

It's Time To Go Home

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Context

You're sitting in "your" room. In any case, it's the room that you've come to know as your own. You have, after several months, adjusted to your host culture. You probably feel as if you have finally become a member of this new culture. You have made friends, gone to school, become a member of a family. Many people don't even believe that you are American.



Remember how you felt when you first arrived in this new place? You knew that you would experience "culture shock," but you had no idea just how intense those feelings would be. For the first part of your year you had moments where you wanted nothing but to go home. But you stuck it out. You don't know when it happened, but one day you realized that you had made it. You woke up from a dream in another language. You were mistaken for a "native" in a restaurant. You forgot certain things about the United States. You changed.

Now it's almost time to go home. Once again, you are on a roller coaster of emotions. You are excited to see your American family and friends again, but at the same time you are filled with feelings of anxiety and fear. You are starting to experience the initial phase of "re-entry shock."

What to Expect

Because no two people are exactly alike, it's hard to predict exactly what you will go through when you return home. It's important, however, to anticipate and to prepare yourself for the possibilities. If you feel that you have adjusted well to your host culture, if you feel that, in many ways, you have "become" French, or Belgian, or German, or Mexican, etc., you will most likely have a more challenging time coming home. It is ironic that the more "successful" you have been as an exchange student, the more difficult it will be for you to adjust to being American again. Just as you survived and indeed excelled as an exchange student, so too will you re-adjust to being back home.

This isn't Home!

You have probably constructed all kinds of mental pictures about what coming home will be like. You know that you have changed. Be prepared for things at home to have changed as well. Your siblings have grown, your friends have moved on, your parents may have renovated the house. The home that you return to can never really measure up to the "home" that has existed in a dream-like quality in your head for all of these months.

A valuable aspect of living in another culture



is that it provides you with another perspective of the United States. What you have learned about the U.S. while you have lived abroad may, in fact, be negative. You may find, especially for the first month or so back home, that nothing is as you remembered and nothing is as wonderful as it was in your host country. You may find that most Americans are too consumer-oriented, too fast-paced, too overtly friendly, insincere, or too whatever. You may feel as if you just want to withdraw and day dream about your host country. Don't.

Know that, in time, you will readjust. Try not to constantly complain to your friends and family. Remind yourself how you felt the first month or so of your exchange. Reread your journal. It may help keep your perspective.

You're a Different Person

Be prepared. Your parents may not recognize you at the airport. You may have put on weight, changed your hairstyle. You have physically matured. You have adopted the fashions of your host culture. For the past few months, you probably didn't want to "look" like an American. And now you don't. You may want to send a current photo of yourself to your family. That way how you look when you come home won't be a tremendous shock for them!



You have changed inside as well. You are not the same person you were before you left. You have experienced many things. You have learned so much about others and about yourself. Your insights have been challenged and broadened. You will now see the world from another perspective, and you won't even realize how much your insights and values have changed until you come home. It is important that you understand that those back home have not experienced what you have. Your friends and family will not necessarily appreciate

being told that they have silly habits, or that what they eat is disgusting, or that you disapprove of how they do or see things. You must remember to be diplomatic and not negative.

It is true that sometimes you will feel isolated and misunderstood. Your friends and family will tire of hearing about your year abroad. They will become exasperated every time you bring up your host country. They may tune you out. Try not to wallow in self-pity. Don't withdraw. Keep the lines of communication open with your family and friends. They can't understand what you're feeling if you don't tell them. Keep in touch with your friends and family in your host country. Try to make contacts with other exchange students. They will be valuable resources and provide support for you.

Readjusting Socially

When you first arrived in your host culture, you probably stood out. Everyone recognized you as American. You dressed funny, your accent was strange, or you could hardly speak the language at all. Sometimes you may have felt like a freak. It took some time, but you were finally accepted by your peers in your host culture.

Friends back home have written to you or may even have visited. To some extent they have kept you informed about what's going on back home. There is no way that you could possibly know everything, and you will find that you are a bit behind on the social scene back home.

Styles will have changed, different music will be on the radio, slang expressions will be different, new people will be popular. Once again, you may find yourself feeling like an outsider. Some people will think that



you're really cool, while others may make fun of you. In fact, you may find that you don't have a lot in common with the people who were your best friends before you left. Prepare yourself for this; readjusting to social life can be a difficult process for you. Realize that, in some ways, you can reinvent yourself. You have developed a different personality as a result of your year abroad. Embrace the new "you." You have gained valuable insight and maturity--others will surely come to appreciate this about you, especially if you appreciate it about yourself.

Is That English You're Speaking?

If you have been immersed in a language other than English, you may have difficulty expressing yourself appropriately, at least for the first few weeks back home. You will have forgotten words, expressions, slang. You may "go blank" when trying to communicate. It may be frustrating sometimes. Sometimes, though, it will be amusing to you and to your loved ones. Utilize the process of re-learning English as a way to re-establish relationships. This way, others will feel as if they are contributing to your successful readjustment.

If you have lived in a country where English is spoken, you have most likely developed an accent that is unique to that country. You have learned different terms, different slang, new expressions. Some people back home may find your new way of speaking to be interesting and unique. Others may think that you're "faking it" or that you have a superior attitude. Don't be discouraged. Others will adjust to your new language mannerisms, and you will soon fall back into an American accent. Remember, all of these adjustment processes require time and patience.

It's important to note that you have developed different non-verbal habits as well. How closely (or not) you stand to someone, the gestures that you use while

speaking, how you move your eyes, whether-or-not you make eye contact and with whom, how frequently you touch others, all of these patterns of non-verbal communication may be different for you now. Americans generally maintain a greater spatial distance when interacting than do Western Europeans and South Americans, for instance. Females in Japan do not maintain eye contact with males in the same ways as American females do. You may find that your patterns of non-verbal communication send different "messages" back home. Be aware of this. You will soon re-adjust your movements to your surroundings.

What to Do

Expect the Unexpected

As soon as you realize that coming home will be different from what you had imagined, you will have made an important step. Most likely, by now, you are an expert on change. You have experienced many ups and downs and felt like you were on a roller coaster. You have adapted to many kinds of changes and you have succeeded. Realize that change is inevitable and can ultimately be beneficial to you and to your life. See change as a teacher, as yet another adventure for you to experience.



Your Health Matters

For the first two weeks back home, you will be exhausted, both physically and emotionally. It may be tempting for you to jump into a busy schedule of parties, get-togethers and reunions. Try to "take it slow" for awhile to give yourself time to readjust. You may also feel depressed and anxious from time to time. These feelings are inevitable results of re-entry. They are also temporary.

In time you will feel more comfortable with and relaxed in your surroundings.

Be Open in Your Communication

Some of the frustrations that you will feel as a result of your re-entry can be remedied with thoughtful and open communication. You will occasionally feel out-of-place and misunderstood by your friends and family. Discussing how you feel in a loving way will better ensure that you receive the support you need. Being constantly critical and negative will only serve to further alienate you from your loved ones.

Create a Balance



You now have a dual identity, a bi-nationality. You are American, but in very real ways, you are also French, German, Austrian, Mexican, etc. Realize how wonderful that is. You will never be "just" American again.

You have been exposed to a whole new world of being and seeing.

YOUR NEW WORLD



Take a mental inventory of those things about being American that are important to you and combine them with those things that you value about your "new" cultural identity. Be proud of who you are. The experiences that you have had will make you a more well-rounded person and a more sensitive member of our global community. **Welcome home.**