

Comfort and Harmony

Living in another culture can sometimes be a bit uncomfortable. Everything is so new that we can feel like a small child, not always knowing what to do.

There are two kinds of uncomfortable.

The kind none of us want is when we feel unsafe. Not that this would happen, but for example, say that you are told to go skydiving. Any time you feel unsafe, you have the right and obligation to say that you need to talk with your chaperone. Tell your chaperone or the Tokyo Labo Staff how you feel. They can help you determine if you are seeing the situation clearly and they will inform others if the situation is against the 4-H exchange program rules.

The good kind of uncomfortable are situations that are new to us: trying new foods, learning new skills, doing something in a different way than we do it at home, and doing something that we normally wouldn't choose to do, such as public speaking or an unfamiliar sport. This is more like the ache we get when we are developing our muscles; you have to stretch a little to grow. The best way to really understand a culture is to fully participate in that culture. The best way to grow as a person is to try new things. We encourage you to try everything. You may find that you enjoy it. If you try it and decide that it's not your favorite, then you have learned something about Japanese culture, as well as something about yourself. You have also shown that you care enough to try to do what your Japanese family and Labo Party are doing.

You may have heard that Japanese culture values harmony. Harmony helps people work together. It can protect others from discomfort and embarrassment. This is why Japanese people may be reluctant to say NO out loud in situations when an American would not hesitate. If someone says that a situation is "difficult" or "probably can't happen" or "we'll see" or looks uncomfortable and changes the subject, it really means NO, so please don't negotiate like you would do at home.

One of the ways that harmony is preserved is to be respectful and polite, especially to those who are older or who know more than you do about a

particular situation. While you are in Japan, you may see people apologizing for inconveniencing someone. You may hear them say they are sorry. This does not mean, as it may do in the USA, that they are accepting blame for a situation. It means that they are sorry that there is a problem and they want to make things better. You may see someone treat another person as if they are royalty. This is a way to show that they value the relationship. It demonstrates the quality of the "lower" person as much as it does the person they honor. While, in our culture, some people are uncomfortable making themselves seem not as good as another person, in Japan that is polite, and putting others first actually makes you look good.

When you are in Japan, please remember to thank people often: after meals, after they take you somewhere and especially if you receive a gift. Besides saying THANK YOU, another way you can thank your host family and Labo Tutor is by sharing yourself and your culture. Spend time talking and playing with others. Tell about yourself and show your album, games and stories. Teach a few words in English and learn some Japanese. In America, teenagers often spend time alone. You may even have a television or game system in your room. In Japan, it's more common to want to spend time together and to do things in the same room, even if you are all doing different things, like reading or watching TV. When you need a break, it's ok to go to your bed and read or listen to music, but don't spend so much time alone that you shut out your host family.

You are now part of a special group, a Japanese family and their youth club. Please don't criticize or whine about things you see or do. You don't want to embarrass your host family. If you have a problem, talk with the chaperone. You can call them any time. When you see someone working, try to help. Pick up the other end of a table or stack the chairs. This shows that you care and that you are part of the group.

When you first arrive in Japan, people may do everything for you. This is natural, because you are new and they want to take care of you. As you get to know the situation, don't just sit at the table as someone clears the dishes, get up and help and be a part of the family. The first few times you try, your host family probably won't allow you to help, but if you see your host brother or sister helping, then join in. Or get up and help anyway. Many Japanese youth don't help at home until they are older, because most of their time is spent doing schoolwork.

You may be assigned your own chopsticks, slippers or rice bowl. This is probably not for you to take home, but a sign that, just like everyone else has assigned items, as a part of the family now you do, too. And as part of the family, you will need to keep your sleeping area clean and pick up after yourself. The Japanese “ecosystem” is different than Alaska; snack crumbs or a full trash can may attract cockroaches, and wet towels will mildew.