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Managing Reverse Culture Shock: Section Overview

<http://www.state.gov/m/fsi/tc/c56076.htm> (Retrieved 8/9/2016)

So now that you know about the effects of reverse culture shock, what can you do about it? This section provides you with specific information and resources to help you effectively prepare for and deal with many of the psychological and cultural challenges of coming home, from getting "closure" on your foreign experience, to developing stress management skills. While this information will not eliminate the stress of reentry, using it can help to reduce the severity and duration of reentry stress.

Pre-Departure Preparation

Effectively dealing with reverse culture shock begins long before you ever land in the United States. If you're reading this, you've probably already taken the first step toward lessening the effects of reverse culture shock—you're educating yourself and expecting disruption in your routines and level of comfort in a new place. The most important thing you can do to deal with reverse culture shock is to expect that it will happen to you. [Read more about pre-departure preparation.](#)

Getting Closure

An essential part of entering your new culture is getting closure on your foreign experience. If you don't feel like you've said "goodbye" to the foreign culture, then you might have a harder

time accepting your new home. Do everything that you can to make sure that you have no regrets when you return home. This includes things like:

- Visit all the places and sites on your list of "must see" before departing (plan these trips in advance, if possible, to assure you have time);
- Take pictures and videos;
- Say goodbye to friends;
- Buy host-country souvenirs and keepsakes;
- Host a "going away" party to see everyone before you leave; and
- Remember, it's better to plan something small and actually accomplish it than to think about something grand and never get around to it.

This is also a good time to create or update your contacts/friends list (save those phone and email contacts!). You might want to make sure your friends also have your new contact information. For people you wan



Repatriation can be more stressful than the outward trip

I am a long term expat with two international moves under my belt. Three if you count the move from England to Wales. Both my children are "[Third Culture Kids](#)" (TCK) having been born outside their passport country. So I know first hand that a successful international experience can be an enriching one, personally and professionally, for both the expat and his/her family.

Increasingly there is a great deal of corporate support during the outward process to guarantee a seamless transition into an expat assignment. But I know from any number of stories heard socially and professionally, that repatriation is quite often not supported as seriously as the outbound transfer and even neglected totally by many companies. This is both financially and also in terms of transition supervision.

Why?

In theory, the expat is going back to a situation with which he/she is familiar and it is often incorrectly assumed that this process will be problem free.

[But re-entry to a country of origin can actually be more stressful than the outward transition.](#)

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Stressors tend to intensify in relation to the length of the international assignment. Long term expats with multiple moves under their belt, with portable careers and skill sets, report additional difficulties.

8 causes of re-entry shock

[Expats talk of “re-entry shock” and feelings of reverse homesickness are very common.](#)

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Re-assimilation can take anything from six months to five years depending on the length of the overseas assignment and the degree of local integration experienced in their expat lives.

If you need support with repatriation or an expat transfer check out the [individual coaching programmes](#)

The are 8 expectations to manage:

1. **The home environment will be the same** – the expat has usually lived a life changing experience. There is a tendency to assume that practices in the workplace of origin will be unchanged and professional relationships can be picked up where they left off. This is almost always not the case. These too will have evolved, particularly any nuances in the balance of power and influence which may have developed and changed during the period away from base. It is very common for the expat to feel excluded or passed by, especially if the re-entry is to a central headquarters. Many expats make a decision to return to HQ for career development reasons because they perceive being away from headquarters [reduces their visibility](#) quite literally. When they get back they are considered to be out of touch.
2. **New skills will be appreciated and maximised:** Feelings of frustration are commonplace if accompanied by few or no opportunities to maximize any new skills or experience. If the expat experience does not seem to be valued, disappointment will be intensified. Unmet expectations can even lead to depression and the employee leaving the company.
3. **Family and friends will be interested** – the expat has usually had an exciting time, using professional opportunities to enhance their personal experiences via travel and other

activities. Returning expats report that old friends show very little interest in their overseas lives to the point where they cease to talk about it. In some instances it is perceived as bragging.

4. **The returnee will feel at home** – many cultural changes will have taken place in the culture of origin during the international assignment which the expat will not have been part. The expat can feel like a “foreigner” in his or her own country and customs and practices that were once completely normal to them now seem alien. The expat location was their home.
5. **Career Transition Coaching is not needed** – to support this stage of career development is invaluable to engage all stakeholders to achieve successful re-integration and to maximize the return on what has been a significant corporate investment. The reality is that repatriation process should be positioned as part of an ongoing longer term career strategy to maintain motivation. Ideally it should start well in advance of the return to home base. Many companies do not do that to their detriment and are surprised to see transition issues with the employee on his/her return. They are even more surprised to see the employee leave with a 19% turnover reported. This is a poor ROI on talent management investment.
6. **Family and Partners will be fine** – this is part of the thinking process that needs to be re-examined by many companies as the professional and personal continuum is blurred during the return to the country of origin. The expat not only has to manage his/her professional re-entry, but will be impacted by negative experiences to which the family is exposed. So if the trailing spouse and any children are struggling, especially those born outside their passport countries (TCK), then the expat will be under even greater pressure professionally.
7. **Loss of expat perks** – depending on the seniority of the assignment expats miss very often the financial perks of an international mission which could include company car, petrol allowance, school fees, flights home etc. On the return these benefits tend to cease. In some regions (APAC, Eastern Europe) domestic support is provided and/or is very affordable.
8. **Expats will not miss their friends and overseas lives** – international communities tend to be very open and welcoming, as well as offering a variety of cultural experiences, shopping, travel and food items and so on. Adjustments will need to be made contributing to the feeling of homesickness.

So, for many the challenges of “coming home” can be just as significant as the transition of “going overseas.”

t to maintain more frequent contact with, invite them to join you on Facebook or LinkedIn. It might also be a good idea to make a list of closure-related activities, with deadlines, to finish before you and your family return home.

Mental & Psychological Preparation

You know that you're going home, and you know you're going to experience reverse culture shock to some degree, but it may be hard to visualize how these stresses will occur. Before you return, it's a good idea to sit down and think through some of the potential problems you may face -- and how you should deal with them.

For example, ask yourself:

What are my expectations of home and what changes may have occurred?

Consider these questions to help you prepare for differences that may be present upon your return as well as to realistically manage your expectations about what life might be like.

- How does home look?
- How do I expect to feel?
- What will I find frustrating?
- What do I want to accomplish after I return home?
- How are others likely to feel about me?
- What will be different at home?
- How will my role be different?



What new things might I have to get used to?

The following are some considerations of general popular culture shifts of which you may have been unaware while abroad:

- New vocabulary
- New technology and how people use it (texting, video chat, etc.)
- New foods
- Trends in fashion
- U.S. television programming
- New style automobiles

What coping strategies will I use to deal with challenges and stress? (More about this [below](#).)

- What stress-relieving methods will I use? (Exercise / Health / Diet / Organization)
- Who will I communicate with (at home?/ friends still living abroad?)
- How will I organize my time?
- What are some cues I can transfer/modify from this culture to my new home?

What activities and groups can I get involved with at home?

Many organizations can be grounding and familiar, and may provide continuity in the face of change, especially if you have been involved with similar organizations in the past.

Alternatively, new activities may provide fun and exciting outlets to help you cope with the stress of transition, and making a change is the perfect time to jump in and try something new.

- School activities with your children
- Study a new subject
- Clubs
- Professional organizations
- International and intercultural groups
- Religious and spiritual groups
- Community service projects
- New sporting activities

Coping Strategies

After you've been home a short while, the effects of culture shock will start to become more apparent. Some of the challenges you simply have to endure. There are, however, several coping strategies that you can use to help minimize the stress and ease into reverse culture shock. It is important to think of these coping strategies as coping strategies and not as escape routes. After all, you will have to adjust to the home culture sooner or later. Use these methods to help reduce the stress of the transition and not to hide from your need to adjust. These include communication outlets, stress management, and modifying and transferring cues.

Communication Outlets



Communicate with others who have been overseas and experienced reverse culture shock. They will likely appreciate your experiences and provide a sounding board for your frustrations. They can also lend support and advice on coping with the challenges. Numerous organizations also exist for the very purpose of providing fellowship for former expatriates.

Keep in contact with the friends you have made while serving overseas. As you get used to the new communication patterns of "home," you can maintain communication with your friends overseas. They may enjoy hearing about your new life and experiences, and this can compensate for any "lack" of communication you might be experiencing at home. You can also meet people from the host country who are now in the United States. This may be a good way of keeping in touch with the culture, and keeping up on the language.

Stress Management

Known stress reducers are useful in the stressful situation of reentry as well as many other stressful events. Maintaining your health through diet and exercise will help you to have the energy to accomplish all of the tasks of reentry. Regular planning and organization will also help you to establish familiar routines, adding stability and predictability to your life, thus reducing stress. When you set goals and accomplish them, you will feel better about yourself and your situation.

Also pay conscious attention to your stress level. Take time to relax and retreat from especially stressful circumstances. Don't overwork. And remember that you are experiencing reverse culture shock: it will pass as you adjust.

Transferring and Modifying Cues

Cues are any of the little things that we are familiar and comfortable with in a culture (see the earlier section [Culture Shock: A Refresher Course](#)). One way of adding psychological stability to our reentry experience is to transfer cues from the foreign culture into your new home culture, or to modify existing cues to represent your favorite cues of the host culture. These cues include things that you became familiar with and that will remind you of your foreign home. For instance, consider cataloging some of your favorite recipes, and/or purchasing CDs of your favorite music (and adding your favorite tunes to your portable device). Other cues might include art or literature of the host country, and photographs or videos of people and places. Perhaps an item of the local traditional dress is something that you would like to wear when you return to the states. Think of ideas of what cues you can transfer or modify from the culture you're now leaving to keep with you in your "home."

Transferring and modifying cues is a strategy you can use to help you "ease in" to your new home culture. As you get used to the new cues, the transferred or modified cues can fill in the void of familiarity and routine created by your transition. Remember, however, that you will

have to adapt to the United States, so don't use these transferred cues as an escape from adapting.

Special Considerations: Spouses/Partners and Kids

The preparation and coping methods already discussed should be applied to each family member's situation. Remember that reentry can be even more difficult for spouses and kids than for employees, so make resources available to all. Everyone will benefit if the entire family works together in preparing for and coping with reverse culture shock.



Spouses/Partners

As mentioned previously, the best thing spouses can do is to expect reverse culture shock and to support each other in this difficult transition. Each partner should consider how the transition may affect the other. Especially for the partner who has spent more time in the local culture or who will be responsible for managing most of the logistical tasks, reverse culture shock can be tremendously challenging. Be sensitive and supportive during this time. Getting through the challenges together as a team will likely strengthen the relationship.

Young Children

As with adults, recognizing change and preparing for change is important to help children understand a move. Parents can help smaller children to gain closure on their experience by visiting favorite places and friends or having a going-away party. Children can also mentally prepare for the transition by making their own reentry checklists. Once in the new culture, parents can make the new home as "familiar" as possible, and allow children freedom to make home their "own" (allowing them to arrange their own bedroom, for example). Children can also transfer cues from the host culture, including photos, toys and favorite foods to their new home.

As parents, the most important thing you can do is to love your children and make sure they know you love them. As expatriate families quickly learn, family members are the single most important source of support, strength, identity and security. Be an important part of your child's life and give them the attention and support that they need. In short, be parents - don't rely on "the system" to do your job. Utilize the services of organizations and support groups to help you in bringing up your unique family. The [Family Liaison Office's](#) article "[Moving Forward When Bouncing Back](#)" in the *Foreign Service Journal* offers tips to ease a child's transition. They include:

- preparing for the move by doing research on homes, neighborhoods and educational opportunities as a family;

- anticipate that before, during and after the move your children may seem hesitant or frustrated;
- talk to other foreign service parents;
- help your kids manage their expectations about life in the U.S. by setting realistic expectations about friendships, home and school;
- read up on how to support your family during the transition (read FLO's [Bouncing Back](#)); and finally,
- encourage your children to get involved in some activities they might have missed overseas.

Teens

Teenagers should use the same preparation and coping strategies as described earlier. In addition, parents can help their teenage children deal with culture shock by being sensitive both to their need to fit in, and to the regular stresses of teenage life. Parents should help their teenage children to get involved in the new home environment, encouraging and facilitating in extra-curricular activities, sports, and youth organizations. The most difficult problem many returnees face is establishing themselves in their new home. Therefore, any steps you can take to make them feel more comfortable are vital to the transition. Most importantly, instill in your teenagers a good sense of self-worth. If children know that they have intrinsic value as people, struggles with "fitting in" will not be as challenging.

Teens can also follow some guidelines to make a good adjustment to their new home.

1. Try to keep up on popular U.S. culture
2. Keep in touch with friends abroad and at home (through Facebook, email, phone calls, and other methods)
3. Learn how to drive, and get your driver's license
4. Be "low-key" about your overseas experience (others probably won't understand or appreciate it like you do)
5. Don't judge other teens too harshly - it's important to make new friends
6. Don't be too hard on your parents (they're also going through reentry stress)
7. Get involved with others in your new environment (activities, sports, etc.)
8. Know that this stress will pass

9. Join the [Foreign Service Youth Foundation](#) and take advantage of their teen reentry programs, as well as other offerings.

In addition to these suggestions, there are many resources, organizations and publications available for youth and parents in the foreign affairs community, as described in the [Resources for Managing Logistical Tasks](#) and [Learn More](#) sections.

