

## GOING HOME AFTER YOUR STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE

*"In a sense, it is the coming back, the return, which gives meaning to the going forth. We really don't know where we've been until we come back to where we were – only where we were may not be as it was because of who we've become, which, after all is why we left."* – Bernard from "Northern Exposure", upon returning from Africa

When returning home, some students are surprised to find they experience as much, or more, culture shock as when they first began their exchange. You may find that your interests and values have changed, while those of your family and friends may not have. You may find that friends and family have new and different interests that are unfamiliar to you. You may even find that they aren't as interested in hearing about your experiences as you are in telling them.

### Re-Entry Challenges

Some common feelings and experiences associated with readjusting to life at home include:

- frustration that your friends and family don't understand the importance of your exchange experience or lose interest when you tell them about it
- finding everyday life at home to be trivial
- depression, uncertainty, confusion
- changing goals and priorities
- negative emotions toward your home country
- reverse homesickness
- desire to be alone

### The Top 10 Immediate Challenges:

It's important to be aware of the immediate emotional obstacles that might arise during the first few weeks to months after arriving back home. When you are able to identify what might make the re-entry process challenging it is easier to find the right coping strategies to address those issues and more effectively benefit from your experience overseas.

#### 1. Boredom

During your time abroad you are constantly experiencing new things (i.e. cultural events, food) and exploring new places (i.e. campus, sight-seeing, etc.). Also, learning to interact with the host culture as well as communicating in another language (if that was part of your experience) is a constant new stimulation that will suddenly be gone. Returning to old routines once at home, even though they are familiar and comfortable, can seem boring in comparison.

#### 2. "No One Wants to Hear"

It's not that your friends and family are attempting to minimize your experience or achievements, however, it's unlikely they will want to hear every detail, especially if you've been gone for more than a year. Be realistic in your expectations of how interesting the retelling of your journey might be for

everyone else and perhaps stick to only the major highlights.

### **3. You Can't Explain**

Even if your friends and family give you plenty of attention to hear all about your travels abroad, you might find it difficult to express your thoughts and feelings about your experience satisfactorily. You might start to feel as though no one really "gets it". Try to remember that this is normal and can be expected since it is difficult for others who haven't had a similar experience to fully relate.

### **4. Reverse "Homesickness"**

After some time back home, it's natural to start to miss the people, places and routines you became familiar with while studying abroad. This "reverse homesickness" is much like the initial homesickness you experienced leaving home the first time. To ease these feelings of grief try to stay connected to the people abroad by communicating with them through social media or using other methods to keep in touch.

### **5. Relationships Have Changed**

You can expect that some things may have changed at home, whether they changes are perceived as positive or negative, change will have happened. It is only natural that your relationships with family and friends may be a little different. Your experience as an international student may have changed some of your ideas and attitudes. You may also expect that some of your family and friends may have changed during your time abroad too. It's best to remain flexible, open, and accepting of these changes in everyone.

### **6. People See "Wrong" Changes**

You may notice within the first few weeks of your return that some people are critical of your behavior or ideas. They may think that these "bad traits" are due to the influence of your study abroad experience. You should be aware of these reactions and know that this should pass quickly, especially if you don't confirm their stereotyping.

### **7. People Misunderstand**

Be careful of how you may look and appear to others. They may interpret your behavior differently since your return. For example, your sense of humor or new clothing styles may appear inappropriate. The way you express affection or start a conversation may appear aggressive or negative. Just remember to be aware of how your behavior may appear to others.

### **8. Feelings of Alienation**

Sometimes the image you had of "home" while you were away may not be the reality you experience upon your return. It is natural to experience some alienation or even detect faults in society which you didn't notice before. This is the same experience as when you first arrived abroad. Be patient until you regain your cultural balance and perspective.

### **9. Inability to Apply New Knowledge and Skills**

Upon your return you may not be able to immediately use all the new skills that you learned abroad. You may feel that your new skills are not practical or not applicable at home. You'll need to adjust, be patient and try to use the cross-cultural skills you gained to establish new routines.

### **10. Loss/Compartmentalization of Experience**

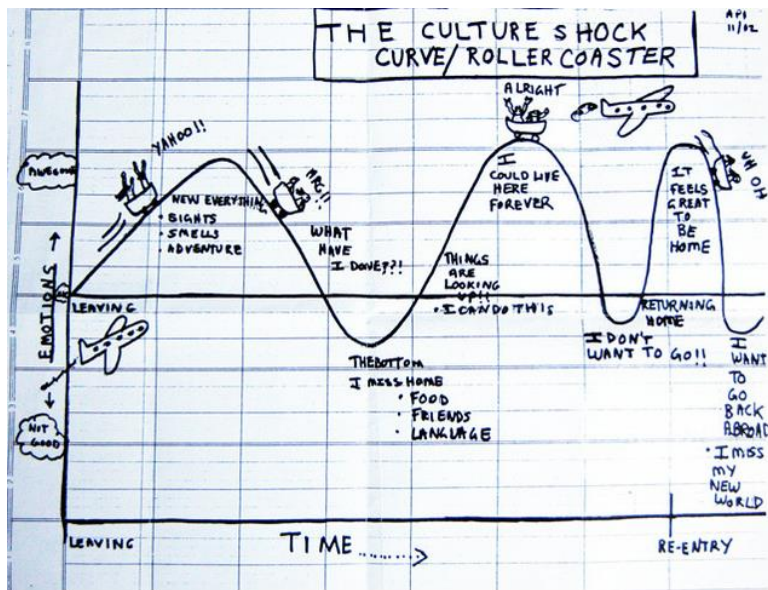
Once back at home you may feel as though you will lose everything you gained through your experience

overseas. It may appear as though your experiences are becoming just distant memories. It is important to keep in touch with people that you meet and those that have similar experiences at home. To overcome these feelings don't forget your wonderful achievements, skills, and the relationships you developed while studying abroad.

- As adapted from Dr. Bruce La Brack, School of International Studies, University of the Pacific, Training Design for International Transitions, La Brack and Pusch, SIIC. *Ten Top Immediate Reentry Challenges: As Rated by University Students*. Taken from <http://reverseculturechock.weebly.com/immediate-re-entry-challenges.html>

## Reverse Culture Shock

### The Culture Shock Curve/Rollercoaster



Taken from <http://relocation-uk.com/2016/08/16/culture-shock/>

### Why Does Reverse Culture Shock Happen?

What could be easier than going home? After all, you grew up in that culture, speak the language(s), understand how the system works, are familiar with how to cope with daily living, and have a ready-made support group. When you were homesick you dreamed of how great it would be to be back in a comfortable and familiar place surrounded by family and friends. However...the reality is that returning home after a significant overseas experience is not without its stresses. There are many reasons why this is so, but the major contributing factors seem to be:

**It is largely unexpected** – Few people prepare for the return because they expect it to be easy and are surprised when it is not.

**The reality of home differs from your imagination** – When you are abroad, images of home life can become idealized or romanticized. It is easy to forget or minimize the problems or issues that once were sources of stress in your everyday life.

**Change has occurred to everyone** – However major or subtle, things are different. You, the people around you, and your culture have changed. Sometimes this is obvious and immediately observable,

sometimes it is “hidden” and only comes out under certain circumstances which are usually unpredictable, and therefore, unsettling.

**People may react to returnees in ways returnees consider inappropriate** – People generally expect you to be the same person you were when you left and usually attempt to treat you that way. They often have little patience for a returnee who seems to be significantly “different” or who exhibits behaviours or attitudes that, to them, seem odd or uncharacteristic of that person.

**Reverse culture shock is neither recognized or understood at home** – Few people in the home culture are likely to be familiar with the concept of reverse culture shock. Therefore, people often respond to a returnee having difficulty readjusting by bluntly suggesting they “get over it” as though it were a conscious act on their part or that they could control their emotions if they wanted to. Unlike undergoing culture shock while abroad where program directors and fellow students are likely to be at least sympathetic, upon re-entry the pressure to conform quickly and substantially can be intense and tolerance can be in short supply.

### **Steps You Can Take to Overcome Reverse Culture Shock are:**

1. Get involved with the Exchange/Study Abroad Programs at your home university.
2. Connect with international activities on campus.
3. Talk to others who have gone through a study abroad experience. They will be able to relate to you. Talking to other people will reduce some of your loneliness and frustration.
4. The best way to readjust is to understand that reverse culture shock is normal and that in time you will cultivate a deep appreciation of both your exchange culture and your home environment.
5. Understand that your friendships and relationships may have changed as a result of your new experiences.
6. Explore new places and people with whom you can share your international experiences. Join an international club, take a language course, or register for courses where you can apply what you learned from your travel and academic experiences abroad.
7. Be patient with yourself. Re-entry is a time of transition. Learn ways to take care of yourself, think positively, and maintain a sense of humour.

## **Before Going Home**

### **Reflecting on Your Experience:**

- What was the strangest food you ate?
- What was your most memorable experience?
- What was the funniest thing that happened to you?
- What was your most embarrassing cross-cultural communication moment?
- Where would you go if you had the chance to study abroad again?

- What was your living situation like on exchange (host family, dorm, etc.)?
- Who did you spend most of your free time with during your exchange?
- What was your favourite place in your host country?
- Where did you want to go but didn't get the chance to?
- What was the best photograph you took during your stay?
- What was your favourite thing to do on the weekends?
- What was the biggest change in your daily routine?
- Are there any behaviours or sayings from your host country that you now find yourself doing or saying?
- When you get home, what is one of the first things you want to eat?
- Why did you choose to go a program to your host country in the first place?
- What is the most special item you'll bring back from your host country?
- Who did you wish would visit you abroad so that you could share your experience with them?
- Who did you meet who made your experience memorable?
- What is a profound moment that comes to your mind from your time abroad?
- If you could relive your exchange experience over again is there anything you would do differently?
- What is something that you discovered about yourself while on exchange?
- What are your impressions of your host country and it's citizens now that you have lived there for awhile?
- Do you wish you could stay in your host country longer, or do you feel ready to return home?
- Where you able to fit in any travel before, during or after your exchange experience? If so, where you go?
- Now that your exchange experience is almost over, what are your plans? Where will you go and what will you do next?
- Did you have a favourite song that you listened to while you were here?
- Will will be one of your favourite momories when you look back on your study abroad experience?
- When you had a free afternoon during your time here, what was your favourite thing to do?
- Did you discover a favourite restaurant, coffee shop, or club while you were here?
- Did anyone come to visit you while you were here? If so, who?

## Saying a Proper Goodbye

### How Do You Bring Proper Closure to Your Adventure?

1. **Take last minute photos** – We often forget to see deeply into local culture and record the things that are closest to us. Building memories is an important part of your exchange, so record as much of your daily life as you can, especially the ordinary places, people and things you want to remember. Record the street you live on, your room, your favourite park, restaurant or pub (the monuments and scenery are great but they won't mean as much to you later as the places and people that are a part of your everyday life – and they will be more interesting to people at home.)
2. **Collect music** you won't be able to find at home or put together a soundtrack from your exchange.
3. **Learn to cook a dish** that you liked that was different to you.
4. **Keeping a journal** is a great way to keep track of your experiences.
5. **Get addresses** of friends and classmates – **and keep in touch!!**
6. **Plan to visit somewhere you've wanted to go** but haven't been yet.
7. **Plan a goodbye trip or event** with your friends/classmates.

### Take a few minutes to write down some of your ideas for planning a proper goodbye:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

### When You Are Back at Home (after a few weeks)

Taking this exercise seriously will eventually assist you to better gauge how the process of overseas adaptation has played out for you personally. So take a few minutes and fill out the following questions. We promise it will worth your effort.

- A. The five things that have bothered me the **most** about being home are:
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
  - 4.
  - 5.

- B. The five things I have enjoyed the **most** about being home are:
- 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
  - 4.
  - 5.
- C. The five things from my experience on exchange (people, places, situations, etc.) I miss the **least** since I have returned home are:
- 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
  - 4.
  - 5.
- D. The five things (people, places, activities, etc.) I miss the **most** from my exchange since I have returned home are:
- 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
  - 4.
  - 5.

## Bringing it Home

If you are part of the small percentage of the world's citizens that has had the opportunity to live life on another culture's terms, you've probably found that the experience awakened your senses and led you to new understandings and personal growth. Coming home might feel like a letdown after all that excitement. But it's also an opportunity to put your new skills to use. The challenge now is to take both your new knowledge and your exploration skills and integrate them permanently into your life ahead. It might sound like a daunting task, but, supported by your horizontal roots, the new you is destined to thrive.

*"Travelling is not just seeing the new; it is also leaving behind. Not just opening doors; also closing them behind you, never to return. But the place you have left forever is always there for you to see whenever you shut your eyes."* – Jan Myrdal