

Can You Ever Truly Return “Home”?

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I just returned from Paris where I lived for many years. As is typically the case when I go back, everything is still very familiar and it is easy to slip back into French patterns of communication and interaction. And yet, there are always those unanticipated surprises. Cultures evolve and when we leave a place we often expect it to be the same when we return. However, it's at this point we realize that we have changed.

For those of you who have returned “home” after a long sojourn abroad (or perhaps like me returned to a place where you were once an expat), some of the greatest challenges are that you no longer belong. This is particularly difficult when you return to your home country. Many people experience culture shock when they first relocate abroad. However, few people anticipate reverse culture shock when they return home.

Unfortunately, not enough emphasis is placed on preparing expats who have returned from an overseas assignment reintegrate into their home culture. Even when there is some recognition that things may be different, the psychological impact of returning home may throw people for a loop. Many clients report the feelings of isolation they feel. Their experience is not valued at the office and they are sometimes relegated to cubicles while management figures out what to do with them. Family and friends are not interested in more than the superficial aspects of their time abroad. Most importantly, the expat doesn't feel that s/he belongs anymore. While living abroad, you are special; there is a sense of freedom as you're often given excuses from conforming entirely to social norms because you're a foreigner. You may have had economic privileges you lack at home. Each day is an adventure as you try to navigate the workings of your new culture. Yet, returning home can be flat and is all the more compounded by the fact that you can't easily return to live in your host country.

Few companies and organizations adequately prepare people for the realities of repatriation. Unfortunately the consequences of this can be very detrimental to an organization if the expat's knowledge and experience is not valued upon her return. According to the 2013 Global Relocation Trends report put out by Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 31% of expats who return home end up leaving their jobs within a year. This obviously has a negative impact on business when talent is lost taking with them knowledge and global expertise.

If you have ever struggled with the effects of reverse culture shock, below are a few tips to help you regain your sense of cultural identity and again feel at “home”.

- 1) Take the time to readjust and recognize that it won't happen overnight. Since your overseas experience will begin to sink in slowly over time and you'll start to notice the ways you adapted, observing how your frame of reference may have changed will allow you to develop an action plan to get more in synch with your home culture.
- 2) If you're feeling homesick for your host country, find ways to re-connect to it. Attend events sponsored by your host country's cultural center if there is one near you. Watch movies from that country or find restaurants that serve its food. You might even explore if there is a network of expats from your host culture that you could get involved with.
- 3) Seek out other expats who have returned home. You often find that they will have an empathetic ear and you may have more in common with them initially than with your former friends or family.
- 4) Continue to do hobbies or interests that you did overseas. If you have children, try to replicate activities they did overseas at home.
- 5) Think creatively of how your overseas experience can be of value professionally. If you're returning to your previous company or organization, articulate the ways your knowledge and expertise gained from your overseas experience can be added value to your organization. If you are job seeking, reflect on what you have learned from this environment that could be beneficial to a new employer. Capitalize on skills you have learned like resourcefulness, alternative-perspective taking, and foreign language ability as these are often appealing to employers.
- 6) Don't make any major life-changing decisions in the first few months after your return. I've heard people say they want to sell their lifelong home because it seems too big after living in a 2 room apartment overseas. Keep in mind that part of your adjustment is the process of re-integrating old lifestyle habits. You want to avoid making major decisions you may later regret.

Remember that Rome wasn't built in a day. It takes time to process your overseas experiences so be patient. Capturing them in stories will keep them fresh in your mind and allow you to reflect on what you learned. And most importantly, remind yourself that just as you adapted when living overseas, you will re-adapt being back home—but with a new perspective that will allow you to be more conscious of culture.

