

# 03 SOCIAL HEALTH SUPPORT



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- I . Cultural Awareness
- II . Mental Health
- III . Social Gatherings at School  
and Drinking Cultures
- IV . Interpersonal Relationships

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# 03. Social Health Support



Living in a foreign country can be difficult, and for many GETs, the stresses of everyday life dramatically affect their professional and private lives. From culture shock, to depression and even interpersonal relationship problems, working in Korea can be a stressful and maturing process. Many former GETs describe their work in Korea as incredibly difficult and incredibly valuable, and most leave with a better understanding and appreciation of themselves and their talents. While living in Korea can be hard sometimes, it is very rewarding, and the EPIK team is here to support GETs. This section is designed to help GETs who may be struggling with understanding their new lives in Korea.



## I . Cultural Awareness

### A. Culture Shock

Culture shock describes the anxiety and feelings felt when a person moves to a completely new environment.<sup>8)</sup> It often occurs when an individual moves to a new country and is surrounded with an unfamiliar culture, unknown social mores and different people. Occasionally, it can be mentally and physically stressful; living in a foreign country is different and adjusting to these changes takes time and patience. Often, when people discover that standard cultural and social customs from their home country are not universally upheld, they are shocked and disappointed. The language barrier, too, can cause discomfort and not knowing how to order food or use a bank machine can be disenfranchising for many people. After living in a foreign country for a while, expats may not know how to act appropriately in social situations or express themselves clearly. All of these factors contribute to culture shock, and the degree and severity of it

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8) Information Obtained from: [http://kidshealth.org/teen/your\\_mind/emotions/culture\\_shock.html](http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/emotions/culture_shock.html)

is affected by an individual's attitude and previous multicultural experiences.

Culture shock is a general growth process that involves learning more about a new culture, and there are various stages that most people pass through. Sometimes an individual may vacillate between the stages for months; others may pass through the stages quickly. While culture shock can be unsettling, it is a very valuable tool for personal development. Ultimately, culture shock allows a person to analyze their own assumptions and perspectives and is a great opportunity to learn more about a different culture and oneself.

The feeling of culture shock sets in after the first few weeks of arriving at a new place. There are many general symptoms associated with culture shock that appear at different times.

Symptoms of culture shock may include:

- sadness, loneliness, melancholy
- preoccupation with health
- insomnia, desire to sleep too much or too little
- changes in temperament, depression, feeling vulnerable or powerless
- anger, irritability, resentment, unwillingness to interact with others
- identifying with the old culture or idealizing the old country
- loss of identity
- trying too hard to absorb everything in the culture or country
- inability to solve simple problems
- lack of confidence
- feelings of inadequacy or insecurity
- developing stereotypes about new cultures
- developing obsessions such as over-cleanliness

- longing for family
- feelings of being lost, overlooked, exploited or abused

## B. The Stages of Culture Shock Sources

Culture shock has three general stages: (1) the honeymoon phase; (2) the negotiation phase; and (3) the adjustment phase. All three can be ongoing or succinctly separate. During any of the phases, an individual may feel some of the symptoms of culture shock, and often culture shock appears to be an ongoing process. Many people report that they occasionally cycle through the phases as they constantly reassess and negotiate their own personal standards and culture in comparison with their hosts' culture and society.

### 1. The Honeymoon Phase

The honeymoon phrase describes the period just after arrival in a new country when the differences between the old and new culture are romanticized. Everything appears to be exciting and novel. An individual may find pleasure in the new country's food, culture, architecture and social styles. The individual rarely finds any problems with the new country and may feel euphoric. Many people believe that the new country is flawless.

#### Case Study

Mark moved to a small town in Korea, and after his first three weeks, he was convinced that he would never leave. He told all of his friends back home about the generous people, beautiful nature and brilliant students.

He loved his job and could find no fault with his school. When other expats complained about Korea, he ardently defended his new home. Mark made an effort to have only Korean friends; he decided that he didn't want to associate with others from his home country. Two months later, however, he realized that he didn't have very many friends because he couldn't speak Korean well. He felt isolated and alone, and he didn't know where to find help. Later that month, the Office of Education scheduled a cultural field trip for GETs, and fortunately, he was able to meet other teachers in the area who had similar interests. After a while, he achieved a balance between spending time with fellow GETs and developing his friendships with his Korean Co-Teachers and acquaintances.

## 2. The Negotiation Phase

An individual may enter this phase after a few weeks to a few months. This period is characterized by a general feeling of anxiety and discomfort that arises from differences in culture and language. An individual may begin to notice subtle differences between the old and new culture, and these changes can cause impatience, anger, sadness or feelings of incompetence. Unimportant tasks such as eating in a restaurant can cause anxiety if the method of preparation is too different. During this transition from the old to new culture, there may be strong feelings of dissatisfaction. Some may find the pace of life, personal habits and humor of the host country annoying, and an individual may be irritated easily. Mood swings and depression are common during this period. New situations are daunting and intimidating. A person may have a difficult time making friends or lose interest in hobbies.

### Case Study

Nathaniel arrived in Korea about three months ago. He had enjoyed his first few months, but as the semester continued, he noticed many small things bothering him. He became easily irritated when his Co-Teacher stood or walked too close to him, and Korean food was no longer appetizing. He hated the Korean language and had given up on learning it. He had many foreigner and Korean friends but had been spending most of his time alone. For some time, he had felt really uncomfortable going outside, and when people stared at his blonde hair and blue eyes, he became agitated. Before coming to Korea, he loved hiking, but after a few months, he spent most of his time watching western television and movies on his notebook at home. After he yelled at one of his classes, he realized he was having more than just a bad day, and he called the National EPIK office. The EPIK Counselor realized that Nathaniel was struggling with culture shock and gave him some suggestions and resources. Nathaniel took the Counselor's advice, and after a few months felt much more comfortable with living in Korea.

### 3. The Adjustment Phase

Usually after 6-12 months, an individual will have come to terms with the new culture and become accustomed to his new routines and habits. The host country gradually will become normalized and new situations will no longer be surprising. Usually this stage begins when an individual begins to develop an understanding of the culture. Often people pass into this phase when they start to learn the language and make friends with people from both the new and old countries, and a certain balance is achieved between the old and new. Life is no longer surprising,

but it still is different. At this point, most people begin an evaluation of the old and new cultures. One may realize and accept the good and bad things a culture has to offer.

### Case Study

Jason's adjustment to Korea had been really difficult, but after a year, he felt comfortable with Korean culture. Initially, everything had been difficult and even riding the bus was stressful for him. He never knew how to queue, and he hated it when people bumped and pushed into him for no apparent reason. For the first eight months, he only thought of returning home, but when he made some Korean friends, he realized that he had misjudged Korean culture. He decided to stay to learn more of the language and to continue developing his teaching skills. Even riding the bus has improved, and although he doesn't fully understand why people push, he has accepted it as a normal part of his new life. He sometimes finds himself irritated with Korea and Koreans, but these feelings are usually superficial and temporary.

### C. Outcomes of Culture Shock<sup>9)</sup>

There are three basic outcomes of the adjustment phase:

#### 1. The rejecters

The rejecters include those who find it impossible to accept the foreign culture and integrate. They isolate themselves from the host country's environment, which they may perceive as hostile. They may exclusively associate with other foreigners and critically approaches the new country's people and culture. Often, they may adopt a superior attitude toward the people of the host country. Approximately 60% of expats behave this way.

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9) Information Obtained from: <http://ihouse.berkeley.edu//residents/healthtip-060910.pdf>

### Case Study

Jean lived in a major city in Korea for three years, but as she prepared for her fourth year, she realized she did not really like living in Korea. She did not have any Korean friends. She could not speak any Korean. She usually spent time with her Western friends. She also realized that teaching wasn't her passion, and while she liked her students, her enthusiasm had waned over the years. While Jean had been comfortable, she had not learned that much about Korean culture or life, and she hadn't challenged herself. When she arrived in Korea, she was excited to learn about others, but now, she realized she simply was living and not enjoying her life or students. After discussing her goals with her family and friends, she decided not to renew her contract, and she returned home to pursue other opportunities.

## 2. The adopters

The adopters group includes those expats who fully integrate into the host culture. They lose their own cultural identity in the process and normally remain in the country forever. About 10% of expats fall into this category.

### Case Study

Many Koreans told Martha that she had a Korean spirit, and she agreed. After her first year, she decided that she was going to stay indefinitely. She married a Korean man, and slowly began to lose her Western identity. After five years, another foreigner commented that she was more Korean than most Koreans. Martha realized that she had given up most of her Western

tendencies: she no longer vocalized her opinions; she only ate Korean food; she didn't feel as independent and self-reliant as before. She didn't think these changes were positive or negative. They were just changes.

### 3. The cosmopolitans

The cosmopolitan group consists of those who manage to adapt the aspects of the host culture they see as positive with their own cultural identity. They may approach difficult situations with humor aimed at the host country and themselves. About 30% of expats are in this group.

#### Case Study

After ten months in Korea, Ryan felt he had developed a positive and balanced attitude toward Korea. He had Korean and expats friends. Before coming to Korea, he had studied Korean culture and language extensively, and he felt that he had a fairly good understanding of Korean life. He acknowledged that there were pros and cons of living in Korea, but he also remembered that it was the same in his home country. He really appreciated Korea's respect for elders and had incorporated it into his own daily life. Sometimes, the Confucian based hierarchy bothered him, and occasionally he really wanted to speak out against older teachers when he knew they were wrong. He decided, however, that he would accept it until he returned to his home country. He still had problems, but he usually approached them tactfully, and his Korean co-workers appreciated him for his efforts.

## D. How to Get Through Culture Shock

Living in a different country can be stressful, but a positive attitude can help an individual struggling with culture shock. The following are some common suggestions for culture shock stress:

- develop a hobby
- focus on the positive
- remember to use all available resources
- be patient
- don't try too hard
- exercise
- try different relaxation and meditation techniques
- maintain contact with old ethnic group
- maintain contact with the native culture
- pay attention to relationships
- establish simple goals
- maintain confidence

## E. Cultural Cliff Notes

It takes an extended period of time to fully understand and appreciate a foreign culture, and with Korea's rich and vibrant history, it is difficult to learn everything about Korea.

There are some noticeable differences that Westerners should note well. The following are some interesting norms of Korean culture compared with the Western standard.

Nuance	Korea	West
Getting Attention	Palm down, use all five fingers to call someone over.	Palm up, use index finger to call someone over.
Affection	Public displays of affection are frowned upon	Public displays of affections are tolerated
Anger	Showing anger is rude	Showing anger is rude, but it happens
Bargaining	In markets where the prices are unmarked, bargaining is acceptable	Unacceptable in most places
Bathroom	Sometimes there are no toilet papers in public bathrooms and wet floors are common. Squatting style toilets sometimes are used. People queue in front of the stall.	Usually have toilet paper and floors are usually dry. Sitting style toilets are the norm. There is one line for all of the stalls.
Public Bathhouse	Public bathhouses have <i>many</i> facilities including different types of saunas, work out equipment and game rooms.	A sauna is the closest approximation.
Acquaintances and Strangers	In the past if a Korean hasn't been introduced to another person, he or she may not feel comfortable approaching them.	Even if they have not been introduced they will feel comfortable introducing themselves.
Bowing	When greeting someone, bowing is common (especially to elders).	Handshakes are usually sufficient.
Criticism	Should be avoided when possible and done tactfully, gently and privately.	A normal means of assessment.

Nuance	Korea	West
Dress	Dress is a sign of position, and it is important not to dress too informally. Conservative clothing is better.	Conservative clothing is the norm in business, but business casual and casual are also popular.
Drinking	An important part of social and business relationships. Pouring drinks for each other is perceived as friendly. Use two hands when holding a glass.	Small amounts of alcohol are okay in business situations, but it is usually reserved for social functions.
Eating	Use chopsticks and a spoon. Rice, soup and kimchi are staples of every meal. Slurping and burping are acceptable, and too much talking is impolite. Blowing nose while eating (and any other time) is rude.	Depends on the type of food. Meals include a lot of talking. Slurping is rude.
Education	Highly valued in Korea. Most students study for hours every night.	Westerners do not emphasize the education is the only means for success.
Elderly	Show kindness and respect at all times toward the elderly. It is culturally acceptable for the elderly to scold strangers.	May show kindness and respect.
Gifts	Very important. For home visits, fruit, flowers, cake or liquor is appropriate.	Important for special occasions.
Invitations	Usually given informally, sometimes with little notice.	Usually formal with plenty of notice.

Nuance	Korea	West
Mentality	Group mentality is emphasized.	Individualism is emphasized.
Passing Objects	Use both hands especially to the elderly or to show respect.	Either hand is okay.
Personal Questions	Personal questions are a way of getting to know each other.	Personal questions are taboo
Rice	Staple of Korean diet.	Not as much
Same Sex Touching	Common to see women holding hands or men hugging. A natural way of expressing affection	Considered awkward
Shoes	Should be removed before entering a house and some restaurant	Preference
Singing	The noraebang (singing room or karaoke) is a popular activity to do at social functions	Karaoke only occurs in bars in front of large groups
Smirking	Koreans often show a smirk when they are embarrassed or feel sorry for doing something regrettable	Smirking is offensive
Staring	Considered rude to stare at older people. Staring at foreigners has no special meaning and is done out of curiosity and interest. Koreans do it without realizing that this offends foreigners	Considered rude
Tipping	Usually not necessary.	Appropriate
Titles	Using titles is very important (Lee Principal; Kim Team Leader). Avoid using Western titles	Mr. and Ms/Mrs. are commonly used.

Nuance	Korea	West
Touching Children	A natural expression of interest and affection. Some children may try to hold hands with their teacher.	Usually don't touch.
Paying for Meals	Usually one person pays for everyone, but they take turns in paying.	Going Dutch is popular.
Personal Space	Small personal spaces.	Large personal spaces.

## II. Mental Health

Living abroad in another culture presents an individual with special challenges, and day to day highs and lows are normal for everyone. Being away from the comforts of home and experiencing a new culture, job, and language can be unsettling for some people. When this experience is coupled with culture shock, some individuals may not get over feelings of sadness and periods of low moods, and if this lasts long enough, they may suffer from depression. Depression is a serious mood disorder that can be associated with culture shock. Although depression can be a symptom of culture shock, it also is a major illness and should be taken very seriously. Generally, expats may experience depression or become depressed while encountering culture shock, but it's important to remember that depression and culture shock are separate and not mutually inclusive.

Sadness actually can be cathartic and it can help heal emotional wounds. Depression, however, is not normal or healthy and is characterized by long periods of sadness or low moods accompanied by low self-esteem, and loss of interest or pleasure in normally enjoyable activities. Depression can affect anyone, and it

doesn't have to have a specific cause. Different factors including genetics, environment, biochemistry and social psychology all have been shown to contribute to the development of depression. Additionally, a trauma, a death of a loved one, a stressful environment, or an illness can negatively affect an expat's wellbeing and lead to depression. Depression affects all facets of a person's life including sleeping patterns, thoughts, appetite, moods and behaviors. It can be debilitating, and familial, personal and professional relationships all can suffer. Feeling depressed is a normal reaction to loss, life's struggles, big life changes or an injured self-esteem. Everyone feels sad or low sometimes, and these dips or troughs are a normal response to life's daily struggles and stress, but when these feelings become overwhelming and last for long periods of time, they can keep an individual from leading a normal, active life.

### Case Study

Mark arrived for orientation with high hopes for an exciting year. He was little anxious because it was his very first time leaving Canada and living on his own. He enjoyed orientation and learned many things and made some good friends, but he also was excited to go to his school and teach. He was assigned to Elementary school in Gyeongbuk in a little town in a rural area. From his first week, however, things started off poorly. His co-teacher told him she did not want him there teaching and that she was forced to be his co-teacher. She asked him not to bother her with questions. Toward the end of his second month he started to experience culture shock, and he found he was extremely anxious. He could not sleep, and he was having trouble eating. He called the POE, and they asked him to call the counselor at the national EPIK office. He called the counselor and they decided to call each other every Monday to give updates and for Mark to receive assistance and support. For a month, they called each other, and the Counselor gave Mark strategies for interpersonal relationships and stress relief.

After a month, however, Mark's symptoms became worse, and he fell into deep depression and he was experiencing anxiety attacks. The Counselor and Mark agreed it would be better for Mark to get more help. They called the POE and after fully looking into his situation they decided to transfer Mark at the end of his first term. Despite his struggles, Mark realized he really liked teaching and Korea and he wanted to stay on longer. With the help of his friends and the EPIK Counselor, Mark was able to survive until end of his first term, and then he was transferred to another school. Currently, Mark teaches at another elementary school and enjoys his work immensely. He works well with his students and feels that he is a happier and better teacher.

### **A. Different types of Depression:**

There are several types of depression. The two major ones are clinical and dysthymic depression.

1. Clinical depression is also called major depression, and it affects all areas of the person's life. It intrudes with a person's work, study, sleep, eating and pleasure. It interferes with a person's ability to function in their everyday life. It is a normal but serious disorder and needs to be treated. Many people can get better with proper treatment and care.
2. Dysthymic depression is a long term depression, and it lasts at least two years. It may not debilitate a person, but it usually leaves sufferers feeling emotionally unwell. Dealing with everyday life can be difficult and at times overwhelming. Sufferers may experience clinical

depression and other disorders concurrently.

3. Adjustment disorder with a depressed mood is also called reactive depression. It is similar to culture shock although the two are distinguished by symptoms and severity.
4. Bipolar depression is also called manic depression and is not as common. An individual diagnosed with bipolar depression experiences polar highs (mania) and lows (depression). Their moods fluctuate in a cyclical pattern, and sufferers experience an extreme range of emotions.
5. Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) comes cyclically with the seasons. Usually it affects people during the winter months.

### **B. Symptoms of depression include (SIGE CAPS):**

- **sleep** disorder insomnia, early-morning wakefulness, or excessive sleeping
- loss of **interest** in activities or hobbies once pleasurable, including sex
- feelings of **guilt**, worthlessness, and/or helplessness
- fatigue, decreased **energy**, and exhaustion
- difficulty **concentrating**, remembering details, and making decisions
- **appetite** loss or overeating
- **psychomotor** agitation or retardation
- thoughts of **suicide**, suicidal idealization, or suicide attempts
- feelings of hopelessness, pessimism, irritability, agitation, and restlessness
- persistent aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems that do not ease even with treatment
- persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" feelings

*If an individual suffers from five or more of the aforementioned symptoms for two*

*weeks or longer, they are suffering from depression. The individual should consult a recognized medical official as soon as possible. If you know anyone who shows these symptoms, be supportive and work with them to help them find professional assistance.*

### **C. Strategies for dealing with depression**

There are two major ways to deal with chronic depression—medication and psychotherapy.

1. Medication: Antidepressants help regulate biochemical levels in the brain and allows the brain to function more normally. In particular, antidepressants affect the levels and release of specific neurotransmitters such as serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine. As with all medications, it usually takes three to four weeks for the antidepressant to reach full efficacy, and patients should work with a doctor to watch for side effects.
2. Psychotherapy: The three primary types of psychotherapy used when treating depression are cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), interpersonal therapy (IPT), and group therapy (GP). Most experts recommend working with a trained psychologist or psychiatrist for at least 10 to 25 sessions (considered short term therapy), if not more. CBT aims to help patients learn to rethink negative behaviors. The therapy isolates negative thinking and allows people to relearn how to process and understand their emotions. It has been shown to be very effective. IPT focuses on guiding people through their interpersonal issues and personal con-

flicts. It is especially helpful in isolating personal problems and allowing the individual to work through conflicts. In GT, individuals with similar mental health issues gather to help each other work through their problems. For mild to moderate depression, psychotherapy is a very good and viable option. For those suffering from severe depression, however, a combination of psychotherapy and medication has been shown to be the most effective treatment.

#### **D. Depression Help**

Individuals suffering from depression should contact a qualified medical professional as soon as possible. It may be difficult to find qualified English speaking professionals in Korea, but some resources are available in larger areas. If someone is experiencing the blues or a minor drop in mood, there are many resources and tools to help. There are several strategies an individual can use to help alleviate symptoms and feel better. Some ideas include:

- Finding a support group, attending religious services or strengthening ties with the local expat community. Talking with a close friend or confidant can help.
- Improving sleeping habits. Although this is difficult, it is critically important to get on and stay on a regular schedule. Sleep is important for regulating emotions and keeping stress levels low.
- Reducing stress. Remember that not all things need to be done perfectly or immediately.
- Improving eating habits.
- Learning to stop negative ways. Self-help books, friends, family and mentors are valuable resources and can give thoughtful ideas and feedback.
- Focusing on the positive.

- Learning to avoid procrastination. If possible, finish and get things done while maintaining realistic goals. Break up large tasks into smaller ones, and do them one step at a time.
- Setting a daily routine and sticking to it.
- Exercising can help improve mental and physical health.

It takes time to overcome depression. Life gradually will improve, but it takes a lot of work, energy and space to make a full recovery. Most experts recommend not making any major life decisions until an individual has made a full recovery.

### Case Study

Frank had had a rough few years at university and after graduation, he wasn't sure what to do next. He struggled with depression while studying, but fortunately, his university had a great Wellness Center, and there he had received a lot of attention and help. He felt strong enough to make a change and decided to apply for EPIK. Frank thought that moving to a different country would be an escape from everything that had made him depressed and that Korea would allow him to start over. He began to get excited to leave behind all of the terrible behaviors and influences and begin his new life. When he arrived in Korea, however, he immediately felt lonely and worthless. Even when he taught well he thought he was a terrible teacher, and he had a difficult time making friends with Koreans and other expats. He isolated himself from his community and rarely went out except for school and grocery shopping. Soon, exhaustion took over, and he often slept the whole entire weekend. Some days, he couldn't get out of bed in time for school, and within two months of his arrival, Frank realized that he was still suffering from

depression. He called his POE, and his coordinator recommended that he call the EPIK main office's Counselor. Frank and the EPIK Counselor discussed the problem, and they realized that Frank lived too far away from a city to seek regular treatment from a trained professional. They tried using online, interactive depression treatment websites, but Frank didn't respond well. After discussing the problem with EPIK, the POE and his school, Frank decided to resign from his job and return to England to seek treatment. He made preparations to leave, and although he didn't have enough money to pay back his Entry Allowance loan, he arranged with his school, the POE and EPIK to pay it back after he returned to England. He left Korea and returned to London where he was able to find treatment and pay back his loan. He still regularly emails his Co-Teacher and students, and although he couldn't stay at their school, he appreciates their help and understanding.

### **E. Helping Those with Depression**

Medical and psychological professionals recommend the best way to help a depressed friend is by listening actively and giving sincere support. They also recommend avoiding making judgments or giving uninformed suggestions. Helping them stay active and stay on a standard schedule is also helpful, and simply spending time together also allows a depressed friend to not feel as isolated. Often the depressed person does not realize that they are depressed and they do not seek help. Helping them to seek help and find someone they are comfortable with is very important. Help may not be easily available in Korea due to language and cultural barriers. In this case keeping an eye on your friend is important. Treatment should be reserved for professionals only.

### Case Study

Andrea suffered from depression when she was young. After intensive therapy and time, she recovered. About six months ago, she came to Incheon with good mental health. She had traveled internationally, but she had never lived in a foreign country for an extensive amount of time. When she arrived in Korea, she started to have only really bad or really good days. She withdrew from her friends and isolated herself from her new community. Eventually, she realized she was only having bad days, and she recognized that she was becoming depressed again. Classes were tedious, and she found it difficult to focus on planning her lessons. After one particularly bad week, Andrea decided to reach out to her friends and co-teachers, and she confided in some of them. Her Co-Teacher was very supportive and listened to her carefully and thoughtfully. Her friends and co-workers supported her while she searched for a counselor. Fortunately, she found an English speaking counselor in Seoul which was only one hour away, and they were able to work together. Also, she started taking taekwondo lessons with her friends, and now, after three months, she feels more engaged with her life. Although she still has bad days, she has more tools and strategies for dealing with her depression.

## III. Social Gatherings at School and Drinking Cultures

Korea's drinking culture is vibrant and quite different from that in the West. Alcohol has often been called a social lubricant and is a normal part of extracurricular school teachers' gatherings and events. Teachers often use drinking as a means to unify the teaching community. When drinking with a

group of Koreans, it is important to be aware of social drinking etiquette. GETs, as foreigners, usually receive more leeway if mistakes are made, but it is always helpful if a Co-Teacher guides a newly arrived teacher through the first few gatherings.

During teachers' gatherings, teachers will encounter a lot of alcohol as well as a complex set of drinking customs. Drinking and eating do not begin until everyone has arrived at the restaurant. Teachers wait until the Principal, Vice-Principal and older teachers eat before beginning their meal. During the meal, everyone receives a glass, and alcohol is poured. Teachers should receive with two hands. Usually, there's a loud toast and everyone drinks. Younger teachers turn their heads to the side and use two hands to drink.

Drinking is a great avenue for strengthening a relationship with a co-worker, but teachers should be careful to pace themselves. Non-drinkers can substitute alcohol for a cola or another beverage. Often, the Principal and other teachers will visit every table and pour a drink for the teacher. The teacher should accept the drink and then using both hands pour another for the Principal. Drinking alcohol is not obligatory. If a GET politely rejects or asks for a soda, other teachers will understand.

Teachers' gatherings can be an enjoyable way to get to know co-workers better in a relaxed environment. Teaching in a public school is different from one in the West, and schools have very close and well developed communities. Also, most GETs will be given special consideration for drinking and social taboos and shouldn't worry too much if they make a mistake. There's always a next teachers' meeting.

For heavy drinkers, it's important to remember that if a teachers' gathering occurs on a weeknight, they will still be expected to be on time for school and to teach. While alcohol's role is different in Korea, Koreans still expects teachers to perform well regardless of the previous night's activities.

### Case Study

Amanda fit in well with her school but was always uncomfortable at teachers' gatherings because she didn't drink. At the first gathering, the Principal attempted to give her a glass of soju, but she refused. There weren't any English teachers close, and she had a difficult time communicating with him. After that gathering, Amanda always felt that the Principal was upset with her and that she had broken Korean drinking law. Amanda spoke with her Co-Teacher about the incident, and her Co-Teacher explained that her actions had come across a little rude from a Korean cultural sense. Amanda should have taken the shot or asked for a cola instead of refusing it. At the next gathering, Amanda and her Co-Teacher stayed close to each other all night, and her Co-Teacher explained the social rules. When the Principal came to their table, Amanda handed him a bottle of cola and happily took the drink. The Principal realized that it had been a minor mistake, and they are cordial again.

## IV. Interpersonal Relationships

Bridging cultural gaps can be a difficult and challenging experience for Co-Teaching Teams. The language barrier and minor cultural misunderstandings often hinder the development of a sincere relationship between a Co-Teacher and GET. The following are several common culturally based misunderstandings that often occur between Co-Teaching teams.

### **A. Privacy**

Westerners are accustomed to more privacy than many Koreans, and

working in a public school can sometimes be stressful for GETs. Most public schools have a teachers' room where all of the teachers sit, study, and prepare for their classes. In contrast, most teachers in the west have their own rooms and are accustomed to working in privacy.

### Case Study

Albert had just arrived in Korea after working in a public school in America for 2 years. He was caught off guard on his first day when his Co-Teacher introduced him to the school and other teachers. His desk was in the middle of the teachers' room, and he had never experienced anything like it. From the first day, the room was too chaotic and loud for Albert, and he always felt like his Co-Teachers were watching him work. He couldn't focus well and felt like he couldn't take a break or breathe all day. During class breaks, students came to visit him and even during classes, some students lingered to try and speak with him. After a week, Albert spoke to his Co-Teacher and some other EPIK GETs about the situation. His Co-Teacher explained that he couldn't move to an isolated area all by himself because that might come across as rude to other teachers, but they thought of some ideas to help him relax more. Albert now brings his MP3 with soft instrumental music to school. When the office is too loud, he discreetly listens to music. He also takes short 10 minute breaks throughout the day to walk around the school and clear his head.

## B. Dating

Living in Korea presents GETs and Co-Teachers alike with many opportunities for cross cultural interaction. Occasionally, expats and Koreans share a meaningful experience and this can develop into a romance. Cross cultural dating can

promote personal growth and allow one a more detailed view of Korean life. Korean and Western dating styles, however, are different, and if an individual is interested, he or she should be aware of cultural faux pas. Most experienced Korean-Western couples recommend that individuals keep an open mind and be aware of the language barrier before beginning a relationship. It is also helpful to discuss relationship expectations, areas of cultural sensitivity and how to constructively solve problems early in the relationship.

*EPIK does not recommend dating within the school. If a break-up happens, it can damage the teachers' relationships in the school and negatively affect performance.*

### Case Study

John had just arrived at his elementary school and was excited to teach his students. His Co-Teacher, however, seemed somewhat indifferent at his arrival, and during the following week began to act strangely. They were both young and single, but he assumed that they would have a professional relationship. She sent him text messages until early in the morning and always told him how much harder her work was. Sometimes she called him silly or stupid, and he was confused about how to respond. When they went to the bookstore together, he carried half of her books to the car. Later that day, she sent him more messages berating him for not carrying all of the books to the car. Confused, John called the EPIK office and consulted with the Counselor. After speaking with him for a while, the office determined that John's Co-Teacher actually had a crush on him. John misinterpreted his Co-Teacher's

messages and teasing remarks as harsh criticisms and attacks. The berating messages were actually meant to be teasing, and most of her communication had been lost in translation because of her poor English skills. John's unfamiliarity with Korean dating styles had compounded the problem, and when he realized the zealous texting and teasing are normal parts of a relationship, he was relieved. He did not fancy his Co-Teacher, and he respectfully told her that he was not interested. Her odd behavior stopped, and now they have a more professional relationship.

### C. Personal Space

Personal spaces are smaller in Korea than in most Western countries. Many tourists and teachers alike are shocked when they see a full bus in Seoul or Busan. In particular, some GETs may feel uncomfortable because their Co-Teachers walk or sit too closely, especially if the GET is a young woman and the Co-Teacher an older man (or vice versa). It's difficult but necessary to adjust to this difference in personal space rules. If a GET is too uncomfortable, however, a step back or small comment always helps.

#### Case Study

Marcia was living in a small city but was having problems adjusting to Korea. Her home in England had been a little rural, and she had never had personal space problems. When she arrived in Korea, however, she felt like people were walking on her and giving her very little room. When she went to the post office,

she stood in line, but it took her two hours to make it to the front because so many people cut in front of her. Even at lunch at school, she was always the last to eat because she didn't like standing so closely to her co-workers in the line. One day, she was standing in line at the grocery store to pay and an old woman cut right in front of her. She was so annoyed that she left without her food. The next day, Marcia asked her Co-Teacher, Tae-min, about the problem, and he explained that Koreans have a much smaller personal space expectation than Westerners. Tae Min told her that everyone was cutting her in line because they didn't realize that she was waiting. Tae-min had spent almost a decade in Canada and understood Marcia's problem, so he recommended that she stand closer to others and if she was stressed, she should listen to music while in line. Now Marcia takes her MP3 with her to the store and post office and stands closer to others while listening to relaxing music.

#### **D. Bumping**

Another interesting facet of Korean culture is the bumping and pushing that inevitably occurs when getting on and off a bus or while walking around a crowded area. This is similar to the difference in personal space expectations, and many Westerners are surprised when Koreans bump into them and then don't apologize. Many GETs are even more shocked when they are hit with a handbag or coat from a seemingly frail old woman. While this behavior is disconcerting at first, most GETs realize that it's not personal or vindictive: it just happens. The more time that a GET lives in Korea, however, the more accustomed they will become to bumping and jostling of everyday life.

### Case Study

Allan was living in Busan and had to commute on the metro everyday during rush hour. His first day, he arrived at his school really early and avoided the major rush hour, but when he left school, he was shocked to see so many people in such a small area. He was from a small city in New Zealand and had never experienced anything like it: the bumping and pushing were foreign and terrifying for him. Every day stressed Allan out because of the masses of people, and his commute sent him into a panic. Allan discussed the problem with his Co-Teacher, Su-kyeong, and she suggested that he wait until rush hour was over to go home. She helped him join a gym close to their school, and now Allan goes to the gym for a few hours, eats a leisurely dinner, and then heads home when the metro is quieter. He still gets bumped and pushed, but he has learned to accept it as an integral part of living in Korea.

### E. Personal Questions

All cultures have a complex set of social etiquette rules that guide their conversations and interactions. For Koreans it is really important to establish age and social status as soon as possible so that they can know how to engage with each other. Basing their behavior and speech roughly on Confucianism, Koreans adjust the formality of their language according to each individual person. For example, while speaking to a teacher or professor, most Koreans will attach formal endings to their verbs to indicate respect. Verb endings such as ~십시오, and ~십니까? demonstrate respect and are considered honorific endings. To friends, however, many Koreans will speak informally to demonstrate the close nature of their relationship. While English has varying levels of formality, it is much more pronounced in the Korean language. For these reasons, most Koreans ask questions

about age, social status, marital status and other personal questions immediately after meeting a new person. This helps them assess how they should speak to and behave around their new acquaintance. These linguistic patterns carry over to English too, and when meeting a Westerner, many Koreans ask seemingly personal and intimate questions (age, social rank, and marital status) immediately after meeting each other. Many Westerners interpret these questions as rude, but to Koreans, it is just normal. If the questions are too personal or uncomfortable, most GETs recommend simply stating so: Koreans are also quite adept at understanding discomfort and will adjust their questions accordingly.

### Case Study

Daphne was new to Korea, and although she loved working at her school, the personal questions the teachers and students asked her made her really uncomfortable. She didn't know how to respond when a Math teacher asked her if she was single or married (she was single), and she was really offended when he asked her why she wasn't married yet. Daphne tried to be polite but was shocked later when another teacher asked her for personal details about her familial life. Her Co-Teacher, Hye-kyeong, noticed that she was uncomfortable. Later Hye-kyeong told Daphne that the other teachers were just trying to get to know her and that they didn't understand Western culture. She mentioned that they didn't realize they were being rude and that she should politely tell them that her personal life was private. The next day, Daphne was asked many more questions, and she tactfully said that she was a private person and preferred not to answer. She then changed the conversation to travel stories, and the other teachers quickly forgot about their questions.