

Re-entry Shock

Phew! You are now coming home after a four-month stint abroad. You look forward to the familiar. Your home will be cozy, safe, predictable. You will be surrounded by familiar faces. Your incredible journey—across the waters and within yourself—is over. Or is it? Most of us are familiar with culture shock, but are you aware of its close cousin, re-entry shock? This is the final, and perhaps most difficult, phase of your experience abroad. This is the re-entry stage—returning home and its impact on you is at least as profound as the cultural adaptation stage when abroad. In many ways, coming home can be more painful than leaving. The “weirdness” of home, its different pace and social pressures—and people’s lack of interest in your mind-altering experience—can make you feel like a stranger.

Things to Expect As Part of Re-entry Shock

If you are in the re-entry stage, you are probably dealing with feelings of frustration and rejection and a sense of being out of step with the people around you. Here is a list of symptoms you may experience on your return:

- **Feeling let down:** You have a peculiar sense of disappointment very much at odds with the joy you expected to feel when you got home.
- **You feel disconnected from your community:** You feel like you changed while everything at home stayed the same. You miss the community you just left. You’re sometimes overwhelmed with nostalgia. You feel abnormal.
- **Your relationships with family and friends are strained:** Nobody seems interested in your experience abroad. Some people didn’t even notice you were gone! People around you seem boring and narrow-minded. It’s hard to hide your disappointment. You withdraw from your friends and family and, not surprisingly, you feel isolated.
- **Your emotional state is in flux:** You feel disoriented. You sleep a lot, but your dreams are disturbed. You feel out of control, even aggressive. You’re angry one minute, sad the next. You try to deny the importance of your experience abroad. You’re restless, forgetful, petulant. Your unpredictability begins to take its toll on your family and friends.
- **Your life skills are gone:** You look the wrong way when you cross the street. You leave your gloves at home in the middle of winter. You buy powdered milk, like you did in Mozambique, because the array of milk choices at the corner store is overwhelming. The things you do without thinking are often inappropriate. You feel overwhelmed by the tasks of everyday life.
- **Your health deteriorates:** You catch a lot of colds and other viruses; you get headaches; your appetite fluctuates. You’re irritable, lethargic, even depressed.

Re-entry Shock Versus Culture Shock

Re-entry shock is very different from the culture shock you experienced abroad. Far from home, you were motivated to adapt because you were an outsider, and even at the worst of times you knew you would go home one day. Now that you’re back, you feel you ought to fit in, you know the territory, and you shouldn’t need to make adjustments. But being home doesn’t feel right, and since, for some of us, returning home is forever, the stakes are much higher.

The phases of re-entry do not follow a standard pattern and may blend into one another. You may experience symptoms of a stage you thought you’d finished long ago.

Overseas adaptation, according to the experts, takes about one-third of the duration of your stay. When you come back, however, your stay could be forever. Many people find it takes the repetition of a season to make them feel comfortable back home.

The Phases of Re-entry

The re-entry process is a phase of your overseas experience—and is itself divided into three parts: euphoria (the “tourist high”), shock and adjustment.

Phase I: Euphoria or the Tourist High

Most returnees experience the “tourist high.” The euphoria phase of re-entry is cathartic. You’ve been anticipating your homecoming for months. During this phase you feel very optimistic and tend to focus on the positive, such as reuniting with loved ones, returning to a familiar culture, and for some, the local doughnut shop! This euphoria helps sustain you through any initial problems. You avoid difficult situations and convince yourself that everything is wonderful. You downplay or ignore anything that unsettles you. You don’t allow yourself to miss your life overseas.

Phase II: Shock!

You’ve changed, your friends, family and co-workers have changed; indeed, home itself has changed, and you have no choice but to adjust. This realization puts you into shock. Re-entry shock makes us feel we don’t belong in the place that is supposed to be our home; it makes us wonder where we do belong. There are a lot of factors at play in the shock phase of re-entry.

- **You don’t expect change on your home turf:** Because it is unexpected, re-entry shock, sometimes called reverse culture shock, catches many travellers and international workers by surprise. As mentioned, the process of readjusting to home bears some similarity to that of adjusting to a foreign culture—it’s just that you feel like you shouldn’t have to adjust! It is helpful to think of culture as being all of the things you take for granted in everyday life—that’s everything from which way to look when you cross the street, to the importance of religion in daily decision-making. When you adapt to life overseas, you actually change your culture. Upon arriving home, you find that you no longer take for granted the same things other North Americans do. The stress of re-entry shock (and culture shock) is largely due to this fact. If you cannot take anything for granted, you cannot relax.
- **You have changed:** Your experiences and adventures overseas have changed forever how you perceive the world. You adjusted to a new lifestyle, made different friends, did business in different ways, prepared and ate different food, and perhaps even functioned in a different language. Now you’re home and people expect you to carry on as you did before. But as you try to settle into your old routines—or even new ones—you become acutely aware of changes in your outlook, and even in your sense of self. Virtually every returnee feels like an outsider, like he or she is observing life rather than participating in it.
- **No one is interested in hearing about your life abroad:** The people you return to may appear not to have changed, everyday life does carry on without you. Children grow up, old people die, neighbours move. Your relationships with people close to you are affected by the very fact of your absence. You come back expecting to slip into the seat you thought they were saving for you. But they haven’t saved you a place, and worse, they don’t seem to care where you’ve been. As ridiculous as it seems, they don’t want to hear about your experiences. They’d rather talk about last night’s game or who’s getting a promotion. Even close family and friends may show only passing interest in your travels and may have difficulty relating to the new you. Routine existence goes on at home while you pack a lifetime of experiences into each day overseas. Or so it seems...
- **You are critical of home:** Now that you’ve stopped taking home for granted, you can see the flaws in your own society in a way you couldn’t before. It’s far more difficult to forgive your own culture’s flaws than to accept another’s, because you feel partly responsible for them. You find yourself being critical of others. Their lifestyles seem self-indulgent, decadent and irresponsible. They seem callous, self-involved and unfriendly... You’re lonely. It seems you’ll never reconnect with your old friends, or make new ones...
- **You’re bored.** You may worry that you’ll never like home again, that it’s no longer your real home. You rack your brains for ways to get back to the country you left, or just to get away from home. In short, you resist adaptation.
- **You miss your overseas friends and lifestyle:** Your life abroad seems like a fantasy now. There was always something new and exciting and being a visitor kept you removed from the more mundane aspects of life overseas. While you were away, your letters home made you a local celebrity. Now that you’re back, however, you’re just like everyone else. People at home seem uninteresting, uninspired. You miss the exciting discussions you had with

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your new friends overseas. You find people's preoccupations small-minded and boring.

- **You feel vulnerable, powerless:** You may feel overwhelmed by your seeming inability to find a job, or by a general sense of personal failure. Dwindling finances often contribute to this sense of powerlessness. The cost of living may be much higher at home, or the lifestyle you'd grown accustomed to abroad might be beyond your budget. Resettlement expenses can make re-entry financially draining—you have to pay for everything, from new winter coats to a new car. Much has been said about returning to your home and your old life, but you may, in fact, be returning to very different personal or professional circumstances. You may be coming back to a different job or to live in a different part of the country. You may have developed a long-term personal relationship while you were abroad, or a relationship at home may have ended. You may have to relocate soon after you return, or you may not even have a home to return to.
- **SUMMARY: Why re-entry shock happens:** You may be surprised to learn that you are experiencing some of the symptoms of the grieving process. Specifically, you are suffering from the anxiety associated with separation and loss, and for very good reasons. Change is difficult; you have left a significant part of yourself behind; there are no guarantees you will ever go back.

How to Ease Re-Entry Shock

We would like to have called this section "Cures for Re-entry Shock"—but there are none! So, expect it. No matter how seasoned a world traveller you are, you're unlikely to get through the re-entry process unscathed. When you live so far from home, in a different culture, and for a long time, home begins to seem less and less real. Many people idealize North America while they are away, and are horrified by the real thing. So come back with your eyes open: you've changed, home has changed, your entire home country has changed. Be prepared to adapt.

Practical And Easy Tips

- **Enjoy Phase One, the tourist high:** Take a break when you first get back, before you return to work or start looking for a job.
- **Get organized:** Make lists of specific tasks you need to accomplish and keep track of your priorities, emotional as well as practical. Don't make snap decisions, however tempted you are to settle things quickly.
- **Take good care of yourself:** You may be particularly susceptible to illness, so a healthy lifestyle is crucial.
- **Take breaks:** Schedule some downtime; forget about the outside world and do something you enjoy.
- **Treat yourself to something you enjoyed abroad:** Food is the best example. Plan to cook some of your favourite dishes once you get home.
- **Maintain your sense of humour:** Remember how important this aspect of cultural adaptation was abroad? The same applies here—maybe twice over!
- **Reflect on your experience abroad:** Choose which parts of the experience you value and which you will let go.

Start Building a Community

- **Five simple ideas to get you started:** First, work on building your confidence. Second, get involved in activities back home. Third, search for and get to know other returnees. Fourth, look for others (not just returnees) who share common ground (e.g., other job seekers, new immigrants). And fifth, stay in touch with your friends abroad.
- **Rekindle old friendships:** Prepare yourself for your friends' indifference, and try to be understanding. Some will seem unable, or worse, unwilling, to discuss your experience abroad.
- **Decide which parts of your experience you're going to talk about:** Try to distinguish what is important to your audience—whether it's your grandmother or the local Rotary Club—and what detracts from successfully making your point.
- **Think before you speak:** Try to be inclusive. Don't start every sentence with "When I was in Harare/Paris/Bangalore." This will make people feel excluded. Be especially careful about who hears you express your

frustrations about home. Other returnees will be sympathetic, but even they have limited tolerance for complaining.

- **Don't get too attached to your celebrity status:** Remember, most people are only interested in the five-minute version of your trip, and even that won't last.
- **Show interest in others:** Don't assume that what you've been doing is more interesting or exciting than what they've been doing. Ask questions. Be a good listener.
- **Give back:** You have useful information to impart. Why not offer a slide show about your community abroad to a local group—Scouts, Rotarians, or even your neighbours? Who needs your help? Could you offer your support to more recent returnees still in the grips of re-entry shock? Do you have something to offer new immigrants?

Phase III: Adjustment

This is where the "U-Turn of Adjustment" begins to swing upward. During this period, you start to fit in.

- **You actually like it here at home:** Go on, admit it. You respect the people around you. You participate in everyday life, in work, in your community. You're not angry any more.
- **You develop routines:** You remember garbage day. You watch regular television programs and enjoy them.
- **You begin to appreciate the North American perspective:** You are able to talk about your experiences abroad in a way that your friends and family can understand.
- **Your sense of humour is revived:** You begin to talk about your experiences of re-entry—poking some fun at yourself as you regain perspective.
- **Your life has continuity:** You begin to see the long-term value of your experiences abroad. You find ways to use the skills you gained abroad in your everyday life at home.
- **Your health improves:** You sleep better, you don't get as many colds, and you have more energy. You can focus on the people and things around you.

Adaptation is hard work, but it's a natural process, a human survival skill. Think about it: if human beings weren't good at adapting, we wouldn't live in such a complex, technologically-advanced world – and you wouldn't have gone abroad in the first place!

A Last Word

Re-entry is not an entirely negative experience. Through your struggle, you will uncover and develop a number of skills and insights. Not only did you have the privilege of learning about a new culture abroad, but you also gained a fresh perspective on your own culture. You are more adaptable and open to new ideas. You have developed much stronger communication skills – and sensitivity. You appreciate value structures other than your own. You emerge a stronger, more resourceful person, with deeper insights into the human condition.

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