

THE TOP TEN IMMEDIATE REENTRY CHALLENGES

There are lots of reasons to look forward to returning home, but there are also a number of psychological, social, and cultural aspects which can prove difficult, often because they are unanticipated. Interviewing students like you, who have been through the experience and survived nicely, generated the following list. However, they say you should take the process seriously by being realistic and thinking about it and your possible reactions. They offer the following thoughts on reentry for your consideration in the hope they will make your return both more enjoyable and productive.

1. Boredom

After all the newness and stimulation of your time abroad, a return to family, friends, and old routines (however nice and comforting) can seem very dull. It is natural to miss the excitement and challenges that characterize study in a foreign country, but it is up to you to find ways to overcome such negative reactions. Remember a bored person is also boring.

2. No One Wants to Hear

One thing you can count on upon your return: no one will be as interested in hearing about your adventures and triumphs as you will be in sharing those experiences. This is not a rejection of you or your experience, but simply the fact that once they have heard the highlights, any further interest on your audiences' part is probably unlikely. Be realistic in your expectations of how fascinating your journey is going to be for everyone else. Be brief. Find people who DO want to hear, like the study abroad advisor, other study abroad returnees, students considering study abroad in the future or possibly international students on campus.

3. You Can't Explain

Even when given a chance to explain all the sights you saw and feelings you had while studying abroad, it is likely to be difficult to relay these to others. No matter how sympathetic your listener, to convey this kind of experience to others, there must be a similar frame of reference or travel background. It is advised to find one or two key experiences that can be told easily and descriptively which convey the essence of your experience. Sometimes a humorous or touching story can give the impression you want in a short time. You can tell people about your trip, but you may fail to make them understand exactly how or why you felt a particular way. It's okay.

4. Reverse Homesickness

Just as you probably missed home for a time after leaving the United States, it is just as natural to experience some reverse homesickness for the people, places and things that you grew accustomed to as a study abroad student. To an extent writing letters, telephoning, and generally keeping in contact with people from your study abroad country or program can reduce it. Feelings of loss are an integral part of an international sojourn and must be anticipated and accepted as a natural result of study abroad.

5. Relationships Have Changed

It is inevitable that when you return you will notice that some relationships with friends and family will have changed. You have altered some of your ideas and attitudes while abroad. The people at home may have experienced some changes too. Changes may be positive or negative, but expecting that no change will have occurred is unrealistic. The best preparation is flexibility, openness, minimal preconceptions and tempered optimism.

6. People See the “Wrong” Changes

Sometimes people may concentrate on small alterations in your behavior or ideas and seem threatened or upset by them. Others may ascribe any traits to the influence of your time abroad. Jealousy, fear, or

feelings of superiority or inferiority may motivate these incidents. To avoid or minimize them it is necessary to monitor yourself and be aware of the reactions of those around you, especially in the first few weeks following your return. This phase normally passes quickly if you do nothing to confirm their stereotypes.

7. People Misunderstand

If you adapted and integrated well into your host culture, you may find communication difficult upon your return. A few people will misinterpret your words or actions. For example, what you may have come to think of as humor (particularly sarcasm, banter, etc.) and ways to show affection or establish conversation may not be interpreted as such. Others may see you as showing off or aggressive. New clothing or hairstyles may be seen as inappropriate or provocative. References to the country in which you resided or use of foreign words or phrases may be interpreted as boasting. Be aware of how you may look to others and how your behavior is likely to be interpreted.

8. Feeling of Alienation / Critical Eyes

Sometimes the reality of being back home is not as natural or enjoyable as what you had constructed mentally. When daily life is less enjoyable or more demanding than you remembered, it is natural to feel some alienation, see faults in society you never noticed before or even become quite critical of everyone and everything. This is most likely no different than when you first arrived in your new country and found it strange or lacking. Mental comparisons are fine, but it might be best to keep them to yourself until you regain your cultural balance and a balanced perspective.

9. Inability to Apply New Knowledge and Skills

Many returnees are frustrated by the lack of opportunity to apply newly gained social, linguistic, and practical coping skills that appear to be unnecessary or irrelevant. To avoid ongoing annoyance: adjust to reality as necessary, change what is possible, be creative, be patient, and above all use all the cross-cultural adjustment skills you acquired abroad to assist your own reentry.

10. Loss

Being home, coupled with the pressures of school, family and friends often combine to make returnees worried that somehow they will lose the experience of being abroad. They fear it will become compartmentalized like souvenirs or photo albums kept in a box and only occasionally taken out and looked at. You do not have to let that happen. Keep something acquired while abroad as part of your daily life or start a new tradition for a special holiday. Maintain your contacts. Talk to people who have experiences similar to yours and encourage others to go abroad. Practice your skills. Remember and honor both your hard work and the fun you had while abroad.

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