

Coming Home Again- Absorbing Reverse Culture Shock

The situation

Remember your first few days, or weeks away? Remember feeling like a fish out of water, no matter how broadminded you tried to be? You wanted desperately to return home. Maybe you didn't even realize you were being affected, but you were.

Remember how you thought and felt? Well, get ready for what many occur when you return home! You may suffer temporarily from what has been called "reverse culture shock". This may come as no surprise, since "shocks" are common whenever we encounter a dramatic change. All forms of shock require a normal adjustment period.

The reassuring aspect of change is that it usually produces internal growth if handled correctly. This article is intended to acquaint you with some of the normal behavior patterns elicited by a return home from abroad.

This won't make reverse culture shock disappear, but it will hopefully prepare you for what to expect, and how to deal with it, so you can have a more positive returning experience.

A shock or mild surprise

The degree of shock experienced by each sojourner may range from a jolt to an uncomfortable agitation. There are a number of factors that may determine how great or small your adjustment may be.

- THE LENGTH OF TIME YOU WERE AWAY?
- DID YOU HAVE PREVIOUS TRAVEL EXPERIENCE TO THAT LOCATION?
- HOW MUCH CONTACT WITH YOU MAINTAINED WITH HOME WHILE YOU WERE AWAY?
- THE AMOUNT OF TRAVEL EXPERIENCE YOU HAD PRIOR TO THIS TRIP?
- WHETHER OR NOT YOU ENJOYED YOUR TIME ABROAD?
- DID YOU TRAVEL ALONE OR WITH OTHERS?

Common Frustrations/Anticipated Behaviors

- BOREDOM

Life simply does not seem as exciting here in Murfreesboro as it may have while you were overseas. The humdrum of going to classes, going home, going out and going to sleep (repeat) does not compare to your weekend excursions to Prague, London, Buenos Aires, or Tokyo.

- NEGATIVISM

All of a sudden your home environment doesn't measure up to that terrific mental picture you had of it before you left or while abroad. Many American sojourners become quite negative about American society, labeling it too materialistic, too friendly, too backwards or too "something else". A common tendency is to withdraw, become defensive or to mentally wander abroad. Be reassured that in time, you will be able to incorporate an appreciation for the positive aspects of both your home culture and that from abroad.

- FEELINGS OF ALIENATION

Change occurs within almost all overseas travelers. Sometimes, without even desiring it, you may find new beliefs; attitudes and patterns of behavior have now become part of your personality and life style.

Somehow the person you used to be doesn't feel at home anymore. Transitions to home become more stressful when you perceive the changes as negative. Even positive changes can be stressful as you feel pressure from family and friends at home to revert to the "old you".

Avoid the temptation of discarding your positive changes.

- PERSONAL CHANGE

Your insights have been broadened and your perspective is now different. Be aware that your emotional and mental climates have also changed. An attempt to go back to the “old you” will likely fail.

Likely, the internal changes are positive ones and there will be no need for a reversion to the old. Try not to convert those around you. They haven’t experienced what you have. Either they can’t, aren’t interested or are unwilling to understand. They may even have a hard time understanding and appreciating the “new you” and all the changes you have gone through. It may be difficult to adjust back to a former lifestyle without some struggle. A healthy solution may be to combine the positive aspects of the old and new you. The result should be a much richer and enjoyable lifestyle.

It is probably unwise to impose your new perspectives and opinions on family and friends. Not many people enjoy being told what the ‘proper’ way to eat is or the ‘civilized’ way to address others. Vent your frustrations in supportive atmospheres where there are others who have been abroad.

- **SOCIAL ADJUSTMENTS**

Social situations can be very challenging. Things like slang expressions, clothes, music, dancing and who’s who can change. You may feel like an outsider. Your friends may seem boring and close-minded. Your interests may have changed.

It is not uncommon for those returning from abroad to feel superior to others. It can be disconcerting when others do not recognize your “advanced status” or pay little attention to your return home. Former friends may have found new friendships and have priorities that are now different than yours. Be patient. If the friendship is worth maintaining, adjustments can and will be made. If not, developing new friendships can be a way to develop your new perspectives.

Concluding advice

- Expect differences

Unexpected alterations in life are often harder to deal with than expected changes. Use change as a tool and teacher. Look for the positives in each situation.

- Guard your health

Expect some extra exhaustion, depression or anxiety, which are often normal accompaniments to long distance travel and retuning home stress. The condition is temporary and curable, especially when you know what to expect and how to cope.

- Getting it back together

Identify your new options as soon as possible after arriving home. Try to make as many arrangements for developing a lifestyle that will combine the best of the old with the best of the new. Be proud of everything you have accomplished by going abroad and start thinking about your next trip.

Coming Home Again was adapted by Mary Lynn Allen, UNC Charlotte, 1999, and Matthew Geisler, NAU, 2001, and Rhona Cadenhead-Hames, UB, 2004, for University at Buffalo’s Study Abroad Programs Office.

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