

## What Kinds of Challenges Will I Face With Reverse Culture Shock?

There are plenty of reasons to look forward to going home, but there are also a number of psychological, social and cultural challenges involved in re-adjusting. These can be especially tough because they are often unexpected. Some students who, like you, faced these challenges and survived them well, made a list of symptoms of reverse culture shock.

### 1. **Boredom**

After all the newness and stimulation of your time abroad, returning to family, friends and old routines (however nice and comforting) can seem very dull. It's natural to miss the excitement and challenges that characterize study in a foreign country, but it's also up to you to find ways to overcome such negative reactions. Try to incorporate your new perspective into your old home — find cultural outlets that you hadn't tried out before, learn a new hobby or take a day to be a tourist in your own town.

### 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 them. This is not a rejection of you or your achievements, but simply a reflection of the fact that once your friends or family have heard the highlights, they'll feel like they've heard everything. Be brief in recounting your tales of adventure — it usually was, in fact, more interesting for someone who was there. Often, you may find that others who have been abroad are more able to relate to the type of experiences you've had, so they may be more excited (or at least willing!) to listen to your stories.

### 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 will be bit frustrating to relay them coherently. It is very difficult to convey this kind of experience to people who do not have similar frames of reference or travel backgrounds, no matter how sympathetic they are as listeners. Your stories from foreign countries and different cultures can leave your friends or family without a frame of reference, which makes the story pretty abstract and therefore not as interesting as it was for you. Try including in your stories an element of life they would be familiar with, such as food, school, shopping, etc.

### 4. **"Reverse homesickness"**

Just as you probably missed home for a time after leaving the United States, you likely will experience some "reverse" homesickness for the people, places and things you grew accustomed to as a student abroad. To an extent, you can reduce this by writing letters, telephoning and generally keeping in contact with people you met. But feelings of loss are an integral part of international sojourns 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 have changed. Just as you have altered some of your ideas and attitudes while abroad, the people at home are likely to have experienced some changes. These 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 “bad” traits to the influence of your time abroad. These incidents may be motivated by jealousy, fear or feelings of superiority or inferiority. To avoid or minimize them, try to monitor yourself and be aware of the reactions of those around you, especially in the first few weeks after your return. This phase normally passes quickly if you do nothing to confirm their stereotypes.

**7. People misunderstand**

A few people will misinterpret your words or actions in such a way that communication is difficult. 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 seen as wit but aggression or showing off. Be aware of how you may look to others and how your behavior is likely to be interpreted. Also remember that continual references to your time abroad may come across to others as arrogant or even rejection of your home culture.

**8. Feelings of alienation/critical eyes**

Sometimes the reality of being back “home” is not as natural or enjoyable as the place you had constructed in your head. When real daily life is less enjoyable or more demanding than you remembered, it is natural to feel some alienation, see faults in the society you never noticed before, or even become critical of everyone and everything for a time. This is no different than when you first left home. Mental comparisons are fine, but keep them to yourself until you regain your more balanced cultural 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. Ways to avoid ongoing annoyance include adjusting to reality as necessary, changing what is possible, being creative, being patient and, above all, using the cross-cultural adjustment skills you acquired abroad to assist your own re-entry. Rest assured: The cross-cultural understanding you gained is an enormously valuable tool in our society, and opportunities for you to put it to use will certainly arise.

**10. Loss/compartmentalization of experience**

Being home coupled with the pressures of job, family and friends often make returnees worried that somehow they will “lose” the experience, becoming 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. Maintain your contacts. Talk to people who have experiences similar to yours. Practice your skills. Remember and honor your hard work and the fun you had while abroad.

*~ Adapted from list compiled by Dr. Bruce LaBrack. School of International Studies, University of the Pacific for use by LASPAU for the CAMPUS program. Aspire Newsletter, Spring 1994*