

Getting Used to American Idiosyncrasies

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When you come to study in the USA, you join a new culture that is dynamic, enriching, and sometimes bewildering. In your own country you know the social customs, both subtle and stated. In a new country, though, the rules are not always obvious. Despite your good intentions and determination to understand your U.S. colleagues, you will sometimes be surprised by their behavior. Eventually, you will get accustomed to these idiosyncrasies – things they do that seem quite odd to you. So what can you do in the meantime? First, smile and relax. Then watch and listen. And most of all, keep a sense of humor about the cultural differences you are discovering.

Timeliness Equals Respect

U.S. professionals take promptness seriously, and the quickest way to lose their respect is to show up late. If you are even five minutes late for an admissions or job interview, you may hurt your chances as a candidate. It does not matter if your car broke down, you were taking an exam, or you were jetlagged and overslept, the perception will be that you consider your own time more valuable than that of the interviewer. This idea carries over into the classroom: missing the first day of class, or even an assignment due date, is considered disrespectful. If you remember only one thing, it is this: if you have an appointment, be there on time, or even early. If you cannot avoid being late, always apologize.

Geographic Isolationism

Don't be surprised if your U.S. acquaintances think that Koreans speak Chinese and Colombia is a city in Mexico. Maybe it's because the U.S. is such a big place, but some of its residents have little knowledge of the rest of the world. If you're from Latin America, you will also notice that people in the U.S. refer to themselves as "Americans" and everyone from the southern continent as "South Americans." Your best response is a pleasant smile and willingness to share a little good-natured information about your own country and your international point of view.

Physical Contact

Whenever you cross cultures, one of the biggest differences is in physical contact. In the U.S. professional environment, a handshake is the appropriate greeting whether you are male or female, old or young. Contact is much more variable among friends. In general, U.S. women tend to touch more than men, and you may see close female friends greeting each other with embraces or cheek kisses. Sometimes a woman will greet a close male friend in the same way. Between two men, physical contact is less common, and walking hand-in-hand or with arms around each other's shoulders is rare. A man and woman who are dating or married may

hold hands while walking in public and occasionally exchange quick light kisses on parting. Strangers usually try to avoid touching each other, even in a crowd - if you accidentally brush against a stranger always say "Excuse Me" or "Sorry," even if the other person was responsible.

Personal Space

Most Americans automatically keep a distance of about three feet from strangers and colleagues, even during conversation or when standing in line. When you enter this space, they become uncomfortable. If you find someone backing away from you, just stop moving closer. He'll adjust to the distance that is most comfortable, and you'll be the only one who knows what happened.

Any time you can't decide how to behave, watch the people around you. And if you think there's been a cultural misunderstanding, just laugh and ask what's wrong. Chances are good that your colleague, classmate, or acquaintance will be happy to explain, and you will have learned one more thing about U.S. idiosyncrasies.