoyed or frustrated because you spend too much time talking to it and thinking about it. You just need your own

space once in a while and some time to relax.

Maybe you don't want to go out in public much if it means answering more questions about your baby's age, how long you've been in Japan and what you do (even though maybe in general these don't bother you). Or maybe you just don't want to use Japanese, even though you know it's fantastic practice because you live here. Or you don't want to sit for five minutes trying to figure out some of the ingredients in a product -- the ones you don't recognize -- AGAIN. (Because there are an awful lot of ingredients in products and food...) And by you, I mostly mean me.

The next stage is the part where I'm supposed to find myself feeling more part of the culture. More integrated somehow. Not that I'll ever truly fit in, and I don't necessarily expect to. I feel like I'm getting closer to where I feel integrated to the point I can or need to be, while also figuring out what part of me still fits the US. I haven't been back in almost three years, and I'm not sure when we'll go back for a visit, so this has been difficult to figure out.

Especially when you find your relationships back home dwindling. People sort of forget that you're a part of their daily life (because you're not there), and you change. And they change. And whenever you do get around to talking with some of them, you realize that some of the things they say make little sense to you (and probably vice versa). Or you find some people still looking at you as this person from years ago, rather than seeing you for who you are now. It's not their fault at all, as it's just a result of living overseas and away from loved ones. Not everyone, but in my experience, a lot of people.

At times, I can feel that next stage RIGHT THERE. As if I have some sort of breakthrough I'm waiting for. But for now I'm still waiting. And "hiding".

Please know that I love writing about how to survive in Japan here on SiJ, and I love more than anything helping folks. I also feel so blessed to have made so many friends and have found the support I've found in you, because some days the kind words you say, the thank yous, the encouragement, and support you offer are what gives me hope to just keep going that day, or week, or just a good reminder to be thankful. And you brighten my days more than you know.

I know I'll get past all this in time. I wish it was now, but at least I'm aware of how I feel and what's going on and I keep going forward. And if you're ever in this situation, especially for those of you who are newly arrived, just know that those feelings are normal. It's ok to feel that way. But also remember that ranting about it on forums (or emailing me nasty emails, and no it doesn't happen often) won't help you feel better, and it doesn't help anyone else either.

So, now that I've told you how I've honestly been doing, has anyone else experienced a low point of culture shock here in Japan? I've been here four years and from when I spoke with Andrew Grimes of Tokyo Counseling Services earlier this year, he [mentioned something about the third or fourth year being a difficult point in time](#), which seems to be the case for me. Anyone else?

I'd love to hear your thoughts below, and also your best advice on dealing with the low points of culture shock.