

“Surviving Re-entry: A Readjustment Manual for Parents.”

Handbook by Leonore Cavallero, SIT Study Abroad, 2002

The following excerpts are from *“Surviving Re-Entry: A Readjustment Manual for Parents.”* *“Surviving Re-entry: A Readjustment Manual for Parents”* is a useful resource for parents of students who are studying or returning home from study abroad. The goal of the handbook is to look at why return culture shock occurs, consider some of the common concerns expressed by students going through re-entry, and discuss what parents can do to assist their student during the re-entry process. Readjustment can present challenges for parents, families, and friends who may not understand why the returning abroad student is having problems transitioning back to life in their home country.

Why does return culture shock occur?

The process of readjustment is different for each person. Some students spend weeks or months feeling alienated from their home environment while other students seem to readjust to being home with little or no difficulty. These individuals may experience a delayed return culture shock that can catch them unaware months later.

Culture is a learned process. To genuinely feel part of the new culture, students participate in its practices and customs. When students return home from study abroad, their learned responses to social situations and different ways of perceiving their environment comes right along with them. Although these newly acquired customs and behaviors are not necessarily commonplace or relevant back home, it is virtually impossible for them to be dropped overnight. Many students are also not sure they want to forget the behaviors and customs they have acquired while studying abroad. They do not want to return to being exactly who they were before they left.

Is there a way to tell how long the process of adapting to return culture shock is going to take?

Probably not because each student goes through different cycles during the readjustment process. The first few days of being home can be euphoric. During subsequent weeks, when the shock of re-entry hits, the student might feel depressed or unsure of him/herself and uncertain about previously made plans. Students also may feel that no one around them can relate to what is happening to them. It may take weeks to integrate the personal changes gained through their experience into the reality they left behind. While they are struggling with this process, it is not uncommon for some students to try to find a way to go back abroad.

What are some of the main difficulties faced by student returning home?

Pace of life

While abroad, students may encounter the perception that Americans allow their lives to be “ruled by the clock”, ignoring circumstances beyond one’s control. Upon their return home, some student may express new points of view related to “watching the clock” and prioritizing people and situations over schedules and deadlines.

Consumerism

Coming home from abroad, it is not unusual for students to feel a sense of confusion, guilt, or ambiguity when contrasting their standard of living with the conditions of their host communities.

Personal Communication

Most returning students are full of stories to share, yet also feel apprehensive that they will not be able to adequately communicate their feelings. The frustration in communicating their experience, even with the use of email and cell

phones, frequently leaves students with a sense of alienation both within their own family and among their broader group of friends. This in turn, can lead to withdrawal and depression. Often it is easier for returning students to relate to new friends who are also returning home from study abroad programs and may be experiencing the same difficulties readjusting.

Worldview

Many students feel their worldview has expanded as a result of studying abroad. Students often claim a deeper awareness of critical global issues and they speak of the significance of having firsthand experience in another cultural context. Students often return home newly inspired to become more involved in global issues and in pursuing development or social justice work.

What can you do as a parent if the readjustment is unexpectedly difficult?

Patience

Readjustment is a very individual process, and no one pattern holds true for everyone. During the first few days home, a light schedule may be preferable to one that is too hectic. Although your student is home again physically present, emotionally and psychologically they may not have arrived completely home. They may need to reacquaint themselves with their home environment as they readjust.

Patience and dialog can provide a deeper understanding of what changes your student has experienced. Students appreciate the effort their parents make in trying to comprehend how their worldview may have changed and broadened. This attention allows them to feel that the results of their study abroad experience are both valued and respected.

Listen

Willingness for their parents to listen is one of the requests most often heard from students going through the readjustment process. Some returning students want to talk continuously about their experience, while others need time before they can share their stories. Some students find it difficult to put their experience into words. In these cases, parents might give their student an empty photo album or a scrapbook. This can serve as an excellent tool to spark communication, while allowing the student to create a visual display of the semester. For some students it is easier to talk about their experiences weeks or months following their return. Waiting to share can be an easier way for students to open up about their study abroad experience rather than immediately sitting down and answering questions from curious family members.

If parents have had occasion to travel and also experienced return culture shock after living or working overseas, they can share their own stories with their student. Sharing can help create a mutual bond of experience, and serve to reassure the student that reverse culture shock is temporary and will indeed pass.

Support

Students may express concern about losing the knowledge and competencies acquired abroad, including new language skills, increased cultural awareness, and broadened global understanding. Parents can support students in finding ways to keep their experience real and vital in their lives.

Specific suggestions include:

- Identify neighborhoods where your student can become involved working with immigrants and their families

- Arrange for your student to give talks and presentations to local schools or groups of interested individuals
- Provide your student with information on local radio and TV stations that are related to the language and/or culture of your student's host country
- Encourage your student to take classes relevant to his/her overseas experience and to get involved in campus activities that are important to him/her, such as tutoring foreign students, increasing political awareness, and organizing fund raisers