

Coming Home

A Handbook on Returning Home after Studying
Abroad



By: Ashley Kipling

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PART I: PREPARING TO LEAVE YOUR HOST COUNTRY

PHYSICALLY:

Relationships:

Prepare yourself for leaving by tying up loose ends, and visiting host friends and family. Make your preparations a time of little stress as this may affect your health prior to leaving and flying home.

Luggage:

Make sure you are in compliance with airport regulations. Because you probably bought many items and souvenirs during your time abroad, consider buying a larger suitcase rather than shipping items home, which can be very costly and time consuming.

Jet lag: (According to BBC Health.com)

- Get lots of rest the night before your departure.
- Drink lots of water before, during and after your flight.
- During the flight, drink lots of water as opposed to juice, alcohol, and caffeinated beverages.
- Exercise can also prevent jetlag. By getting activity, walking around the cabin frequently, and stretching your legs while sitting, swelling, stiffness, and restlessness can be prevented.

EMOTIONALLY:

- Get the contact information from your new friends and host family members so that you can keep in touch.
- Understand your expectations about what home may be like:
 - Family, friends, school, work...
 - Reevaluate expectations if they seem to be unrealistic. Understand that home and family may have changed while you've been away. By preparing yourself for this realization, it may be easier to embrace the change upon returning. Also understand that many of these realizations may occur after being home for a period of time.
 - Understand that home may not be the only thing that has changed since you've left. Most likely, you have changed too through your experiences abroad.
- Remind yourself that reentry/reverse culture shock is a process just like culture shock was with your initial entry into your host country. It takes time and is a normal process of re-acclimating to your home country and culture.

PART II: A LOOK AT REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK

What is reverse culture shock?

Reverse culture shock (also called reentry adjustment) is the process of readjusting to one's home culture after living abroad for a significant period of time.* Many students do not expect that a transition would take place upon returning home; however, reverse culture shock can be more difficult than the initial culture shock that one experienced upon entering their host country. This process of reverse culture shock can range from a few months to a year or longer.*As with culture shock, reverse culture shock is also characterized by a loss of familiar cues and both require the individual to integrate into a different culture.*

But why would reverse culture shock be more severe than culture shock itself?

Many students who study abroad expect culture shock upon entering the host country. They are aware that the host environment will be different than their home culture; therefore, they are less shocked when the culture and people are different than what they know or expect. Reentry adjustment is different from culture shock in a few ways. By being aware of these differences, it can help ease the difficulty of reentry.

The first major difference between culture shock and reverse culture shock is in one's expectations of the two transitions. Students who return home do not anticipate readjustment issues since home is not a "new place".* But with one's new experiences, events, and values acquired through the host country, home may be seen through a new lens. The shock is that home, what was once comfortable and familiar, is no longer the same as it was before leaving. These realities of home do not match what the student "expected" to experience upon returning home.

Another difference between culture shock and reverse culture shock is a returnee's concept of change. When going to a foreign country, change can be expected since one is entering a new environment with new social and cultural cues. Upon returning home though, the student may experience change in the home environment as well as internal change, such as value, attitude and behavioral changes.*

The third difference between the two transitions is the student's awareness of the changes that have taken place.* Environmental changes are easier to identify than internal changes that may have occurred while abroad. Many internal changes may have taken place during one's time abroad, but only upon reentry do these changes become more apparent. This can contribute to the difficulty of the adjustment process. In addition, these internal changes are not only new to the student but may be unexpected for their family and friends.

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¹ Gaw (2000), Adler (1981), Thompson & Christofi (2006)

What does reverse culture shock look like?

The following are a list of symptoms of reverse culture shock. They are divided into personal symptoms (those occurring internally) and social symptoms (ones that are influenced by the environment). Because reverse culture shock is such a unique transition for each individual, not all students experience the same symptoms. Some people experience many; others only a few.

Personal Symptoms	How the symptom may look
Depression	May be caused by feeling of loss of the host country. Many times students are not prepared for re-entry issues; therefore, the challenges are internalized rather than seen as normal.*
Anxiety & Stress	Returning home can be stressful especially if expectations about coming back home are not being fulfilled. This change and uncertainty can create tension which is not necessarily a negative thing. In many ways, this tension can lead to self exploration and positive change.
Disorientation	Similar to culture shock, reverse culture shock may disorient the student with feelings of being caught between the two cultures of their host country and home country.*
Anger/Hostility	Some students may experience a negative and angry reaction towards their home country/culture. Some common reactions may include anger, criticism, and guilt about the home country's materialism, pace of life, hospitality, sexuality, and international influence.*
Helplessness	Personal changes as well as changes in the home environment may seem sudden and unexpected. Even though these changes may be out of your own control, this transition can be a time of reflection and growth.
Belonging & Purpose	Many returnees experience personal growth and learning after returning from abroad, including redefining their belonging and purpose. Some areas explored may include one's American identity, career goals redefined and/or expanded, reevaluating relationships, etc.*
Change in Cultural Identity	Cultural identity is defined as "the mental framework through which individuals understand their way of being, interpret social cues, choose their behaviors, respond to their surroundings, and evaluate the actions of other people".* Subtle changes that occurred while abroad may become fully apparent only upon your return home. These changes may include a new awareness of the home culture, such as negative and positive aspects, comparisons between the two cultures and cultural changes within yourself.
Academic Problems	Difficulty concentrating and a lack of motivation may occur upon returning. This may be due to a general restlessness that can occur after experiencing an adventurous, unique, and exciting time abroad.



² Thompson & Christofi, 2000, Gaw, 2000, Walling, et.al, 2006, Sussman, 2000

Social Symptoms	How the symptom may look
Alienation/Social Withdrawal	Upon returning, many students expect that their family and friends will be the most receptive to their experiences, but are often shocked when there is a lack of interest. Many times, family and friends are interested in what is happening in the U.S. and are less interested in what is happening in a country so far away; even if it's your host country. This can cause the student to feel rejected and isolated from the people who are closest to them.*
Interpersonal Difficulties	Because of the lack of interest from friends and family, it can leave the student feeling lonely and unable to connect with those closest to them. After returning, it is not uncommon for students to alter their circle of friends, especially to include others who have had similar travel experiences. *
Discrimination	It is not uncommon for returning students to maintain a non-home country ethnic and/or cultural identity after returning from their experiences abroad. Because these events have shaped the student, it may be difficult for family and friends to understand these personal changes. Students may feel out of place because self-identities have changed and may no longer conform to the American mainstream norms.*

PART III: HOW CAN I DEAL WITH REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK?

- **Re-Entry is a process:** Understanding that the transition of reentry takes time and is normal may help ease some of the pressure to quickly readjust.
- **Expectations of home:** It may be necessary to reevaluate your expectations of coming home. Not everyone will be as interested in your experiences abroad. Don't take this personally though; it's not a reflection of you. It may be that your friends and family are not able to relate to you in this way.
- **Changing relationships:** Allow yourself the support of people who have experienced the reentry process. This will give you good support and ease the frustration of not being understood by family or friends from home. However, try to keep up the relationships you have come back into by taking interest in their lives while sharing a bit of your adventures too. The study abroad experience may have changed you and as a result, it may not be a surprise if new and different friends may compliment you better now.
- **Changing identities:** It's normal to want to keep your international experience alive when you return. All that you've learned of your host country's cues and culture has become your new social norms. You don't have to lose the international part of you though. What the reentry process allows you to do is to incorporate your new cultural self in the context of home. It doesn't mean you have to abandon all you've learned from your host country; it does mean finding the right balance though.
- **Belonging & purpose:** Going abroad may expand your view of the world, as well as expand the possibilities that are available to you. Explore your options and even allow yourself to incorporate bigger dreams and possible paths that may have once seemed impossible or even unconventional. Utilize the career center and Cal Poly clubs to expand on your new worldview.

- **Back to school and fighting boredom:** Many times after coming back from an adventurous and exciting study abroad experience, it can be hard to get back to business. Offset some of the workload your first quarter back with an elective or a fun class. This will help you ease back into the routine and intensity of things. Also consider taking day trips, go hiking, and explore new aspects of your city that you never new before.

PART IV: OTHER TIPS FOR RE-ENTRY

WHAT CAN I DO WHEN I GET HOME REGARDING...

Family and friends:

- Share your experiences of your host culture with family and friends by cooking a typical dish and having a get together.
- Share one or two brief yet significant international experiences with people who politely ask how your trip was.
- Share feelings of your experience abroad. Feelings rather than experiences sound less like bragging.
- Get your pictures developed quickly upon returning and put them in photo albums. This will ensure that you won't forget what you saw on your travels and it may help to include your family and friends in your experience abroad.
- Be interested in what is going on in your friends and family's world. Show interest in what has happened in their world while you were away.
- Get caught up with current events and changes on your campus, in the community and in the US that you may have missed while you were abroad.

Using my new skills and interests:

- Join clubs on your campus, such as international clubs (see Part VI: Resources for Cal Poly Clubs).
- Explore international career options and volunteer experiences abroad (see Part VI: Resources for opportunities abroad).
- Use your new experiences by volunteering with the study abroad office. Help out with study abroad events, and share your experiences and travel knowledge with prospective students interested in study abroad.
- Continue to travel internationally. Periodic local trips to explore your community may also help with the initial adjustment of reentry.

Maintaining my language skills:

- Find an internship, job or volunteer opportunity where you can utilize and continue improving your language skills.
- Become a language partner through Cal Poly's Language Exchange club. This club was started by a student who studied abroad and was interested in maintaining her language skills after returning home. Her idea was to create a student club that meets once a week at a coffee shop to practice speaking the language learned while abroad. If you are interested in this club, you may contact Courtney at cplanguage.exchange@gmail.com to be paired with an international student.
- Join a language club.
- Tutor students who are learning your host language.
- Watch movies, listen to music, and read books in the language of your host culture.
- Continue to take courses in the language of your host country. Maybe even consider getting a minor in the language.

Maintaining an interest in my host country and culture:

- Keep in touch with your host family and friends. Set up an email list with all your contacts once you return so you can periodically send emails to them.
- Read the local news of your host city and even the news of your host country online. This will keep you knowledgeable of international issues and will create topics of conversation with your host friends and family.
- Cook food from your host country periodically.
- Listen to music, watch movies and read books in the language of your host country.



PART V: WHAT OTHER STUDENTS WHO STUDIED ABROAD WISHED THEY KNEW BEFORE RETURNING HOME

“I think a lot of people think that when you return, the world you thought you had figured out isn't what you had thought. Studying abroad puts a lot of things in life into perspective and upon coming back, I started appreciating the things I took for granted...the use of a car, warm weather, a comfortable bed, and everything else we seem to take for granted in this world. I think the best advice I can give you is to enjoy how new the world seems to be when you come back and try to take note of the changes and then learn and appreciate them.”

D.K.

“The thing that surprised me the most was how long jet lag lasted. It took me a while to get my regular sleeping patterns back and I was really tired in the beginning.” R.Y.

“It was hard to transition from having no alone time, to being alone all the time. It was also hard to transition back into my normal routine with normal friends. It was especially hard going from being able to walk everywhere, with everyone outside all the time to a completely different way of socializing with people.” S.S.

“I wish I knew that it would be harder to come back home than it was to leave. Also you get so used to non-Americanized things that when you come home, you get so overwhelmed by them, such as watching TV, having fast food, and being able to understand every conversation you hear on the street. For example, I went to Costco when I got back and was so overwhelmed.” C.J.G.

“When you return from studying abroad, it is easy to talk forever and a day about the trip. Despite your excitement though, this can annoy people and sometimes make them feel left out. So my suggestion is to have some highlights you want to share about your trip on hand before talking about it. Also, it’s helpful to be aware that life went on without you while you’ve been gone, and friends have a lot to share too. Take some time to listen to them too.” C.G.

“One thing that caught me off guard when I came home was the amount of distain I had for my own American culture. It was as if being away allowed me to see how privileged we actually are as Americans. What I wish I knew before coming home was that re-entry almost changes you as much as studying abroad does. It’s not always easy to deal with the transition of reentry, but you learn a lot through it and it will eventually end...I promise.” A.K.

“I wish someone would have told me that I had changed much more than I thought was possible. Being abroad, you are not only exposed to new perspectives, values, and morals, but even the mundane details of every day life have changed. When I returned, it was difficult to see that while I had grown and changed significantly, most of my life at home had stayed the same. Family, friends, and lifestyle were all the same, they expected the same things from me, and expected me to fall back into my regular life. They liked to hear about my time abroad, but didn't seem to want an overabundance of information. It was a lonely feeling, especially when that was all I wanted to talk about. Eventually, I found ways to reconcile my two lives, though it is strange that a large part of my life seems to be 'off limits' if I want to have normal conversations and feel like I fit in. It was a challenge for me to keep what I learned and continue to move forward from that point.” E.C.

PART VI: OTHER RESROUCES

STUDY ABROAD WEBSITE: <http://iep.calpoly.edu>

Stay up to date on upcoming events, ways to get involved after returning home, and also volunteer opportunities.

CAL POLY CLUBS: Below are a few international clubs. For a complete list of Cal Poly Multicultural Clubs, please visit the website at <http://www.asi.calpoly.edu/uu/clubprograms/clubs/Clubindex.php?type=12>

- International Club: Kelley Paulick at kgpaulic@calpoly.edu
- Poly Cultural Committee: <http://www.calpoly.edu/~pccclub/event.htm> and/or contact Jonathan Reimers at jonathan.reimers@gmail.com

OPPORTUNITIES ABROAD

There are many opportunities to use your new skills and experience in working abroad.

Interning, working or volunteering abroad:

- www.peacecorps.gov
- www.workingabroad.org
- www.transitionsabroad.com
- www.workingoverseas.com
- www.internationalcenter.umich.edu/swt/work/
This site addresses questions about working abroad, financing it, what to look for and how to begin the process. There are also great links to working, interning and even teaching abroad.
- GoAbroad.com
This website outlines various ways in which to work abroad. The site is broken down into various components according to what you may be looking for. Below shows the breakdown:
 - InternAbroad.com
 - VolunteerAbroad.com
 - TeachAbroad.com
 - JobsAbroad.com
 - Language Schools

Teaching Abroad:

www.Worldteach.org
www.Teachabroad.com