

Reverse Culture Shock

One of the biggest challenges for students who participate in study abroad can be the difficulty in re-adapting to the realities in the United States (otherwise known as "re-entry"). Many students who studied abroad went through many changes, re-examining their priorities, their values, and what they think of themselves and the United States. The "reverse culture shock" may be more difficult than the "culture shock" you felt while abroad. If return culture shock is severe, it is important that students are able to seek help/counseling to help them through this.

Just as culture shock can differ greatly from person to person, reverse culture shock is just as personal of an experience. Upon return to the United States, you may find many things are different from how you left them. You may be more critical of the United States, while you now view your host country in a more favorable light. From language adjustments to depression to a simple trip to the supermarket, reverse culture shock can hit you in more ways than you would expect.



Defining Reverse Culture Shock

So what is reverse culture shock? First, let's examine the process of re-entry. There are usually two elements that characterize a study abroad student's re-entry:

1. An idealized view of home
2. The expectation of total familiarity (that nothing at home has changed while you have been away)

Often students expect to be able to pick up exactly where they left off. A problem arises when reality doesn't meet these expectations. Home may fall short of what you had envisioned, and things may have changed at home: your friends and family have their own lives, and things have happened since you've been gone. This is part of why home may feel so foreign.

Feelings You May Experience

The inconsistency between expectations and reality, plus the lack of interest on the part of family and friends (nobody seems to really care about all of your "when I was abroad" stories) may result in: frustration, feelings of alienation, and mutual misunderstandings between study abroad students and their friends and family. Of course, the difficulty of readjustment will vary for different individuals, but, in general, the better integrated you have become to your host country's culture and lifestyle, the harder it is to readjust during re-entry. This is where reverse culture shock (sometimes called re-entry shock) comes in to play.

Stages of Reverse Culture Shock

Reverse culture shock is usually described in four stages:

1. Disengagement
2. Initial euphoria
3. Irritability and hostility
4. Readjustment and adaptation

Stage 1 begins before you leave your host country. You begin thinking about re-entry and making your preparations for your return home. You also begin to realize that it's time to say good-bye to your friends abroad and to the place you've come to call home. The hustle and bustle of finals, good-bye parties, and packing can intensify your feelings of sadness and frustration. You already miss the friends you've made, and you are reluctant to leave. Or, you may make your last few days fly by so fast that you don't have time to reflect on your emotions and experiences.

Stage 2 usually begins shortly before departure, and it is characterized by feelings of excitement and anticipation - even euphoria - about returning home. This is very similar to the initial feelings of fascination and excitement you may have when you first entered your host country. You may be very happy to see your family and friends again, and they are also happy to see you. The length of this stage varies, and often ends with the realization that most people are not as interested in your experiences abroad as you had hoped. They will politely listen to your stories for a while, but you may find that soon they are ready to move on to the next topic of conversation.



This is often one of the transitions to **Stage 3**. You may experience feelings of frustration, anger, alienation, loneliness, disorientation, and helplessness and not understand exactly why. You might quickly become irritated or critical of others and of U.S. culture. Depression, feeling like a stranger at home, and the longing to go back abroad are also not uncommon reactions. You may also feel less independent than you were while abroad.

Most people are then able to move onto **Stage 4**, which is a gradual readjustment to life at home. Things will start to seem a little more normal again, and you will probably fall back into some old routines, but things won't be exactly the same as how you left them. You have most likely developed new attitudes, beliefs, habits, as well as personal and professional goals, and you will see things differently now. The important thing is to try to incorporate the positive aspects of your international experience while abroad with the positive aspects of your life at home in the United States.

Want to talk about it?

One important way to cope with the transition is talk about it! Seek out friends who may have shared similar experiences or make an appointment to talk with a counselor. Learn more about the services offered by the American University Counseling Center by accessing our website at www.american.edu/counseling or contact us today to schedule a **free and confidential** conversation with one of our therapists at (202) 885-3500. We are located in Mary Graydon Center, Suite 214.