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Culture clash

By Dr. Douglas Berger, M.D., Ph D. | [ASK THE EXPERT](#)



There is no denying that coming to live in a country like Japan where things are done differently can pose a challenge. Dr. Berger comments.

QUESTION

I was transferred to the Japanese branch of my company 3 months ago where most of the staff are Japanese. Initially everyone was very friendly, having welcome parties and inviting me to social activities after work. Now they seem distant and don't ask me out anymore. Is this normal? Did I do something wrong?

Dean S.

The key to this issue is to understand the structure of Japanese society and to adjust your expectations accordingly. Japanese society is generally based on group affiliation. This is especially true for persons one grows up with, went to school with, entered the company with, etc. As a non-Japanese, you are not even in the superset of being from the same country, nor having the same language (even if your Japanese is very good), so that it is extremely difficult to actually be part of the social network.

The initial parties and social activities were to be kind and polite as a way to save face (maybe partially a reaction to hide the group exclusivity that no one individual really wants you to have), and this is often mistakenly taken by a non-Japanese as a show of real friendship. It is not that they are not friendly, it is just that those events are the standard welcome procedure in Japan, and they made you re-calibrate yourself to think there was more there than there really was.

Close relationships with Japanese are possible, but you will need to be patient to cultivate these over time, and usually with individuals-you will still not fit into a group, and it is better not to try. Be magnanimous with everyone but tease-out those few persons you think want to be real friends with you just as you would in your home country. If you learn the language and keep relationships in Japanese, then you can also weed-out the many persons who want to have English practice friends. Similar to the welcome parties, Japanese will be very polite and friendly to foreigners when speaking English, you don't want to read more into the relationship than is really there. It will be easier to make friendships with the international community quickly because of shared backgrounds; be patient in cultivating friendships with the Japanese.



As a final note, if you have issues with loneliness or rejection sensitivity then these kind of social alienations can hit particularly hard. If you think your experience with the Japanese have stirred up something in you that has affected your social functioning or has given you subjective distress at times in the past, then you might want to talk to a professional about that.

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Dr. Berger and his staff at the Meguro Counseling Center in the Shibuya-Ebisu area provide mental health care for individuals, couples, and families, in both English and Japanese.

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The logo for Tokyo Families Magazine, featuring the word "families" in a large, lowercase, serif font. Above the "f" is the word "TOKYO" in a smaller, uppercase, sans-serif font. To the right of "families" is the website address "tokyofamilies.com" in a smaller, lowercase, sans-serif font. The entire logo is set against a light beige background.