emory abroad



guide to returning home

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After You Return

A Thoughtful Return

Since time for an organized debriefing session upon re-entry may be scarce, we encourage you to record in your journal your thoughts on these questions to prepare you for returning home:

- In what ways have I changed?
- In what ways might my family and friends have changed?
- How would I like my family and friends to treat me when I return home?
- What am I looking forward to the most?
- What are the lessons I have learned that I never want to forget?
- What are some skills I have learned?
- Many say the re-entry shock is more challenging than initial culture shock. What are some things I might do to make the transition easier?
- What have been the important things about this study abroad experience that I want to share with family and friends?
- What do I want to do with the experiences I've had (e.g., continue studying the language)?

You've been focused on the journey, but returning home is often an equally challenging experience. To make the most of your international education, learn what to expect after your travels.

Re-Entry Challenges

Ten Immediate Re-Entry Challenges:

1. Boredom

After all the newness and stimulation of your time abroad, a return to family, friends, and old routines (however nice and comforting) can seem very dull. It is natural to miss the excitement and challenges that characterize study in a foreign country, but it is up to you to find ways to overcome such negative reactions.

2. "No One Wants to Hear"

One thing you can count on upon your return: no one will be as interested in hearing about your adventures and triumphs as you will be in sharing those experiences. This is not a rejection of you or your achievements, but simply the fact that once they have heard the highlights, further interest on your audience's part is probably unlikely. Be realistic in your expectations of how fascinating your journey is going to be for everyone else.

3. You Can't Explain

Even when given a chance to explain all the sights you saw and feelings you had while studying abroad, you will likely to be unable to relay them coherently. It is very difficult to convey this kind of experience to people who do not have similar frames of reference or travel backgrounds, no matter how sympathetic they are as listeners. You can tell people about your trip, but you may fail to make them understand exactly how or why you felt a particular way.

4. Reverse "Homesickness"

Just as you probably missed home for a time after going abroad, it is just as natural to experience some "reverse" homesickness for the people, places, and things that you grew accustomed to as a student overseas. To an extent it can be reduced by writing letters, telephoning, and generally keeping in contact, but feelings of loss are an integral part of international sojourns and must be anticipated and accepted as a natural result of study abroad.

5. Relationships Have Changed

It is inevitable that when you return you will notice that some relationships with friends and family have changed. Just as you have altered some of your ideas and attitudes while abroad, the people at home are likely to have experienced some changes. These changes may be positive or negative, but expectation that no change will have occurred is unrealistic. The best preparation is flexibility, openness, minimal preconceptions, and tempered optimism.

6. People See the "Wrong" Changes

Sometimes people may concentrate on small alterations in your behavior or ideas and seem threatened or upset by them. Others may ascribe any "bad" traits to the influence of your time abroad. The incidents may be motivated by jealousy, fear, or feelings of superiority or inferiority.

To avoid or minimize them it is necessary to monitor yourself and be aware of the reactions of those around you, especially in the first few weeks following your return. This phase normally passes quickly if you do nothing to confirm their stereotypes.

7. People Misunderstand

A few people will misinterpret your words or actions in such a way that communication is difficult. For example, what you may have come to think of as humor (particularly sarcasm, banter, etc.) and ways to show affection or establish conversation may not be seen as wit, but aggression or "showing off." Offers of help in the kitchen can be seen as criticism of food preparation, new clothing styles as provocative or inappropriate, references to your host country or use of a foreign language as boasting. Be aware of how you may look to others and how your behavior is likely to be interpreted.

8. Feelings of Alienation/Critical Eyes

Sometimes the reality of being back "home" is not as natural or enjoyable as the place you had constructed as your mental image. When real daily life is less enjoyable or more demanding than you had remembered, it is natural to feel some alienation, see faults in the society you never noticed before or even become quite critical of everyone and everything for a time. This is no different than when you first left home. Mental comparisons are fine, but keep them to yourself until you regain both your cultural balance and a balanced perspective.

9. Inability to Apply New Knowledge and Skills

Many returnees are frustrated by the lack of opportunity to apply newly gained social, linguistic, and practical coping skills that appear to be unnecessary or irrelevant. To avoid ongoing annoyance, adjust to reality as necessary, change what is possible, be creative, be patient, and above all use all the cross-cultural adjustment skills you acquired abroad to assist your own re-entry.

10. Loss/Compartmentalization of Experience

Returnees often worry that somehow they will "lose" the experience after returning home to the pressures of job, family, and friends; it may seem that the experience will somehow become compartmentalized, like souvenirs or photo albums kept in a box and only occasionally taken out and looked at. You do not have to let that happen. Maintain your contacts. Talk to people who have experiences similar to yours. Practice your skills. Remember and honor both your hard work and the fun you had while abroad.

Reacting to the Changes

Returning to one's home environment isn't easy for a number of reasons, including how much you have changed, how much you understand these changes, and how much your friends and family accept these changes. It's important to take time to consider what the particular frustrations are for you. Record your reactions to these questions and statements:

- I know that I've changed as a result of my experience because ...
- My friends do seem to understand _____about me, but they don't understand ...
- My reentry experience would be better if ...
- Now that I am home, I worry most about ...
- The one thing I have learned about myself is ...
- I wish I could explain to my family and friends that ...

10 Tips for Returning Home¹

1. Prepare for the Adjustment Process

The more you consider your alternative, think about what is to come, and know about how re-turning home is both similar to and different from going abroad, the easier the transition will be. Anticipating is useful.

2. Allow Yourself Time

Re-entry is a process that will take time, just like adjusting to a new foreign culture. Give yourself time to relax and reflect upon what is going on around you, how you are reacting to it, and what you might like to change. Give yourself permission to ease into the transition.

3. Understand That the Familiar Will Seem Different

You will have changed, home has changed, and you will be seeing familiar people, places, and behaviors from new perspectives. Some things will seem strange, perhaps even unsettling. Expect to have some new emotional and psychological reactions to being home. Everyone does.

4. There Will Be Much "Cultural Catching-up" To Do

Some linguistic, social, political, economic, entertainment and current event topics will be unfamiliar to you as new programs, slang and even governmental forms may have emerged since you left. You may have some learning to do about your own culture. (Note: most returnees report that major insights into themselves and their home countries occur during reentry.)

5. Reserve Judgments

Just as you had to keep an open mind when first encountering the culture of a new foreign country, try to resist the natural impulse to make snap decisions and judgments about people and behaviors once back home. Mood swings are common at first and your most valuable and valid analysis of events is likely to take place after allowing some time for thorough reflection.

6. Respond Thoughtfully and Slowly

Quick answers and impulsive reactions often characterize returnees. Frustration, disorientation, and boredom in the returnee can lead to behavior which is incomprehensible to family and friends. Take some time to rehearse what you want to say and how you will respond to predictable questions and situations: prepare to greet those which are less predictable with a calm, thoughtful approach.

7. Cultivate Sensitivity

Showing an interest in what others have been doing while you have been on your adventure overseas is the

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¹ The list was compiled by Dr. Bruce La Brock from the University of the Pacific

surest way to reestablish rapport. Much frustration in returnees stems from what is perceived as disinterest by others in their experience and lack of opportunity to express their feelings and tell their stories. Being as good a listener as a talker is a key ingredient in mutual sharing.

8. Beware of Comparisons

Making comparisons between cultures and nations is natural, particularly after residence abroad; however, a person must be careful not to be seen as too critical of home or too lavish in praise of things foreign. A balance of good and bad features is probably more accurate and certainly less threatening to others.

9. Remain Flexible

Keeping as many options open as possible is an essential aspect of a successful return home. Attempting to re-socialize totally into old patterns and networks can be difficult, but remaining aloof is isolating and counterproductive. What you want to achieve is a balance between maintaining earlier patterns and enhancing your social and intellectual life with new friends and interests.

10. Seek Support Networks

There are lots of people back home who have gone through their own re-entry and understand a returnee's concerns. You might consider talking to: faculty, exchange students, international development staff, diplomatic corps, military personnel, church officials, and/or business people about the concerns you have as a returnee. University study abroad and foreign student offices are just a few of the places where returnees can seek others who can offer support and country-specific advice.