

# Top Ten Immediate Reentry Challenges

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As Rated by University Students

There are many 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 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 audiences' 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 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 others about your trip, but you may fail to make them understand exactly how or why you felt a particular way.

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 emails, 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.

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### 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 any 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 discomfort, it is necessary to monitor yourself and be aware of the reactions of those around you, especially in the first few weeks 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 becomes difficult. For example, what you may have come to think of as witty humor (particularly sarcasm, banter, etc.) and a way to show affection or establish a conversation may be considered aggression or “showing off.” Conversely, a silence that was seen as simply polite overseas might be interpreted at home, incorrectly, as signaling agreement or opposition. New clothing styles or mannerisms may be viewed as provocative, inappropriate, or as an affectation. Continually using references to foreign place or sprinkling foreign language expressions or words into an English conversation is often considered boasting. Be aware of how you 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 actual daily life is less enjoyable or more demanding than you remembered, it is natural to feel some alienation. Many returnees develop critical eyes, a tendency to see faults in the society you never noticed before (eg-Americans are so wasteful, materialistic, overweight, in a hurry, etc.). Some returnees become quite critical of everyone and everything for a time. This is no different than when you criticized the host culture while abroad. In both cases, being critical is closely related to discomfort during readjustment and mild culture shock. Mental comparisons are fine, but keep them to yourself until you regain both your cultural balance and a balanced perspective.

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9. Inability to Apply New Knowledge & Skills

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

10. Loss/Compartmentalization of Experience

Being home, combined with the pressures of job, school, family, and friends, often conspires to make returnees worried that they might somehow “lose” the experience. Many fear that it will become 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 abroad; seek out and talk to people who have had experiences similar to yours; practice your cross-cultural skills; continue language learning. Remember and honor both your hard work and the fun you had while abroad. To the extent possible, integrate your overseas experience into your ongoing life and activities.

Source: Dr. Bruce La Brack, School of International Studies, University of the Pacific Training Design for International Transitions, LaBrack and Pusch, SIIC, 2005