



Life After Study Abroad: Reentry Strategies

This information is designed to help you mentally process your thoughts and feelings as a result of your experiences abroad. Hopefully, when you return, you will look at the world and those around you a little bit differently than you did before you left. You've been exposed to a completely different culture, and have seen things that may alter the way you look at your life in the States. That is good! You have been away from family, friends, and the University, and they may not understand all that you have experienced. It might be difficult to get back into your normal daily routines and settle back into life in the U.S. CIE has provided this material so that you can begin processing your international experience.

Tips on Re-Entering Life at Home

(Adapted from an article by L.E. Chinn and Darren Crutchfield)

There are some common issues that surface time and time again in returning from overseas. Some of these things are not necessarily good or bad, but how you handle them can be beneficial or destructive in your life. These are issues that you may or may not face individually, but at one time or another people in your group will likely face them. Whether you face each of these or not, you should strive to be sensitive to other members of your travel group who might be struggling with them.

Fatigue and Depression: These have been linked together because they often appear together. *Emotionally*, you may have been on a "high" since a few days before you left. But often, if your trip is more than a few days in length, you have experienced some dramatic mood swings. *Physically*, you probably have been pushing yourself beyond your normal limits. You probably don't normally get up as early, study as long, and eat the foods you have been eating, or stay up as late as you have been. Jet lag only compounds these challenges. *Mentally*, you have probably been stretched and challenged more in the past few days or weeks than in the last two years, especially if you have been taking courses in a foreign language! To sum it all up, your emotions need a break, your body needs a break, and your mind needs some time to sort out everything you have been learning. After a few days at home if you are feeling more tired than normal, or are feeling a little depressed about life in general, it is O.K. That is normal. The best thing to do is get some rest and talk out your feelings with someone who will let you say whatever is on your mind and won't judge you for it. If after two or three days you are still feeling this way, contact another member of your travel group, a staff member at the Center for International Education, (or if traveling with UMW faculty, your trip leader) and talk with them. Often, your fellow travelers can be more sensitive and helpful than someone who did not share your experience.

Culture Shock: Culture shock is generally defined as difficulty coping with stress in an environment that is foreign to the individual. This is commonly associated with going to another country, but it can also show up once you return home. You have changed as a result of your time abroad, especially if you have been abroad for more than a month or two. For instance, your worldview has expanded, your value base may have shifted, and your priorities may now be different. You may feel a little out of place now in your "home culture" and experience culture shock again. This is a normal experience, and is actually a good thing if handled properly. You probably have had some very positive changes in who you are. Your task now is to learn new ways of living life and handling stress based on the changes you are making in your life.

Values Shock: Sometimes the "culture shock" experience is appropriately labeled "values shock." The two are very similar but different. The system of values you have just experienced abroad may be different from the values with which you grew up. Perhaps the values in your host country emphasized relationships rather than tasks, high respect for elders rather than maintaining a youthful experience, or peaceful existence rather than accumulating wealth. Now, arriving home

again, you have another value system against which to compare your home culture. For some people, it is the first time they will see some of the less attractive aspects of value systems in our country. It can cause emotional stress or “values shock.” Ugly truths are just as prevalent in other cultures, but you may or may not be aware of them. The most appropriate way to handle this stress is with circumspection. Seek constructive ways to channel any strong emotions brought on by values shock. Raise awareness or funds for an appropriate cause, and tell the tale of your experience, but don’t try to force the same changes you have experienced upon others who have not shared a similar personal transformation.

Indifference from Friends and Family: You shouldn’t expect too much from family and friends regarding your experience abroad and the personal changes you are making. You will find some who are genuinely interested, but many will be indifferent. Believe it or not, life went on while you were gone. Everyone still got up and went to school and work. Social gatherings on Friday night or Saturday happened even though you weren’t there. And, sadly, some people just won’t be that interested in the details of your experiences overseas. Don’t take it personally. It is best to prepare a 2 or 3 sentence summary to give those who ask, “Hey, how did it go?” After you give them your summary, if they pursue the conversation by asking questions, then you know they have a genuine interest. Your family and those who helped support your decision to go abroad will most likely be the most receptive audience. Besides, since they have invested in your experience, you owe them a report on what their investment earned in your life, and if you went on a service trip, the lives of the people that you served.

Leverage Your Experience

Realizing the skills you have gained abroad and capitalizing on these abilities can help you articulate your study abroad experience to others and sell it to potential employers in any field. If you caught the “travel bug” and find yourself yearning to go back abroad, researching international fellowships and careers can help you set new goals for yourself. Below are some ideas to get you started.

Make the Most of Your Experience

Be sure to feature your abroad experience in various contexts:

- Resume
- Cover letters
- Interviews
- Networking
- Graduate School Applications
- Scholarship Applications
- Professional On-line Profile

Focus On Skills You Gained

Highlight “transferable skills,” skills you gained abroad that are beneficial in various professional settings.

- Cross-cultural communication
- Flexibility and Adaptability
- Budgeting and Planning
- Independence and Teamwork

Graduate School and Fellowships Abroad

- Peterson’s Graduate School Guide

- Fulbright Research Fellowships
- Boren Awards
- Global Health Corps
- Bosch Fellowships

International Teaching and Volunteering Opportunities

- Peace Corps
- Language Corps
- Fulbright Teaching Assistantship
- CIEE Teach Abroad
- Japan Exchange Teaching (JET) Program
- Teach English in Spain (Ministry of Education)

International Career Opportunities

- Forum on Education Abroad Job Listings
- International Careers Consortium
- NAFSA Career Center
- U.S. Foreign Service