

## **TEN TOP IMMEDIATE REENTRY CHALLENGES** **As Rated by University Students**

Dr. Bruce LaBrack

There are lots of reasons to look forward to going home, but there are also a number of psychological, social and cultural aspects which can prove difficult – often because they are unanticipated. The following list was generated by interviewing students like you who have been through the experience and survived nicely. However, they say you should take the process seriously by being realistic and thinking about it and your possible reactions. They offer the following thoughts on reentry for your consideration in the hope that they will make your return both more enjoyable and productive.

**1. *Boredom***

After all the newness and stimulation of your time abroad, a return to family friends, and old routines (however nice and comforting) can seem very dull. It is natural to miss the excitement and challenges which characterize study in a foreign country, but it is up to you to find ways to overcome such negative reactions – remember a bored person is also boring.

**2. *“No One Wants To Hear”***

One thing you can count on upon your return: no one will be as interested in hearing about your adventures and triumphs as you will be in sharing those experiences. This is not a rejection of you or your achievements, but simply the fact that once they have heard the highlights, any further interest on your audience’s part is probably unlikely. Be realistic in your expectations of how fascinating your journey is going to be for everyone else. Be brief.

**3. *You Can’t Explain***

Even when given a chance to explain all the sights you saw and feelings you had while studying abroad, it is likely to be at least a little bit frustrating to relay them coherently. It is very difficult to convey this kind of experience to people who do not have similar frames of reference or travel backgrounds, no matter how sympathetic they are as listeners. You can tell people about your trip, but you may fail to make them understand how or why you felt a particular way. It’s okay.

**4. *Reverse “Homesickness”***

Just as you probably missed home for a time after coming to the United States, it is just as natural to experience some “reverse” homesickness for the people, places, and things that you grew accustomed to as a student in America. To an extent it can be reduced by writing letters, telephoning, and generally keeping in contact, but feelings of loss are an integral part of international sojourns and must be anticipated and accepted as a natural result of study abroad.

**5. *Relationships Have Changed***

It is inevitable that when you return you will notice that some relationships with friends and family will have changed. Just as you have altered some of your ideas and attitudes while abroad, the people at home are likely to have experienced some changes. These changes may be positive or negative, but expecting that no change will have occurred is unrealistic. The best preparation is flexibility, openness, minimal preconceptions, and tempered optimism.

**6. *People See “Wrong” Changes***

Sometimes people may concentrate on small alterations in your behavior or ideas and seem threatened or upset by them. Others may ascribe “bad” traits to the influence of your time abroad. These incidents may be motivated by jealousy, fear, or feelings of superiority or inferiority. To avoid or minimize them, it is necessary to monitor yourself following your return. This phase normally passes quickly if you do nothing to confirm their stereotypes.

**7. *People Misunderstand***

A few people will misinterpret your words or actions in such a way that communication is difficult. For example, what you may have come to think of as humor (particularly sarcasm, banter, etc.) and ways to show affection or establish conversation may not be seen as wit, but aggression or “showing off.” Offers to help in the kitchen can be seen as criticism of food preparation, new clothing styles as provocative or inappropriate, references to the U.S. or use of English as boasting. Be aware of how you may look to others and how your behavior is likely to be interpreted.

**8. *Feelings of Alienation***

Sometimes the reality of being back “home” is not as natural or enjoyable as the place you had constructed as your mental image. When real daily life is less enjoyable or more demanding than you remembered, it is natural to feel some alienation, see faults in the society you never noticed before, even become quite critical of everyone and everything for a time. This is no different than when you first left home. Mental comparisons are fine, but keep them to yourself until you regain both your cultural balance and a balanced perspective.

**9. *Inability to Apply New Knowledge and Skills***

Many returnees are frustrated by the lack of opportunity to apply newly gained social, technical, linguistic, and practical coping skills that appear unnecessary or irrelevant at home. To avoid ongoing annoyance: adjust to reality as necessary, change what is possible, be creative, be patient, and above all use the cross-cultural adjustment skills you acquired abroad to assist your own reentry.

**10. *Loss/Compartmentalization of Experience***

Being home, coupled with the pressures of job, family, and friends often combine to make returnees worried that somehow they will “lose” the experience; somehow becoming compartmentalized like souvenirs or photo albums kept in a box and only occasionally taken out and looked at. You do not have to let that happen. Maintain your contacts. Talk to people who have experiences similar to yours. Practice your skills. Remember and honor both your hard work and the fun you had while abroad.

# PREPARING TO RETURN HOME

## Quick Tips

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Reentry into your home culture can be both as challenging and as frustrating as living overseas, mostly because our attitude toward going “home” is that it should be a simple matter of getting resettled, resuming your earlier routines and reestablishing your relationships. However, world wide research has shown that reentry has its own set of special social and psychological adjustments which can be facilitated by being aware of the reentry process and following some advice from those who have already returned. The following list is compiled from many sources, but all of the tips come from returnees who offer these ideas in the hope of making your reentry easier for you and for those at home.

**1. *Prepare for the adjustment process.***

The more you consider your alternatives, think about what is to come, and know about how returning home is both similar to and different from going abroad, the easier the transition will be. Anticipating is useful. As one psychologist put it, “Worrying helps.”

**2. *Allow yourself time.***

Reentry is a process that will take time, just like adjusting to a new foreign culture. Give yourself time to relax and reflect upon what is going on around you, how you are reacting to it, and what you might like to change. Give yourself permission to ease into the transition.

**3. *Understand the familiar will seem different.***

You will have changed, home has changed, and you will be seeing familiar people, places and behaviors from new perspectives. Some things will seem strange, perhaps even unsettling. Expect to have some new emotional and psychological reactions to being home. Everyone does.

**4. *There will be much “cultural catching up” to do.***

Some linguistic, social, political, economic, entertainment and current events topics will be unfamiliar to you as new programs, slang, and even governmental forms may have emerged since you left. You may have some learning to do about your own culture. (Note: most returnees report that major insights into themselves and their home countries occur during reentry).

**5. *Reserve judgments.***

Just as you had to keep an open mind when first encountering the culture of a new foreign country, try to resist the natural urge to make snap decisions and judgments about people and behaviors once back home. Mood swings are common at first and your most valuable and valid analysis of events is likely to take place after allowing some time for thorough reflection.

**6. *Respond thoughtfully and slowly.***

Quick answers and impulsive reactions often characterize returnees. Frustration, disorientation, and boredom in the returnee can lead to behavior which is incomprehensible to family and friends. Take some time to rehearse what you want to say and how you will respond to predictable questions and situations; prepare to greet those which are less predictable with a calm, thoughtful approach.

**7. *Cultivate sensitivity.***

Showing an interest in what others have been doing while you have been on your adventure overseas is the surest way to reestablish rapport. Much frustration in returnees stems from what is perceived as disinterest by others in their experience and lack of opportunity to express their feelings and tell their stories. Being as good a listener as a talker is a key ingredient in mutual sharing.

**8. *Beware of comparisons.***

Making comparisons between cultures and nations is natural, particularly after residence abroad; however, a person must be careful not to be seen as too critical of home or too lavish in praise of things foreign. A balance of good and bad features is probably more accurate and certainly less threatening to others. The tendency to be an “instant expert” is to be avoided at all costs.

**9. *Remain Flexible.***

Keeping as many options open as possible is an essential aspect of a successful return home. Attempting to resocialize totally into old patterns and networks can be difficult, but remaining aloof is isolating and counterproductive. What you want to achieve is a balance between maintaining earlier patterns and enhancing your social and intellectual life with new friends and interests.

**10. *Seek support networks.***

There are lots of people back home who have gone through their own reentry and understand a returnee’s concerns – academic faculty, exchange students, international development staff, diplomatic corps, military personnel, church officials, and businessmen and women. University study-abroad and foreign student offices are just a few of the places where returnees can seek others who can offer support and country-specific advice.