

5 ways to cope with reverse culture shock

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For many study abroad students and travelers, reverse culture shock -- or the effects and process of re-entering one's home country after being abroad -- can be just as challenging as culture shock itself.

“Reverse culture shock is that feeling you get when you return home and have to re-adjust to everything being different again, just like you did when you went abroad,” said Keely Davin, senior program coordinator for Ohio University's Office of Global Opportunities.

Returning to the United States after a period of time spent immersed in another country's culture, language and way of life may result in feelings of confusion, frustration and misunderstanding.

According to StudentsAbroad.com, reverse culture shock usually takes place in four different stages: disengagement, initial euphoria, irritability and hostility and, finally, readjustment and adaptation.

These four stages are essentially a rollercoaster of emotions. It begins with sadness, continues with elatedness, transforms into feelings of alienation and disorientation and ends with a slow but steady readjustment to life at home.

“Most students experience a great deal of personal growth while abroad and might feel frustrated when returning home to friends and family because it can feel as if people don't understand or recognize that change,” Davin said.

So what do you do during this process? How do you get out of the muck and get to stage four sanely? Have no fear; it's possible.

1. Stay in contact with the friends you met abroad

This can include locals, as well as other study abroad students from your program. Keeping in touch with other students who underwent some of the same experiences as you not only maintain those bonds and friendships alive, but can also provide comfort and understanding during your transition back into the States.

Continuing communication with locals allows you to remain up-to-date on the latest international happenings, not to mention sustain relations with people who had a significant influence on your life during your travels abroad. Maintaining relationships with these international friends and acquaintances can also create opportunities to practice your foreign language of choice while upholding possible global contacts for the future.

2. Create a blog or keep a journal

Keeping a blog or journal is a great way to share your thoughts and feelings about your journey while also keeping a hard copy of your once-in-a-lifetime experience. Both of these options are also great ways to overcome reverse culture shock (along with culture shock), as they can be used as outlets to positively articulate and express your sentiments about your time abroad or your recent return home.

If you aren't too fond of writing, other forms of artistic expression may also help you to combat any negative emotions and hardships during re-entry. This could include anything from painting to composing music to going through the awesome pictures you took during your program.

3. Find new ways to spice up your daily routine back home

Let's face it, when we're traveling everything is new, exciting, unexpected and fun. Once we go back home and start getting back into the same old routines, life can seem so boring – so dull and monotonous.

So, don't fall back into your old habits and routines. Find new ways to add pizzazz to your life at home, whether that's exploring a different city in your home state, visiting a state you've never been to, or simply finding a new outdoorsy location within your own hometown. The options really are endless – and, of course, start planning your next international voyage!

4. Find ways to continue developing the skills you started building while abroad

“Continue with advanced language courses or look for ways to get involved with the international community nearby,” Davin said.

Was art or music a huge part of everyday life in the country you traveled to? Start visiting art shows and exhibits. Go to new music gigs, learn an instrument that you might have played while abroad, or continue working on a particular skill – like cooking that special dish your homestay family showed you.

5. Give yourself permission to relax, absorb and really think about your time abroad

“It's not something to be embarrassed about, it's just part of the process,” Davin says. “Try to temper your expectations by cutting yourself some slack and giving yourself some time to adjust to your new surroundings again.”

It is vital to be patient with yourself as you undergo the many different emotions and changes that come along with re-entry and reverse culture shock. Remember to not be so hard on yourself and, instead, remind yourself that what you're going through is normal, natural and -- most importantly -- it will pass.

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