

INFOGRAM

David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies

“Coming Home Again”

All of a sudden, it seems like yesterday that you arrived in your host country – full of anxiety and wonder – to study, work, or volunteer for several months or years. The culture shock you experienced now seems a distant memory, and you have mixed feelings about going home. Yet returning home can be the most interesting and rewarding part of your journey – if you approach it with the right perspective.

Once home, you might notice that you have grown and changed, that your surroundings seem the same but you look at them with different eyes, and that “home” represents a new field of opportunities and challenges. The greatest challenge may be fitting your new self into your old environment. This *Infogram* offers exchange students, study abroad participants, military families, and other expatriates returning from an extended stay in another country some firsthand advice on how to avoid the pitfalls of return shock.

Not everyone will face the same adjustments when going home because their experience abroad has not been the same. The degree of return shock and the types of challenges you face at home depend largely, but not exclusively, on the following factors:

1. How long you have been away – on average, short-term travelers face less shock and fewer challenges;
2. Whether you were immersed and comfortable in the culture or remained a “visitor” – those who get more involved, especially if they speak the local language, find readjusting to home more of a challenge;
3. If you had trouble with culture shock in your host culture – this could mean you have a hard time with life-style adjustments;
4. Whether you kept up-to-date on trends and events at home – long-term expatriates who don’t may feel like strangers when they get home;
5. Whether you have a fellow student, expatriate, or your family to share your experience and offer support during the transition at home; and,
6. What type of living conditions you experienced or witnessed in your host culture – the more different they are from home, the more shock you are likely to have.

After you identify the elements above that might apply to you, check your attitude. Do you believe your time in the host culture was well enough spent that you don’t feel you are leaving work undone? And are you going home voluntarily or as part of a planned program, so that your actual departure is not a shock? Now you can tell, roughly, how much trouble you might have with return shock. Knowing that, you will be better able to handle the transition.

When You Get Home

Most expatriates and former study abroad students agree: once you have gotten over your jet lag and have had a chance to unpack, **get busy**. Get right back into school, work, or family and community activities. Don’t give yourself the time to lounge around and daydream about your host country, analyze your new personality, or fret that home isn’t what you expected. Immerse yourself in life, much the same way you may have done in the host culture. Time to think about, discuss, share, and even analyze your experience will

come soon enough, but you must now focus on being active where you are.

At the same time you are getting busy, don’t make any major decisions based on impulses influenced by your return shock. That is, don’t throw out all of your appliances and sell the car because you did fine without them in Thailand. Don’t exchange all of your dresses for a sarong or your suits for a boubou because they looked great in Africa. And don’t change your major to art history just because you liked the museums of Italy. Let big decisions wait until you feel more at home and can be reasonable about reality. Then, if the art history major is still appealing, change.

Some Things Never Change...

- “My friends who hadn’t been abroad seemed virtually unchanged.”
- “I’d forgotten a bit about how things were with my family and was disappointed to find some family members were the same.”
- “I got used to riding public transportation, but when I came home it became clear that we are definitely a ‘car’ society.”
- “We couldn’t believe how little American’s know about the world.”

Once you are home, your memory of society will quickly be restored and you may eventually wonder if you ever left because so much seems not to have changed. Of course, there will be new movies in the theaters and maybe even a new face in the White House, but on the whole, daily life will be the same. Don’t let this disappoint you. Just remember that change is only rapid when something new is encountered. Home remains home because it didn’t go off to face the new world that you did.

...**But You Have**

- “I appreciate my country and my mom’s cooking more.”
- “I was angry at my culture for wasting resources.”
- “I notice materialism, waste, and racism more than before.”
- “Good roads, efficient transportation, convenience stores, and how much a twelve-year-old kid has already had the opportunity to learn surprised me most about America when I returned from Africa.”
- “Bathrooms are cleaner, there is less noise and traffic, and there are more conveniences.”

It will probably be apparent early on that your perception of home is different than when you left. Depending on where you were abroad; your more sensitive eye will see both positive and negative things about home. Try not to be too critical (of either society) at first, because over time you may realize that most things fit just fine where they are. Then, if you really dislike something about your life at home, you can make life-style changes that might include community involvement, recycling more, using public transportation, or spending less money on unnecessary items. Further, you can take a greater appreciation for your country and/or your host country and use it to enlighten others. Most Americans know very little about other countries; encourage your friends and neighbors to learn more – but not necessarily with a slide show of your adventure. Rather, give them a book on pre-Columbian culture, share some African music (and then its history), take them to an international art exhibit, or encourage them to travel. You can also teach by simple example – by practicing customs and good habits learned abroad. People around you could pick them up.

Personal Growth

- “I discovered a certain confidence in myself and an appreciation for the humanities.”

- “Study abroad helped me be much more well-rounded.”
- “I see myself as more open to new ideas.”
- “I feel like I have a better balance in life; my decisions are more in perspective.”
- “I learned to trust my own judgment.”
- “We are more comfortable with the basic necessities of life.”
- “I am more tolerant, relaxed, and patient.”

Chances are, your time abroad will have been one of self-discovery and self-refinement, but you might not really notice it until you are home. You may be painfully aware of certain weaknesses, but more often than not you will see positive traits. The key will be to build on that new confidence and patience to make them permanent characteristics. It is more difficult than it sounds because the “sameness” of home could tempt you to forget lessons learned and revert back to your “old” self. So, if you feel more outgoing, make new friends. More confident? Start a new project. Socially aware? Start or join a local service group. Well-rounded? Learn a new skill, like playing a musical instrument. In other words, use your international experience as a catalyst for lifelong personal growth.

Relations With Others

Having lived abroad, you should now know much more about history and culture than you did before, but a little enlightenment can be a dangerous thing. It is very easy to appear arrogant if you criticize your home culture or say, “In Japan, they...” But that would be to make the same mistake as you might have made when you first arrived in your host country and critically compared it or its customs to home: “In America, everyone...” To avoid making your positive experience negative for someone else (and you), remember the following:

1. People often cannot relate to an experience they have not shared and therefore do not necessarily

appreciate insights you want to share about your host country. Forcing a storytelling hour or picture marathon on them can be alienating. While you should not refuse to share your experiences when asked, be frugal at first. Share what people ask about – a favorite meal, a little music, one story. Those with greater interest will ask for more. And if you fix a meal or play atonal music for someone who doesn’t like it, don’t criticize them. Did you like it at first?

2. Don’t expect untraveled family members or roommates to adopt life-style habits you picked up. They may not want to eat with the fork in the left hand or take their shoes off at home. They may appreciate the dishwasher and television. Although you may want them to try fried termites, don’t expect them to. At the same time, don’t be shy about adopting habits that you consider significant, regardless of someone else’s opinion. Keeping everything private and/or resisting urges to adopt certain customs is probably unhealthy. It cheats you from getting the most out of your experience. The key is to find a happy medium between keeping some things private and sharing or practicing others.
3. The thought of international travel or living is appealing to many people, but you are really among the few who have been able to do it. By constantly reminding others of your good fortune – either through countless references to this or that in the host culture; wearing T-shirts, sweatshirts, or other clothing that identifies you with international travel; or speaking a foreign language at (not to) or in front of others – you may convey an air of superiority that can encourage resentment among friends and family. You also risk creating an atmosphere that makes it harder for them to

appreciate your experience. Be sensitive to other people's feelings.

4. Finally, friendships developed with fellow students, expatriates, or natives of the host country can be a great resource for sharing memories and understanding adjustments at home. In fact, students and expatriates alike generally agree that such friendships are among the greatest benefits of an international experience; those friends provide a lasting network through which one can better make the transition to life at home without losing touch with life abroad.

Practical Aspects of Life

- "The large variety of items in stores was hard to get used to."
- "We had to get used to doing our housework again because we had a maid in Thailand."
- "We made a few mistakes driving on the wrong side of the road."
- "The higher cost of living was a real shock."
- "My kids had trouble being accepted at school."
- "After such a fulfilling experience abroad, it took over a year at work to feel like I was accepted and a contributor."
- "I got right back into school, so I didn't have too many adjustment problems."

When you come home, you may have a new position at work, another boss, a different school or home, or a society ordered differently than your host society. If employed, you might be making less money due to the tax breaks and benefits packages you had while away. If in school, you may face new situations, new questions about your future, and being different than your friends. You might have to get used to using a car to get around, or you may find shopping an overwhelming experience and expensive (although if you were in an expensive country, shopping might

now be too great a temptation because of comparatively low prices). As with other aspects of returning home, give yourself some time to adjust and make a conscious effort (without complaining or resisting) to fit into your current circumstances. Prepare and stick to a budget, take a refresher driving course, if necessary; wait a little while before you do major shopping; do fun things with friends so you can get reacquainted. Generally, shocks to daily life wear off quickly and you will feel comfortable in time.

Adjusting may be most difficult at work if your position is significantly different than before. If necessary, look at it as a new job in a new company, one that presents you with expanded opportunities to learn or grow. If it just isn't working out, think about a career or company change – but not until after several months of effort at your current job. Perhaps you return to a new company but then find the work less exciting or demanding than it was overseas. It may also be tougher. Maybe your coworkers bother you by their dog-eat-dog approach to business, something you found refreshingly absent in Mexico. In evaluating your feelings, ask yourself whether any of this would have bothered you before your international experience. If the answer is yes, maybe you should look for another job. If no, then try to accept the situation by remind yourself that: (a) this is how it's done here, (b) the job can be as rewarding as you allow, and (c) you probably disliked some (or many) aspects of your employment overseas. Work hard, strive to accomplish company goals, operate within the system to encourage desirable changes, and be positive with your colleagues.

Merging Two Cultures

- "I now place greater emphasis on family relations."
- "I conserve water and drink yerba mate (a Bolivian tea)."

- "I have lots of African friends and keep an open-door policy at home."
- "I take life at a slower pace."
- "We brought home some local spices and recipes, and I cook traditional food on occasion."
- "We continue to speak German at home so we don't lose the language."

In the effort to become acclimatized to home, don't abandon aspects of the host culture that you particularly like and don't ignore skills or characteristics developed there. Instead, merge both (or all) cultures that are now a part of you into a life style that encourages the best in you. For example, while it might be impossible and undesirable to eat the same foods you did abroad, you can cook a few favorite meals. If the ingredients or tools are not readily available, check around. They can usually be ordered, found in a larger city, or even requested from friends in the host culture. If you learned a language, don't stop speaking it; find others who share that language and get together occasionally to converse. Or take language classes in school. Write letters to your friends abroad in their language. Read books, even out loud. Teach the language to another person. If you allow it to slip into disuse, someday you may regret it.

To maintain your appreciation for the host culture, you may want to decorate a room or two in your home or apartment with reminders of favorite places or customs. Or you might decide to study more about the culture's history, arts, music, and current events, although not to the point of becoming so obsessed with the culture that you feel like a foreigner at home. Whatever you adopt, make sure it realistically complements life at home.

Value of a Journal

- "Through reading my journal, I was able to see how my perception of Spain and the culture changed from what was at

first annoyance to love and appreciation.”

- “I wish I had kept a journal.”
- “I am so glad to have a careful record of my trip – even seemingly insignificant things.”
- “Reading my journal brings back great memories.”
- I haven’t read my journal yet, but I know it will help me understand personal changes.”

Slides, pictures, and videos are nice, but nothing substitutes for a journal that registers your feelings, reactions, personal development, and treasured experiences. If you did not keep a journal while abroad, take time immediately to write as detailed a description as possible of your experiences, your initial and later impressions of the culture, your likes and dislikes, and your new friends.

Avoid reading your journal too much when you first get home because you could get depressed or lost in “other-home-sickness.” But, after you have adjusted a bit (or you need some help with some aspect of the transition), refer to the thoughts expressed in your journal. There you will probably discover that culture shock was a lot like return shock and you can handle it. You will notice how and why you changed over time, and you will refresh your memory of the host culture. Most people who keep a diary while abroad are very glad they did.

Once home, keep writing in a journal. Later, it will be interesting to see how you readjusted. And, in fact, the process of writing about your feelings in transition will help you understand them and deal with them more effectively.

If You Need Help

In most cases you will be able to overcome any return shock on your own or with the help of friends and family. It may take a few weeks or only a few days. There are some, however, who by virtue of an intense and/or lengthy experience abroad may need a little more help to avoid having their return shock turn into

depression or cause other psychological problems. These cases may require some level of professional help. The most important thing for you to do is honestly ask yourself if you are adjusting well and if you feel comfortable at home. If not, first try a minor step, such as taking a class on reentry shock; your sponsoring institution may offer one. Some universities have classes as part of their study abroad programs, and many service organizations “debrief” their volunteers before they come home. If such a class or group is not available, try forming a discussion group on your own among people who have shared a similar experience. If neither is available or helps you, you may want to consider counseling or therapy for a short period of time. Or you may realize a need to return to the host country to tend to some unfinished business or pursue other opportunities before (or instead of) returning home for good.

Some Advice

- “Expect to have some readjustment problems, even if you don’t think you will.”
- “Exercise, get a job quickly; think about readjustment in terms of the adaptation you went through in the host culture.”
- “Try to anticipate what might be different (relationship, daily routine, food, leisure activities) and how you will react.”
- “Realize you used to live here – probably for much longer than you lived overseas and this culture is as much (or more) a part of your personal, emotional, and spiritual makeup as the new culture from which you have also drawn values.”
- “Bring the same positive, open attitude home that you took with you when you went abroad.”
- “Don’t dwell on the past once you are home because the present and future are important too.”

- “Don’t expect people to ‘notice’ you just because you have had an international experience. Act yourself and share experiences with friends as you see the opportunity.”
- “Find ways to include your foreign experience into home so you don’t lose touch with the host culture.”

Coming home again can be a traumatic experience, but it doesn’t have to be if you approach the transition with the right attitude. No matter what challenges you face, great and small, work to find a balance between home and your host culture. Finally, remember to be fair to home by looking as hard for the good, uplifting, and interesting as you did abroad. Visit local museums, learn about local traditions, read local or national history (you will be surprised at how rich it is), study a language you can use here (Spanish, American sign language, or one from a significant immigrant community), watch television, listen to the radio, listen to folk music, or visit older family members and ask them about family customs. All societies have a rich heritage, including yours. By looking for the good in each culture you experience, you cannot help but be a better person.