

RE-ADJUSTMENT

(the eighth step of the cultural exchange journey)

Stage 1: Excitement

Excitement, relief, confusion, and surprise all come together as you meet your family and friends, speak your own language, and use your own country's currency again. You return quickly to some of your old patterns of behavior, except now they may feel strange. You are surprisingly awkward in your movement; even too conscious of it.

You will also soon discover that a few changes have occurred in your absence. Perhaps there's nothing major that is new. Maybe there is new furniture in your home or your parents painted the walls of a room a new color. These sorts of changes are not really important, but they are unexpected. You weren't there to see them happen. Somehow you expected time to stop while you were away. You may feel a little uneasy realizing that your family, friends, and your community did not stay exactly the same – they changed too while you were gone.

Stage 2: Realizing the Differences

Though you soon settle back into the familiar routines, new difficulties begin to surface. You might feel challenged in at least three areas of life in your native country:

- a. Education and Career – you may have returned with new ideas about what you want to study or what type of career you want to pursue. In some cases, you may have difficulty changing plans you set in motion before you went abroad. Schooling might present other challenges: You may have missed important deadlines or exams required for university entrance. You may not be able to receive credit for your American school work.
- b. National, Economic, and/or Political Changes – It is possible you could face a changed national economic or political environment. Such changes often interfere with a student's education or career plans.
- c. Relationships with family and friends – Like many students, you may feel you have matured faster than your friends that did not go abroad. Conversation with them seems shallow and less interesting than you remembered. There is frustration too. Friends back home are seldom as interested in your experiences overseas as you are eager to talk about them. *You have been through profound changes, but their importance is not recognized by those who were once close to you.* Instead, they quickly switch a conversation to another topic. Even your parents, though they usually will listen to you and are interested in what you have to say, don't seem to understand how much you have changed or how important this year has been to you. *They may re-impose old childish restrictions on you.* Worse, they may recognize that you have changed and try to change you back!

Stage 3: The Challenge of Readjustment

Unable to slip into your old place in your society or in your family, you struggle to find a new niche for yourself. You may have an identity crisis, feeling detached – from both your host culture overseas, and the home culture to which you just returned. It is typical for exchange students to develop a sense of both isolation and superiority. You feel isolated because your old friends don't understand you and superior because you feel more mature, sophisticated, and knowledgeable about the world than your friends. On the other hand, you may have a strong need to belong to your old circle of friends. You may try pretending that you haven't really

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changed very much and hope you will eventually return to your old self, the way you were before you left home (is that possible?).

Stage 4: Reconciling the Differences

Eventually you will find ways to bridge the gap between the two cultures and readapt to the life of your own society. You might befriend other exchange students or people from different cultures as a way to relieve your sense of isolation. You develop a deeper appreciation of how you have changed and how much you have learned, and this is valuable in itself, apart from your relationships at home and school.

The challenges you face as you try to get interested in your life, resume your studies, or find employment are all part of the normal adjustment and learning process. You have returned home with new ideas, a new outlook, new skills gained in the host country, and obviously you do not want to discard these new aspects of yourself just to fit in again at home. After the initial readjustment to the way of life at home, you may be homesick for your other home abroad.

How can you bring the culture home with you? Here are a few suggestions:

- a. Bring some of the customs you learned in the USA into your life in your native country. For example, if your American family spent each evening discussing the day's events over dinner and you have never done this with your natural family, give it a try.
- b. Search out activities you enjoyed in the United States in your home country. Many times you can find similar activities offered that you did not think to look for before.
- c. Maybe you discovered you did not know as much as you thought about your own culture while away and you could now use this opportunity to educate yourself and others on your own culture and country's history. Be a part of your native culture's events!
- d. Use the knowledge you gained during your homestay of problems or potential problems that exist in your host country's society, and involve yourself in efforts to correct or prevent these problems in your own country (examples: racism, homeless people, etc.).

The readjustment cycle is sometimes long and demanding. You may find it helpful to search out other exchange students to discuss challenges you are encountering or perhaps those students who are preparing for an exchange – either online, or in person. Those that are most successful are those that jump into getting involved in activities once back in their native setting!

Keeping in touch with host family and friends also helps ease the sense of loss. This is not always possible, and both you and your host family should be aware that obstacles may exist which will prevent easy communication.

Returning home is the final stage in the culture-learning process, but the learning continues long after the readjustment. The new perspective gained from time overseas continues to be broadened.

Because exchange students have once opened their minds to a host culture, their minds can remain open to other cultures and new ideas. For this reason, years after they return home, many people report that their year as an exchange student was one of the most significant of their lives. It sometimes takes several years to realize the true value of what you learned!