Why Coming Home Can Be So Difficult . . .

The reality is that returning home after a significant overseas experience is not without its stresses. There are many reasons why this is so, but the major contributing factors seem to be:

**It Is Largely Unexpected**

Few people prepare for the return because they expect it to be easy and are surprised when it is not.

**The Reality of Home Differs from Reality**

When you are abroad, images of home life can become idealized or romanticized. It is easy to forget or minimize the problems or issues that once were sources of stress in your everyday life. Re-encountering them can be disconcerting.

**Change Has Occurred to Everyone**

However major or subtle, things are different. You, the people around you, and your culture have changed. Sometimes this is obvious and immediately observable, sometimes it is "hidden" and only comes out under certain circumstances—which are usually unpredictable and therefore unsettling.

**People May React to Returnees in Ways They Consider Inappropriate**

People generally expect you to be the same person you were when you left and usually attempt to treat you that way. They often have little patience for a returnee who seems to be significantly "different" or who exhibits behaviors or attitudes that, to them, seem odd or uncharacteristic of that person.

**Reverse Culture Shock Is Neither Recognized nor Understood at Home**

Few people in the home culture are likely to be familiar with the concept of reverse culture shock. Therefore, people often respond to a returnee having difficulty readjusting by bluntly suggesting they "get over it" as though it were a conscious act on their part or that they could control their emotions if they wanted to. Unlike undergoing culture shock while abroad where program directors and fellow students are likely to be at least sympathetic, upon reentry the pressure to conform quickly and substantially can be intense and tolerance can be in short supply.

Thus, although there are always lots of reasons for looking forward to going home, reentry into your home culture can seem both as challenging and as frustrating as living overseas. Contrary to the expectation that going "home" is a simple matter of resuming your earlier routines and reestablishing prior relationships, reentry has its own set of special social and psychological adjustments.

Just as initial Culture Shock has definable stages (see Section 1.7.1) and a relatively predictable progression, so does Reverse Culture Shock. The "Honeymoon" phase of initial euphoria or at least relief at being home is often present for some period, followed by some degree of irritation and alienation, with an eventual readjustment.
As the graph shows, the "U-shaped" adjustment curve that roughly illustrates the adjustment to being overseas and culture shock can be modified to a "W," showing the transition process through reentry. While the phases may be quite similar, the timing and duration of them is not. For example, the honeymoon phase overseas might last a matter of days or weeks (even months), but at home the elation of return can dissolve rather quickly. Returnees can find themselves slipping into deepening hostility or withdrawal in very short time.

While the onset of culture shock abroad usually takes many weeks or even months, reverse culture shock can take hold within hours of arriving home and be more persistent. Some students report that it took them up to a year or more to gain the necessary perspective on their experience to allow them to feel completely at home and fully functioning. Someone once remarked that, "Culture Shock abroad was a short term thing, reentering home seemed to take forever." Another returnee with a semi-macabre sense of humor described reverse culture shock as "The gift that keeps on giving!"

The important wisdom imbedded in these aphorisms is that not only is reverse culture shock a surprising consequence of return from study abroad, but that its effects might linger considerably longer than one might expect. For most students a reasonable readjustment home takes about the same amount of time that working through culture shock did while abroad, a few weeks to several months, but for some the process is uncomfortably prolonged.

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