

Patience eases culture shock

BY LEEMA FARHA

IMMIGRATING into a new country is overwhelming. To top it up, cultural differences can engulf many of us with overflow of emotions.

What is culture? Culture is a combination of language, belief, social norms, human behaviour, food, tradition and history. Culture is more or less different from one country to another, from one city to another, from one tribe to another, from one family to another — even from one person to another. We are quite comfortable and at ease with our own culture — the culture we are born into and are brought up with. Emotion, passion, love and affection have knitted and imbedded all the cultural aspects together into our very existence.

Now let's talk about culture shock. When immigrating into a new country and a new culture, leaving behind all the familiarities, many might experience disorientation, disconnection with the foreignness. Feeling of confusion, fear of the unknown, figuring out how to adapt and how to accept could grasp hold of our emotions. Culture shock is a five-stage process a newcomer might go through. The stages are excitement, frustration, adjustment, acceptance and, lastly, the reverse culture shock stage. This is culture shock in a nutshell.

The first shock to some might be the language barrier. Without language, integration becomes time consuming. At the Thunder Bay Multicultural Association language school, we have seen some of the newcomer adults struggling for years to learn English. Causes might be age, trauma, unsure of goal, or they may never have been in a school before — even back home. To such clients, the



ONE CITY,
MANY VOICES

The Thunder Bay Anti-Racism and Equity Advisory Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produce this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario

frustration stage of culture shock seems endless. The language barrier holds them back because they don't go out, observe, socialize, get to know and accept.

Then there might be others who have no language barrier but are unwilling to accept (and even deny) the new and thus fail to cope. This is a kind of shock which might be hidden deep down in the subconscious mind. Sometimes realization doesn't come because of our enrooted beliefs. The person might be a good communicator and might be integrating and interacting in the new society, yet there is a thin layer of non-acceptance. So what kind of non-acceptance are we talking about?

Canada is multicultural, and the world is becoming multicultural. But what happens when some of the cultural aspects or beliefs of the newcomers clash with the cultural values of the new land? Even human behaviour patterns can be shocking to many newcomers. For instance, men and women shaking hands is still not a part of social norm in many countries. Even if some of the women might want to adapt to this culture of shaking hands with the opposite sex, some men (or even women) of the family members could unleash a mixed reaction.

Then there is the human rights, such as equal rights of men and women. Women in many parts of the world are not always treated equally and thus this new concept might be shocking for many immigrants. Many women might be surprised that they have equal rights. On the other hand, many men might not be able to accept what they are exposed to for the first time. The fact that they have to abide by it (treating women equally) might be too much to handle for many. Most do realize, understand and adapt but there might be others who view many of the aspects as unorthodox practices, with stigmas.

My culture defines who I am. I am sure most of us feel the same way.

Shock and then acceptance or resistance spirals when we are exposed to an unfamiliar culture in a new country that we want to call home. These are the emotional stages new immigrants might experience until they become familiar, develop coping mechanism and accept the multiculturalism.

The process might be difficult for many. Maybe time, education, openness and understanding of the new culture will gradually help to accept change. When citizens come across many new immigrants struggling to cope or showing emotions and resistance, perhaps understanding, patience, compassion towards the new arrivals can pave a smoother path for the newcomers to accepting change. This can lead to a harmonious life with everyone in their dream land: the multicultural Canada.

Leema Farha is a staff member of Thunder Bay Multicultural Association and an active volunteer in the community. The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the author.