

Know what to expect when you come home from abroad

Phew! At last, you're home. It's cozy, safe, predictable and full of familiar faces. You've anticipated your homecoming with a mixture of feelings, from elation to regret. Your incredible journey is over... Or is it?



The 3 Phases of Re-entry Shock

What happens when you return home from months abroad? Re-entry is different for every traveler, but most experience the phases outlined below.

You may find that the phases overlap, or you might experience some symptoms and not others. This chart is simply a guide to help you analyze your experience and stay objective as you make the challenging transition to home life.

Phase I: Euphoria	Phase II: Shock	Phase III: Adjustment
<i>Everything familiar feels exciting & alive!</i>	<i>Suddenly, your life abroad seems more attractive than ever.</i>	<i>After some time, a sense of balance finally emerges.</i>

What is re-entry shock?

Re-entry is the final (and often most difficult) stage of any international experience. Its impact is at least as profound as the cultural adaptation stage. And sometimes it catches travelers by surprise.

How does it differ from culture shock?

When you were abroad, everything was new and exotic. It felt natural that adaptation would take time. But when you return home, it seems like you ought to fit in straight away. So why does something feel off? Re-entry shock follows a similar pattern to culture shock but can set in faster and be more intense and unpredictable. You might experience the stages unexpectedly, or out of order. It can take many months to recover from symptoms and feel energized again.

Phase I: Euphoria

The chance to see everything and everyone you've missed fills you with energy.

The euphoria phase of re-entry is cathartic.

Most returnees experience a "tourist high." You've been anticipating your homecoming for months. As your adventure abroad concludes; you reflect on your time overseas. You think of your original expectations for the journey and compare them with the outcomes. Often, your adventure abroad turned out much better than expected, and you may be reveling in this feeling!

During this phase you feel very optimistic and tend to focus on the positive...

You may actually achieve a lot during this phase...

In this first phase, you're generally glad to be home.

The Anticlimax

Here's how one lawyer felt when he returned home after taking part in South Africa's historic transition from apartheid to democracy:



... such as reuniting with loved ones, returning to a familiar culture and enjoying your favorite foods. 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 abroad.

... because you are quite focused and highly motivated. You accomplish tasks easily, partly because you have lots of energy, enthusiasm and the odd surge of adrenaline. Others may find you a bit high-strung or even overbearing.

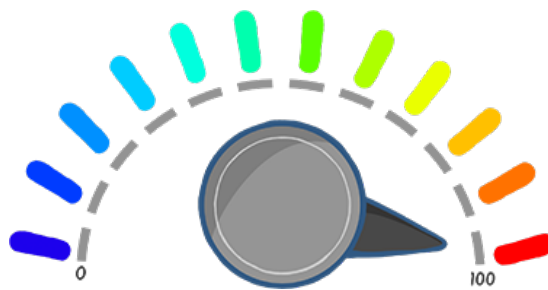
You've missed your family, the seasons, your old neighborhood and more. People are happy to see you back.

"I felt like a distinguished visitor, almost a hero. People were very interested in the dramatic changes that had occurred in South Africa and in my role within them. Dinner parties were organized to celebrate my return. I was even asked to make a presentation at a major event. I had a period of a month or two of really being in demand, but then... it tapered off. Soon, people just wanted to talk about the last movie they'd seen. It was tough just being 'Mr. One of Us' again!"

Phase II: Shock

The shock of re-entry is partly due to the feeling that home isn't home anymore.

Things have changed and suddenly you may feel you don't belong. But this discomfort is totally normal. When you adapt to life abroad, you actually modify your own culture. Upon arriving home, you find that you no longer take for granted the things other North Americans do, which leads to shock. The more immersed you were in your host culture, the more adjusting you'll have to do when you arrive home. Let's look closer at the causes of re-entry shock:



You've changed:

Your adventures abroad have changed how you see the world. You may have adjusted to a new lifestyle, made friends, done business in different ways, prepared and ate different food and perhaps even functioned in a different language. As you try to settle into your old routines (or new ones), you'll need to acknowledge these changes and make space for any worth preserving. You'll also need to readjust some things in order to fit in at home.

Your home feels different to you:

While you were abroad, life at home carried on without you. In some cases, this means people, places and relationships may seem different. This can feel disorienting when you're seeking familiarity. In other cases, it might seem like everything has remained the same, while you've changed significantly. No matter what, when you arrive home, always expect the unexpected!

You miss life abroad:

Your life abroad suddenly seems like a fantasy. There was always something new and exciting to do. Your online posts and stories made you a bit of a celebrity. Now that you're back, you're just like everyone else. You miss the exciting discussions you had with your new friends overseas. And what's worse, you might have to catch glimpses of those friends posting on social media, giving you FOMO.

You become a critic:

Suddenly, you can see the flaws in your own society in a way you couldn't before. It can be more difficult to forgive your own culture's flaws than to accept another's. As time goes on, you may find yourself becoming critical and worry that you'll never see your home in the same light. You may feel detached, bored, indifferent and lonely. You might rack your brain for ways to get back to your life abroad, or to get away from home again. In short, you resist adaptation.

You feel vulnerable:

You may feel overwhelmed by your seeming inability to find a job, or by a general sense of personal failure. You might find yourself living with relatives or struggling to find new accommodation. Dwindling finances can contribute to a sense of powerlessness, and the cost of living at home may be higher than it was abroad. There may be unexpected expenses (a new winter coat, a car, a new phone, etc.) You expected to feel a sense of security upon arriving home, but suddenly it feels like you're out of place.



Experiencing difficult emotions during re-entry is normal. Allow yourself to experience these feelings, but recognize that they are part of a journey of readjustment.

When arriving home, expect the unexpected!

Why Re-entry Shock Happens

You may be surprised to learn you are experiencing symptoms of the grieving process.

Specifically, you are suffering from the anxiety associated with separation and loss. You are grieving the loss of the exciting life you left behind, and for good reason:

- Change is difficult.
- You've left a significant part of yourself behind.
- There are no guarantees you will ever go back.

One student describes a common re-entry experience:

"After returning from my year in Argentina, I didn't consider re-entry shock. I'd already volunteered abroad and never had a big issue, so when I started experiencing feelings of depression and hostility, I was taken off-guard. I suddenly felt angry, annoyed and noticed myself being snappy with friends and family. Life at home suddenly felt boring in comparison with the rush of Argentina, where every day felt like a new challenge and adventure. Eventually, I had to admit that I was experiencing re-entry shock. Once I acknowledged it, I was able to gain perspective and put a plan in action to help myself adjust to life at home."



What to Expect: Symptoms You May Experience Upon Your Return

Feeling let down: You have a peculiar sense of disappointment that's at odds with the joy you expected to feel. You've been missing your family, pining for the perfect cup of coffee, eager to get back to the society and structure you know best. And yet, somehow, it's not satisfying.

Feeling disconnected: You don't fit in anymore. You feel like you changed while everything at home stayed the same, or maybe everything at home changed while you were away. You miss the community you left abroad. You feel nostalgic or like an outsider in your own home.

Your relationships are strained: Nobody seems interested in your experience abroad. Some people didn't even notice you were gone! People seem boring and narrow-minded. It's hard to hide your disappointment, so you withdraw from friends and family. Not surprisingly, you feel isolated.

Your emotions are in flux: You feel disoriented. You sleep a lot, but don't feel rested. You feel overwhelmed, maybe even aggressive. You might be angry one moment, 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 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 got used to buying powdered milk, so the array of milk choices at the corner store is overwhelming. The things you do without thinking are often inappropriate. You feel overwhelmed by everyday tasks.

Your health suffers: You catch a lot of colds and viruses. You get headaches. Your appetite fluctuates. You're irritable, lethargic, even depressed.

Phase III: Adjustment

This is what success looks like.

This is where the "U-curve of adjustment" begins to swing upward!

You finally start to feel like yourself again and incorporate all you've learned while abroad.

You actually like it here at home:

Go on, admit it. You like the people around you. You participate in everyday life, in work, in your community. You feel competent and effective. Some days you even have fun.

You develop routines:

You remember garbage day. You watch sports or your favorite YouTubers — and you enjoy them.

You begin to appreciate the North American perspective:

You are able to talk about your experiences abroad in a way that friends and family can understand.

Your sense of humor 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 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 and 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 overseas in the first place!

How to Ease Re-entry Shock

We would like to have called this section *Cures for Re-entry Shock*, but there are none!

No matter how seasoned a traveler you are, you're unlikely to get through the re-entry process unscathed. When you live far from home, in a different culture, for a long time, home begins to seem less and less real. Come back with your eyes open: you've changed, home has changed, the country has changed. Be prepared to adapt!



Practical Tips to Ease Re-entry Shock

Enjoy the tourist high:

When you first get back, take some time to enjoy yourself. Plan a "welcome home" party. Relish the euphoria.

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, no matter how tempted you are to settle in quickly.

Take good care of yourself:

You may be particularly susceptible to illness, so a healthy lifestyle is crucial. Even the tourist high is physically and emotionally stressful. If you experience unusual symptoms, make sure your doctor knows where you were posted overseas, particularly if it was a tropical area. Doctors may not automatically check for malaria or bilharzia, for example.

Take breaks:

Schedule downtime; forget about the outside world and do something you enjoy.

Treat yourself to something you enjoyed overseas:

Food is the best option. Plan to cook some of your favorite dishes once you get home. Make sure you bring the right spices with you!

Foster a sense of humor:

Remember how important this aspect of cultural adaptation was overseas?
The same applies at home!

Maintain perspective:

Try to see North American people and events within a North American context.

Reframe experiences:

Practice reframing any tough situations into learning opportunities. Every challenge is an opportunity for growth!

Reflect on your experience abroad:

Choose which parts of your experience you will value and which you will let go. We always recommend writing as a valuable way to reflect.

If you have career aspirations, write about the skills you acquired abroad:

Start by identifying career stories that demonstrate your effectiveness overseas.

Additional Tips Start Rebuilding Your Community at Home

Five simple ideas to get you started:

First, work on building your confidence. Second, join in, get involved. Third, search for and get to know other returnees. Fourth, look for others who share common ground (not just returned, but other job seekers, new immigrants, etc.). And fifth, stay in touch with your friends from 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 experiences abroad. This can be particularly galling for international development or aid workers, who have devoted themselves to humanitarian causes and lived in poor conditions among the world's most desperate peoples. Effective communication skills will help ease the transition and can make the difference between a bad case of re-entry shock and a relatively mild one. If you can express yourself clearly and in a way that doesn't offend, your friends will benefit from the insights you share with them, and you will benefit from their support. The following points are worth keeping in mind:

Decide which parts of your experience you're going to talk about:

Try to distinguish what is important to your audience (whether that's your grandmother or the local Rotary Club) and what detracts from successfully making your point.

Choose your audience carefully and be respectful:

Make sure your audience is interested before you launch into a story about life abroad. Be mindful of their attention span. Listen to their questions. Know when to change the subject. Be especially careful about who hears you express your frustrations about home. Other returnees will be sympathetic, but even they will have limited tolerance for complaining.

Think before you speak:

Try to be inclusive. Don't start every sentence with "*When I was in Harare/Paris/Bangalore*," or people will feel excluded. Try to make your comments relevant to the situation at hand.

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.

Unexpected Circumstances

Unique circumstances can sometimes increase the intensity of re-entry shock.

If you experienced any dangerous or threatening circumstances while abroad (e.g. accidents, robberies, humanitarian crises or natural disasters), your stress response might be delayed until after you return home. For example, one woman who was robbed while walking home during a study abroad placement in Nigeria felt fine after the event. But once she returned home, she was suddenly afraid to go walking at night. With some short-term counseling, she recovered quickly.

Ask for help from a trained re-entry counselor if symptoms persist.

When it comes to stress, everyone has their own threshold. As a rule, re-entry symptoms generally last a few weeks and aren't overly debilitating. But if your symptoms continue for more than a few weeks, or if you're having difficulty managing the re-entry process, talk it out with someone who's had a similar experience, or chat with a counselor.

If you do choose to seek counseling, try to find a professional who is familiar with re-entry and adaptation issues. Good luck!

Take It All in Stride

Re-entry might be challenging, but it needn't be a negative experience.

While abroad, you learned about a new culture, had adventures, developed new skills, insights and abilities.

Re-entry is your opportunity to reflect:

Take time to reflect on all your experiences and incorporate what you learned into your new global self.

Acknowledge that you are stronger:

You are now a more resourceful and more insightful person than you were a few short months ago.

Recognize that you've had an intense experience:

Transitioning to life at home may take time and there may be a few hurdles to overcome. But with patience and a positive attitude, you will prevail!



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