

It's Time To Go Home

Context

You're sitting in "your" room. In any case, it's the room that you've come to know as your own. You have, after several months, adjusted to your host culture. You probably feel as if you have finally become a member of this new culture. You have made friends, gone to school, become a member of a family. Many people don't even believe that you are Canadian.

Remember how you felt when you first arrived in this new place? You knew that you would experience "culture shock," but you had no idea just how intense those feelings would be. For the first part of your year you had moments where you wanted nothing but to go home. But you stuck it out. You don't know when it happened, but one day you realized that you had made it. You woke up from a dream in another language. You were mistaken for a "native" in a restaurant. You forgot certain things about Canada. You changed.

Now it's almost time to go home. Once again, you are on a roller coaster of emotions. You are excited to see your Canadian family and friends again, but at the same time you are filled with feelings of anxiety and fear. You are starting to experience the initial phase of "re-entry shock."

What to Expect

Because no two people are exactly alike, it's hard to predict exactly what you will go through when you return home. It's important, however, to anticipate and to prepare yourself for the possibilities. If you feel that you have adjusted well to your host culture, if you feel that, in many ways, you have "become" French, or Belgian, or German, or Mexican, etc., you will most likely have a more challenging time coming home. It is ironic that the more "successful" you have been as an exchange student, the more difficult it will be for you to adjust to being Canadian again. Just as you survived and indeed excelled as an exchange student, so too will you re-adjust to being back home.

This isn't Home!

You have probably constructed all kinds of mental pictures about what coming home will be like. You know that you have changed. Be prepared for things at home to have changed as well. Your siblings have grown, your friends have moved on, your parents may have renovated the house. The home that you return to can never really measure up to the "home" that has existed in a dream-like quality in your head for all of these months.

A valuable aspect of living in another culture is that it provides you with another perspective of Canada. What you have learned about Canada while you have lived abroad may, in fact, be negative. You may find, especially for the first month or so back home, that nothing is as you remembered and nothing is as wonderful as it was in your host country. You may find that most Canadians are too consumer-oriented, too fast-paced, too overtly friendly, insincere, or too whatever. You may feel as if you just want to withdraw and day dream about your host country. Don't.

Know that, in time, you will readjust. Try not to constantly complain to your friends and family. Remind yourself how you felt the first month or so of your exchange. Reread your journal. It may help keep your perspective.

You're a Different Person

Be prepared. Your parents may not recognize you at the airport. You may have put on weight, changed your hairstyle. You have physically matured. You have adopted the fashions of your host culture. For the past few months, you probably didn't want to "look" like a Canadian. And now you don't. You may want to send a current photo of yourself to your family. That way how you look when you come home won't be a tremendous shock for them!

You have changed inside as well. You are not the same person you were before you left. You have experienced many things. You have learned so much about others and about yourself. Your insights have

been challenged and broadened. You will now see the world from another perspective, and you won't even realize how much your insights and values have changed until you come home. It is important that you understand that those back home have not experienced what you have. Your friends and family will not necessarily appreciate being told that they have silly habits, or that what they eat is disgusting, or that you disapprove of how they do or see things. You must remember to be diplomatic and not negative.

It is true that sometimes you will feel isolated and misunderstood. Your friends and family will tire of hearing about your year abroad. They will become exasperated every time you bring up your host country. They may tune you out. Try not to wallow in self-pity. Don't withdraw. Keep the lines of communication open with your family and friends. They can't understand what you're feeling if you don't tell them. Keep in touch with your friends and family in your host country. Try to make contacts with other exchange students. They will be valuable resources and provide support for you.

Readjusting Socially

When you first arrived in your host culture, you probably stood out. Everyone recognized you as Canadian. You dressed funny, your accent was strange, or you could hardly speak the language at all. Sometimes you may have felt like a freak. It took some time, but you were finally accepted by your peers in your host culture.

Friends back home have written to you or may even have visited. To some extent they have kept you informed about what's going on back home. There is no way that you could possibly know everything, and you will find that you are a bit behind on the social scene back home.

Styles will have changed, different music will be on the radio, slang expressions will be different, new people will be popular. Once again, you may find yourself feeling like an outsider. Some people will think that you're really cool, while others may make fun of you. In fact, you may find that you don't have a lot in common with the people who were your best friends before you left. Prepare yourself for this; readjusting to social life can be a difficult process for you. Realize that, in some ways, you can reinvent yourself. You have developed a different personality as a result of your year abroad. Embrace the new "you." You have gained valuable insight and maturity--others will surely come to appreciate this about you, especially if you appreciate it about yourself.

Is That English You're Speaking?

If you have been immersed in a language other than English, you may have difficulty expressing yourself appropriately, at least for the first few weeks back home. You will have forgotten words, expressions, slang. You may "go blank" when trying to communicate. It may be frustrating sometimes. Sometimes, though, it will be amusing to you and to your loved ones. Utilize the process of re-learning English as a way to re-establish relationships. This way, others will feel as if they are contributing to your successful readjustment. Don't be discouraged. Others will adjust to your new language mannerisms, and you will soon fall back into a Canadian. Remember, all of these adjustment processes require time and patience.

It's important to note that you have developed different non-verbal habits as well. How closely (or not) you stand to someone, the gestures that you use while speaking, how you move your eyes, whether-or-not you make eye contact and with whom, how frequently you touch others, all of these patterns of non-verbal communication may be different for you now. Canadians generally maintain a greater spatial distance when interacting than do Western Europeans and South Americans, for instance. Females in Japan do not maintain eye contact with males in the same ways as Canadian females do. You may find that your patterns of non-verbal communication send different "messages" back home. Be aware of this. You will soon re-adjust your movements to your surroundings.

What to Do

Expect the Unexpected

As soon as you realize that coming home will be different from what you had imagined, you will have made an important step. Most likely, by now, you are an expert on change. You have experienced many ups and downs and felt like you were on a roller coaster. You have adapted to many kinds of changes and you have succeeded. Realize that change is inevitable and can ultimately be beneficial to you and to your life. See change as a teacher, as yet another adventure for you to experience.

Your Health Matters

For the first two weeks back home, you will be exhausted, both physically and emotionally. It may be tempting for you to jump into a busy schedule of parties, get-togethers and reunions. Try to "take it slow" for a while to give yourself time to readjust. You may also feel depressed and anxious from time to time. These feelings are inevitable results of re-entry. They are also temporary.

In time you will feel more comfortable with and relaxed in your surroundings.

Be Open in Your Communication

Some of the frustrations that you will feel as a result of your re-entry can be remedied with thoughtful and open communication. You will occasionally feel out-of-place and misunderstood by your friends and family. Discussing how you feel in a loving way will better ensure that you receive the support you need. Being constantly critical and negative will only serve to further alienate you from your loved ones.

Create a Balance

You now have a dual identity, a bi-nationality. You are Canadian, but in very real ways, you are also French, German, Austrian, Mexican, etc. Realize how wonderful that is. You will never be "just" Canadian again.

You have been exposed to a whole new world of being and seeing.

YOUR NEW WORLD

Take a mental inventory of those things about being American that are important to you and combine them with those things that you value about your "new" cultural identity. Be proud of who you are. The experiences that you have had will make you a more well-rounded person and a more sensitive member of our global community. **Welcome home.**

So You Think You're Home Again

Some Thoughts for Exchange Students Returning "Home"

By Dennis White, Ph.D.

Initial Culture Shock

Remember what it was like those first few weeks and months going abroad? It was new, exciting, often confusing, and always changing. And while your whole year may have been exciting, it wasn't always pleasant. You probably became irritated with, and even hostile to, your host culture when the deeper differences between your culture and their culture became apparent. As you began to develop real language skills, and you better understood fundamentally different cultural values, you began the slow process of adapting. Eventually, maybe only at the end of your stay, you began to realize how you could really fit in – adapting fairly well to your adopted culture, while maintaining your own native cultural identity. You became bicultural. And then, just when it was getting good, the year was over and you had to go “home”.

Most people who live abroad for an extended time go through similar successive stages of culture shock. These stages are generally recognized as being:

1. Initial Excitement or Euphoria
2. Irritability and Hostility
3. Slow and Gradual Adaptation
4. Eventual Adjustment to Biculturalism

If your experience was anything like this, you learned that culture shock is not just adjusting to jet lag and different food. It is an on-going process of developing increased cultural competence, by being “shocked” by differences, adjusting to them, learning new skills and eventually adapting. And when you prepared for going abroad, you had some expectation that you would experience culture shock. It is not possible (or even desirable) to avoid culture shock, but at least anticipating it made it somewhat easier -and kept you from thinking it was all your fault, or all the new culture's fault.

Reverse Culture Shock

As you return home, you are likely to experience some very similar, but possibly surprising reactions that are part of what is known as reverse culture shock, or re-entry shock. In the first few weeks back, many people feel the effects of jet lag, general exhaustion from lots of changes, fatigue from an overdose of “welcome home” parties and trying to do and see everything and everyone at once. This flurry of activity can cause a significant degree of disorientation, making it difficult to tell exactly what thoughts and feelings you are having.

But mixed in with all of this are two distinct and often conflicting reactions. One is the same excitement stage as in initial culture shock. It may be very exciting to be back, to see family and friends, to tell about your adventures and to do things you have missed for a year. If this reaction occurs, it fairly quickly wears off, and is replaced by the second stage of culture shock - irritability and hostility. This stage often comes much more quickly than in initial culture shock, and can be much more severe and disturbing. It also may be the first reaction you have to coming home, with no excitement stage at all.

There are several reasons that you may not feel excitement at all, or for very long. Remember, when you went abroad initially:

1. You wanted to go.
2. You expected and looked forward to learning about different things.
3. You were warned to expect culture shock.
4. Though you may have been sad to leave family and friends, you knew it would not be forever – you knew you were coming back.

Now that you are returning at the end of your exchange year:

1. You may not want to come home.
2. You may expect things to be just like they were when you left (or at least that things will be very familiar)
3. You may not have been sufficiently warned about reverse culture shock (or you didn't think it would happen to you).
4. You may be very sad to leave friends and "family" in your host culture because you know there is a possibility that you may never see them again.

If reverse culture shock is so unpleasant, why not try to avoid it? Because it is impossible if your exchange year was successful. In fact, the extent to which you immersed yourself in your host culture, and truly adapted, is probably the best indicator of how much reverse culture shock you will experience. People who don't have much trouble re-adapting to their native culture probably didn't get very involved in their host culture. They didn't change much, so they don't have to readjust much.

The Extent of Change

If your exchange year was a success, you have changed in ways that you probably cannot describe, or completely understand yet. You have become a skilled world traveler. You are a skilled bicultural person. You can actually get along quite well, not just be a tourist, in another culture. You have learned to think of things differently by looking at the world from someone else's point of view long enough to really understand it. In a sense, you have become a citizen of the world, so it may be more than a little confusing to think of where "home" is.

Some of these things will probably happen to you. You will find yourself thinking or dreaming in your new language. You will try to explain something to someone back home and not be able to give a precise translation of what you are talking about. You will talk to your parents about one of your host parents, calling the host parent "mom" or "dad". You will think your hometown is very small, or that your friends think in "small" ways.

So don't be too surprised if your family and friends seem a bit uncomfortable with you. They probably are, because you aren't the same person who left them a year ago. Don't underestimate how much you have changed and how strange you may seem to those who knew you before. You may be very proud of your independence, self-confidence and internationalism. But they may see you as self-absorbed, critical of everything and not interested in fitting in.

Remember that those around you may have changed as well, if not in the same ways you have. If you are expecting things to be the same, you will have more of a shock than if you are looking for changes. Your friends have had a year of growing and maturing, and your family situation may have changed (deaths, divorces, moves, job changes). You missed some important events in their lives, just as they missed some important ones in yours. Even those things that haven't really changed may seem quite different, because you see them differently. Though you may love your native country more than ever, you are also much more likely to be critical of it, and question common cultural practices that you took for granted before you left.

Ways To Deal With Reverse Culture Shock

The single best thing you can do is to anticipate and accept that you will experience some degree of reverse culture shock. The worst thing you can do is to deny it, or try to avoid it. People often try to deny it because they think there might be something wrong with them if they admit it. It is, in fact, very normal, and you will have more problems than necessary if you try to deny it.

More than anticipating and accepting reverse culture shock, you can actually view it as a positive, if sometimes painful, growth experience. It is, and can be, the completion of the circle of change in an intercultural experience. I like to think of it as the third year of your exchange. The first was the year preparing to go abroad. The second was the actual exchange. The third is the year when you can more completely appreciate the changes you have made, the readjustment to your native culture, and the fact that you will be bicultural for the rest of your life. In subsequent years you will have times when you re-experience reverse culture shock, and when you feel like you just got home again; but it will never be as shocking an experience as that first year back.

You can also help yourself by talking about your feelings as often as you can. You may wear out lots of initially sympathetic ears doing this. You may notice that you seem to have an almost incessant need to talk about your experiences. Your friends, especially, may get impatient with you, so you may need to learn to be selective with whom you share your experiences. There is often a conflicting urge to keep it all to yourself, because you think people won't understand or don't care, or because you think that talking about it in the past tense confirms that it is over - and you

don't want to accept that. (Many students don't completely unpack for months, for the same reason - they don't want to admit that it is over.) Of course, that's the issue - it's over and it isn't. The experience is over, but not the memories and the impact on your life.

Sometimes it's best to find other recently returned students, or even people who have been back for years. You can tell how this feeling lingers when exchange students, Peace Corps Volunteers or missionaries start talking about their experiences, even if many years ago. They get excited, they can't stop talking, and they get a glassy, far-off look on their faces. And don't underestimate your parents as listeners. Sometimes they are the only ones who will politely listen as you tell a story for the hundredth time. But however you do it, talk. It is in this way that you can help others understand you, and more importantly, learn to clarify your thoughts and feelings and better understand yourself.

You can also make things easier for yourself by trying not to make too many big decisions, unless you absolutely have to. Don't be impatient with yourself if you have trouble making decisions. Your goals in life may have changed. Because you have a new perspective, some of the plans you made a year or more ago may not seem as relevant now. Remind yourself, your family and friends that you are going through a period of adjustment; and it may take time for you to sort things out.

Finally, don't be too concerned if the course of your reverse culture shock doesn't seem to follow the pattern described here. Each of your experiences abroad was unique, and so will be your re-entry. While your year abroad was probably of great value to you, you may not have had the same emotional attachment to people that other students describe. So you may not have as much trouble letting go of those attachments and getting on in life with new and renewed friends. Going on to college or university is also quite different than returning to high school, and some of the issues are different for these two situations.

Feeling "At Home"

Reverse culture shock subsides, though it never disappears. Eventually you will come to terms with yourself and your "new" native culture, incorporating the fact that you are now a member of another culture as well. You can learn to be at peace with true biculturalism. This is the ability to move from cultural practice to cultural practice, with skill, as the situation calls for it. And while you may somewhat sadly come to accept that you can never truly come "home" again you can learn to feel "at home" in the world at large.