

## The Process of Reentry

by Gary Weaver

### Good News—Bad News

Everyone who has adapted to another culture has gone through culture shock. Those who claim they did not may not have recognized the signs, or perhaps they never really adjusted to the other culture. Tourists seldom experience culture shock because they are short-term sojourners who never actually enter another culture. Many diplomats do not experience culture shock because of their isolation within the diplomatic community and their insulation from the local society.

Almost all students, business people, development workers, and others who must actually live within a new culture and interact with host nationals do experience some form of culture shock. The good news is that the vast majority handle this stress successfully, with some reliable evidence indicating that they grow from the experience. Reactions to the stress of cross-cultural adjustment are simply necessary "growing pains" that eventually lead to greater emotional and intellectual maturity, a more flexible personality, and a wider global perspective. Increased confidence in one's own ability to solve problems creatively is another benefit.

Another piece of good news is that, contrary to popular opinion, long-term sojourners seldom "lose" their native culture while overseas. Ironically, they instead usually find their culture by leaving it. The world-renowned Nigerian jazz artist Fela once said that he discovered what it really meant to be an African when he left Africa.

In a new culture, sojourners become more aware of what makes them different and consciously examine culturally embedded values, beliefs, and thought patterns. They gain both greater awareness of their home culture and greater awareness of the individual "self" and of what is important to them.

Now the bad news. On the return home the sojourner passes through another adjustment period often termed "reverse culture shock" or "reentry-transition stress." The limited evidence suggests that this experience is even more severe and protracted than culture shock and that it sets in much more quickly. Furthermore, those who have adapted best to life overseas tend to have the most difficulty reentering their home culture.

The space shuttle can provide one useful metaphor of these adjustment periods. Extreme stress occurs as the shuttle leaves the earth's atmosphere and *enters* outer space. Once in space, far less stress is exerted on the vehicle. However, *reentry* to the earth's atmosphere is another very stressful period. In fact, the stress of returning to the earth may be even greater than that of leaving it.

### The Continuum of Adjustment

Most scholars agree that cross-cultural adjustment can be graphed as a U-curve. Travelers initially experience a short period of excitement and exhilaration when entering another culture. They are fascinated with the newness of everything and are meeting people who want them to feel welcome. This period is often referred to as the "tourist" or "honeymoon" phase because sojourners are not yet fully involved in the host culture.

Disillusionment soon develops as sojourners face the real difficulties of using public transportation, shopping, attending classes, and working with host nationals. Such disillusionment marks the beginning of culture shock. Interpersonal communication begins to appear ineffective and breaks down. Sojourners long for familiar things from home—the weather, food, language—doubting their ability to solve problems and function in the new environment. Cut off from others, they feel disoriented and out of control.

The severity and duration of culture shock depend upon the individual and on the type of culture to which the individual must adapt. Although Americans experience some degree of culture shock when adapting to England, generally the greater the difference between cultures, the more severe the adjustment difficulties.

Some individuals can tolerate more stress than others and quickly develop coping strategies, new ways of perceiving the world, and alternatives for solving problems.

Most sojourners do eventually snap out of this uncomfortable stage as they develop new friendships and begin to feel comfortable with the social and physical environment. They begin to develop a more adequate, flexible, bicultural personality. This recovery period completes the U-curve, though sojourners may experience a few other "down" periods before returning home.

Adaptation to one's home culture follows a similar pattern, although the stress sets in much more quickly, is more severe, and lasts longer. The so-called U-curve thus becomes a W-curve or continuum of adjustment. If one leaves home again and enters another culture, in all likelihood the pattern will continue and culture shock will recur.

These transitional periods of stress are somewhat analogous to the common cold. Culture shock and reverse culture shock are not terminal, yet there is no "cure." The "symptoms" are similar for each person but also vary with the individual, as does the severity and duration. Recovery does not provide immunity; one can suffer the experience many times.

Individuals develop their own techniques for dealing with the symptoms of a cold—get plenty of rest, drink liquids, eat chicken soup, and so forth. As people experience culture shock, they develop coping strategies to help them minimize its severity and duration. Many of these strategies are just as useful for dealing with reverse culture shock.

### **Why is Reverse Culture Shock Worse than Culture Shock?**

Surveys of sojourners preparing to return home show that most anticipate little or no difficulty in readapting to their native culture. However, most will actually experience more stress during reentry than during their entry into another culture. Those who adjusted best and were the most successful overseas usually experience the greatest amount of difficulty with reverse culture shock.

A host of factors help explain this phenomenon. The most significant is that few returnees anticipate reverse culture shock. When we expect a stressful event, we cope with it much better. We rehearse our reactions, think through the course of adjustment, and consider alternative ways to deal with the stressful event. We are prepared both physically and emotionally for the worst that could happen.

Most sojourners are already expecting stress before they leave home. They know they will miss family and friends, and they are anxious about adjusting to new food, a different language, public transportation, and so forth. On the other hand, few sojourners worry about returning home.

Those who adjust best overseas and are the most successful have probably changed the most during their sojourn. They have more confidence in their abilities to adapt and succeed and thus are the least likely to be anxious about returning home. For example, adolescent children usually adjust very quickly and easily to a new culture, yet they tend to experience much greater reentry stress than their parents.

In an overseas culture, host nationals expect newcomers to make mistakes and be different. Most intuitively understand that the sojourner will experience stress adapting to the new physical and social environment and will long for friends and family back home.

At home, everyone expects the returnee to fit in quickly. They are much less tolerant of mistakes and have little empathy for the difficulties of reverse culture shock—such problems are not expected or accepted. The honeymoon period may last only a few days or hours.

### **The Breakdown of Interpersonal Communication**

The causes of reverse culture shock are quite similar to those of culture shock. A breakdown of interpersonal communication again occurs, resulting in enormous frustration and pain. Most returnees do not

realize that this breakdown is the cause of their distress. Consequently, they are unaware of what provokes the reactions commonly labeled as symptoms of reverse culture shock.

When people communicate, they send messages, not meanings. The meanings are in their heads, and the messages merely try to express them. If two people experience the world in a similar way, their messages will take similar or parallel forms. If they experience the world differently, their messages usually take different forms. What would be a message to one person may have no meaning whatsoever to another. Even which messages are noticed may be different in different cultures. Of course, most people assume everyone else pays attention to the same messages they do and that everyone gives the messages the same meaning.

Americans are primarily verbally oriented people. When they communicate face-to-face, they pay attention to what is said and tend to be less consciously aware of nonverbal messages—tone of voice, posture, gestures, facial expressions, social distance, touch, eye contact, and so forth. On the other hand, non-Western people often pay much greater attention to nonverbal messages and consciously send them more frequently in interpersonal communication.

If an African spends a great deal of time in the United States, he becomes much more conscious of verbal messages and decreases his awareness of nonverbal messages. In the United States, his verbal abilities are highly rewarded and reinforced while his nonverbal subtlety only leads to confusion. Conversely, an American having spent time in Africa returns home adept at sending and receiving nonverbal messages yet perhaps less conscious of direct verbal messages.

One learns what nonverbal messages mean and how and when to use them simply by growing up in a particular culture. To a large extent, their meanings and usage are not explicitly taught but are learned tacitly and are understood at a subconscious level. For example, the American social distance is about an arm's length while it is perhaps only ten to twelve inches for an African. Americans seldom use touch to communicate, especially between individuals of the same sex.

While in the United States, the African sojourner tacitly learns to maintain an arm's length when talking and to offer a brisk handshake, almost immediately released. Upon his return to Africa, he is met by family and friends at the airport. His cousin rushes to shake his hand and continues greeting him without releasing his grip. Others crowd around him as they welcome him home. He tries to pull away from his cousin's grip and backs away from those who are talking to him. The returnee suddenly feels as if everyone is very pushy and intruding on his personal space.

His friends and family suddenly realize how he has changed. He seems cold and standoffish. They consciously notice how he will not hold hands and how he steps back when they try to talk to him. The returnee may be quite oblivious to the nonverbal messages he is sending or why he feels uncomfortable.

While in the United States, the African student learned that Americans are often very rushed and thus it is perfectly polite to greet others with a quick "hi." At home, people expect him to engage in more personal conversation, asking "How are you?" "How is your family?" "How are you feeling?" and so forth. Of course, a polite person would respond with a great deal more than "fine." The returnee finds that others perceive him as rude or abrupt because he no longer is comfortable engaging in lengthy greetings. If he "properly" greeted everyone, he would never get to work on time.

In the United States, frankness and fairly direct feedback are appreciated. Americans do not want to guess at one's response to a question and they feel uncomfortable with ambiguous or nonverbal answers. A clearly stated "yes" or "no" is usually very polite to an American while indirection, subtlety, or "maybes" are often experienced as inscrutable or deceptive.

In non-Western, rural cultures, a high premium is placed on social harmony. Thus, if one cannot comply with another's wishes, a flat "no" remains discourteous. Such a response is considered abrasive, abrupt, and overly negative. Because everyone wants to say "yes" to maintain good feelings, the absence of an affirmative response is sufficient to communicate "no." In such cultures, people tend to respond negatively with some nonverbal sign or such phrases as "maybe," "it is difficult," or "God willing." While perhaps

circuitous and ambiguous to an American, such a response is quite clear and polite for many non-Westerners.

An American returning home from a non-Western culture has picked up these subtleties. Overseas he was highly regarded for his graciousness and efforts to maintain good social relations. To American friends, he seems evasive and indecisive, while to him they appear downright rude.

### **The "Uncle Charlie Syndrome"**

Cleveland et al. describe a common experience of returnees. In the words of an interviewee:

In my hometown, there are probably many people who still don't realize the world is round. I remember when we got home from Moscow people asked me how it was there, but before I could open my mouth, they would begin telling me how Uncle Charlie had broken his arm. They profess interest in things abroad, but they really aren't interested. (p. 25)

Sojourners want to share their overseas experiences, yet trying to do so is a painfully difficult task. After a few days of listening to anecdotes, viewing photos, and receiving gifts, most friends and family members lose interest. Very often the most meaningful experiences really cannot be communicated. These messages have little meaning to those who have never actually lived overseas. It is somewhat like trying to fully share the wonder of a sunset with a blind person.

The parochialism of the home society becomes more obvious than ever before to these sojourners, especially in contrast with the more global perspective acquired while away. Although they have discovered many hidden aspects of their own culture by going overseas and have broadened their view of the world, they have also returned more critical of their own society. To adapt overseas, sojourners had to be more tolerant of other points of views, change many of their attitudes, and open their minds to new ways of perceiving reality. Interestingly, this tolerance and open-mindedness is not always extended to those back home.

While Uncle Charlie's broken arm may seem insignificant to the returnee, it was probably a traumatic event for the family. The returnee's lack of interest in Uncle Charlie's broken arm may be very unsettling to those back home.

### **Other Communication Barriers**

Students returning from the United States to poorer countries are sometimes faced with envy and resentment from those who did not have the opportunity to travel abroad. Often, the image of America held by those at home is based upon an assumption that everyone there has great wealth, and it may be anticipated that returnees will carry back expensive gifts for all.

These students may have written glowing letters home describing their experiences. Sometimes they have failed to describe their financial struggles, thereby reinforcing the perception that they have ample funds. Perceived to be carrying home the "golden fleece," the students may be faced with a host of new obligations—paying school fees for younger siblings, living in a style that becomes a college graduate, providing loans to older family members, and so forth. They cannot hope to fill these new and unexpected roles or to match the new identity ascribed to them by friends and family.

Students who have remained overseas for a long period face a barrier of time separating them from family and friends. To get on with life, some loved ones left at home may have needed to go through a cycle of grief for the departed sojourner. They have experienced the anger and depression that often characterize grief, and have psychologically "buried" the sojourner. Upon the sojourner's return, it is as if a ghost had appeared. Intimate relationships cannot simply continue from where they were at departure. They must be evaluated and developed again, taking into account the change that has occurred because of the sojourn.

## Reactions or "Symptoms"

Most returnees take for granted their ability to effectively communicate with friends and family. The breakdown of communication causes frustration and pain, which, in turn, lead to the physical and psychological reactions associated with stress. Because this stress is not expected, reactions are usually much more severe than those of entry culture shock.

Initially, many returnees engage in "flight" behavior. They may withdraw from others, fantasize about returning overseas, or sleep a great deal. The returnee is often perplexed by these subconscious reactions to the breakdown of communication.

A sense of being out of control is very common. Gregarious sojourners may find themselves avoiding others at home. Fantasies begin to preoccupy them, and returnees may suspect that they acquired some illness overseas accounting for excessive sleeping. Reactions to the situation begin to control returnees and, being unaware of the cause of these reactions, they may not consider alternative ways to cope with the original breakdown of communication.

Returnees to non-Western cultures often find this period especially difficult because they cannot flee or avoid others. While there is great respect for privacy in the United States, this attitude is rare in cultures that emphasize kinship and friendship ties over the individual. Americans might not find it strange for someone to avoid others for a few days. In many cultures of Africa, Latin America, and Asia, to do so is almost impossible and would be viewed as bizarre behavior.

Flight is untenable for returnees. They cannot escape others permanently, sleep away their days, or go back overseas again. They remain trapped in a painful situation that appears hopeless. At this point, a second reaction usually develops—"fight" behavior or aggression. While perfectly normal under the circumstances, many returnees are confused by their own aggressive behavior. Some even feel guilty, especially returnees to the United States, where anger is often equated with irrationality.

Anger is often displaced onto those lower in the social hierarchy, somewhat like the boy who is spanked by his mother and walks out the front door and kicks the cat. Or anger may be directed toward loved ones who are simply convenient scapegoats. For no apparent reason, a minor disagreement with a taxi driver becomes an emotional blowup or a small marital spat explodes into rage.

Because of the value placed on rationality and the overwhelming sense of guilt and loss of control caused by such reactions, some returnees internalize or deny their anger. This denial actually makes matters worse—depression is often attributed to internalized anger. Adding to the problem, hopelessness and lack of control cause some returnees to feel helpless. They can perceive no way of coping with their feelings and are unaware of what is causing them to behave in such irrational ways. Their sense of hopelessness, helplessness, and lack of control causes them to simply give up trying to control the situation. They learn to be helpless, and learned helplessness is also often considered a major factor in depression.

Many other reactions occur to the breakdown of communication. For example, returnees may neurotically distort and deny the complexity of reentry. Some behave as if they have never been abroad, much like a soldier who refuses to accept the reality of battlefield experiences once at home. Such a person denies the impact of the experience and refuses to even try discussing it with others.

Other sojourners go to the opposite extreme. They never actually return home, or they deny they are at home. The Nigerian returnee who studied in London wears three-piece tweed suits, smokes a pipe, and drinks tea every afternoon and scotch in the evening. He speaks in an exaggerated British accent and drones on constantly about how wonderful everything was in London and how terrible everything is in Lagos. Of course, he forgets the bad times he had while abroad and ignores the many positive aspects of his homeland.

An interesting modification of these distortions and denials is illustrated by a group of young men in The Gambia who are referred to as the "Been-Tos." They gather nightly in a small bar and unconsciously

exclude those who have never sojourned overseas. Conversation is almost entirely about where they have been to—some have been to London, others to New York, and so forth. They constantly relive their overseas adventures, much like many Peace Corps volunteers who have formed their own "Been-To" cliques in the United States.

## **Coping Strategies**

The most effective way to minimize the severity and duration of reverse culture shock is to anticipate its occurrence. If returnees are aware of the pattern of cross-cultural adjustment, including the reentry phase, they can fairly easily recognize symptoms and develop specific coping strategies. Many of these coping skills can be drawn from those developed overseas in going through culture shock.

## **"Decompression"**

When the American hostages were first released from captivity in the American Embassy in Iran, they were taken to Germany for a few days. The State Department explained that their brief stay there was not simply for the purposes of debriefing and medical examination, but also for "decompression." This amounted to allowing time for the former hostages to consider how the United States had changed during their captivity. They were encouraged to anticipate reentry difficulties. In light of the very good adjustment the hostages made after their return to the United States, this stay seems to have served its purpose.

Most returnees do not have the opportunity to "decompress." They usually must begin functioning in their society immediately upon arrival. Perhaps it would be better if only the sojourner could return via boat or train instead of by airplane, allowing time to think through the process of reentry.

## **Communication Outlets**

While one should avoid the exclusivity of "Been-To" cliques, spending time with others who can empathize and suggest ways to cope with reentry stress is very helpful. Fellow returnees often want to hear about overseas adventures, with an interest born from their own multicultural, international experience. They may also serve as mentors for newly returned sojourners, and can assure these returnees that their reactions are normal and only transitional. Returnees may feel that their adjustment difficulties are the result of personal inadequacies. It is good news indeed to learn that almost all returnees share these difficulties and manage to complete the cycle of adjustment successfully.

Another coping strategy is often naturally used by those adjusting to culture shock. During their first few weeks overseas, many sojourners write numerous lengthy letters home. While friends and family may greatly appreciate these letters, the real beneficiary is the sojourner, who may be subconsciously compensating for the communication breakdown experienced in entering this new culture by frantically communicating with people at home. As friendships overseas develop, the letter writing decreases because the need to communicate intimately is now satisfied in the host culture.

Maintaining contact with friends overseas, whether by letter, telephone, or electronic mail, is a very good way to cope with the breakdown of communication during reverse culture shock. Of course, the ultimate goal is to develop good relationships and intimate communication with friends and family rather than to rely on compensatory communication.

## **Stress Management**

While overseas, most sojourners develop ways of coping with the physical and psychological stress of adaptation through various so-called "stress management" techniques such as exercising, maintaining a healthy diet, and developing daily routines that allow for some escape from the bombardment of stimuli and demands placed on them. These same techniques can be used to cope with the stress of reentry. Such basic strategies can be especially important because returnees are often quickly immersed in their social and work milieu before they have a chance to "catch their breath."

## Cues or Reinforcers

As sojourners adapt overseas, they become comfortable with the new physical and social environment—the food, weather, buildings, people, music, and ways of interacting. Life becomes more predictable as they learn what to expect from others and what is expected of them. They learn how to get things done, solve problems, greet people, accept gifts, give tips, negotiate and bargain over prices, and determine appropriate social roles. All these environmental elements may be termed "cues" or "reinforcers." The absence of home-culture cues makes sojourners feel like "fish out of water" until they adjust to new cues in the overseas culture. Returnees in turn miss the cues and reinforcers to which they adapted overseas.

Generally, those who go overseas and insist on starting fresh without any reminders of home have a much more difficult task adjusting than those who take along potent cues such as a favorite photograph or tape of music. One way to cope with loss of cues is to *transfer* cues from one's home environment to the overseas culture. The same idea holds true for returnees. That is, transferring cues from overseas to home is an effective way to cope with the stress caused by loss of overseas cues.

Many sojourners consciously consider which cues they want to take home—articles of clothing, recipes, a musical instrument, or photographs. Others transfer cues without knowing it and only realize a cue's real value in easing reentry transition stress when it is lost. Some returnees would rather have their stereo stolen than the cheap tribal mask they have hanging on their living room wall.

While sojourners cannot bring people home from overseas, they can join together with nationals from the overseas culture through organizations in their local community. Thus the social interactions to which they became accustomed overseas can take place at home. Other coping strategies that involve the transfer of cues might include subscribing to publications from the host culture, dining at restaurants that feature host culture food, or listening to shortwave broadcasts from the host country.

Returnees can also *modify* cues in their home culture, making them similar to overseas cues. For example, one can create something similar to the West African *fufu* out of Bisquick. An African returning from the United States can prepare local food that resembles a McDonald's Big Mac and fries. A party might include some music from overseas, and, with some creativity, one could mix home and host culture clothing.

When going overseas, it helps a great deal to develop opportunities to bid farewell and "let go of" the most important social cues—family and close friends. Such rituals provide significant psychological comfort when one is overseas, cut off from loved ones.

The same is true for those who are leaving close friends overseas to return home. Prior to departure, one should be certain to take part in events that allow for farewells to happen. Those who depart abruptly without having allowed plenty of time for the ritual of saying goodbye often find it more difficult to readjust at home.

## Identity and Cultural Transition

When adapting to another culture, sojourners necessarily go through an "identity crisis," growing into new roles and ways of looking at the world and themselves. Values and behaviors that were reinforced at home often go unrewarded in a new culture. Ways of perceiving reality and solving problems that allowed one to function effectively at home become dysfunctional overseas. The sojourner may also be ascribed entirely different roles and status in the new culture.

Giving up inappropriate behaviors, adjusting one's hierarchy of values, developing new ways of solving problems, and adapting to new roles involves passing through a period of self-doubt, disorientation, and personal examination of one's values and beliefs. From this perspective, the so-called "symptoms" of culture shock are simply "growing pains" that lead to the development of new skills and ways of perceiving the world, greater flexibility in dealing with life's problems, enhanced self-awareness, and increased self-confidence.

In her book *Passages*, Gail Sheehy suggests that human beings as they go through identity crises might be compared to hardy crustaceans. "The lobster grows by developing a series of hard protective shells. Each time it expands from within, the confining shell must be sloughed off. It is left exposed and vulnerable until, in time, a new covering grows to replace the old." (p. 29) Going through culture shock, the sojourner sheds a protective structure and is left exposed and vulnerable—"but also yeasty and embryonic again, capable of stretching in ways...[unknown] before." (p. 29)

The lobster shedding its shell is still fundamentally the same, except more mature. Similarly, the sojourner passing through culture shock is still basically the same except for having new ways of seeing the world and a host of new alternatives for solving problems and considering reality.

As with any other identity crisis, culture shock involves giving up an inadequate perceptual and problem-solving system to allow a more adequate, expanded system to be created. It is a sort of death-rebirth cycle. Unfortunately, many returnees are not aware of how much they have grown overseas, and friends and family expect them to return as they were when they left.

For those leaving a wealthy country and returning to a poorer country, the situation may be even more difficult because of new roles and status ascribed to the returnee. Such returnees are often expected to return home and assume new financial responsibilities, live in greater style, and perhaps act as intermediary between foreign visitors and home country nationals in the workplace. These new responsibilities are often overwhelming and usually quite unexpected.

The increased global-mindedness of returnees is sometimes accompanied by increased intolerance of parochialism on the part of those at home. While returnees bring with them an enhanced awareness of their home culture, they have also seen it as an outsider while abroad and thus are often more critical of the inconsistencies inherent in any cultural system. In addition, many returnees have highly romanticized their own countries while overseas and are amazed to find that the streets are not as clean as they imagined, the people not as warm and friendly, and the efficiency not as great as seemed the case while out of the country.

Disillusionment sets in quickly for those who glorified their homeland while overseas, and again the returnees must go through a death-rebirth cycle—giving up the identity that worked so well overseas to take on a new one at home. While no one can regress to the predeparture "self," many will try to deny the impact of their overseas experience. Others may attempt to hang onto the identity acquired while overseas, but this obviously will not work at home. Another identity must be developed and new "growing pains" will accompany its birth.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Cross-cultural adjustment should be considered a continuum with at least two low periods—entry to another culture and reentry to one's home culture. With awareness of the process of adjustment and recognition of the "symptoms" of stress, individuals can develop their own special coping strategies. Thus, the severity and duration of these stressful periods can be minimized and the entire process can become one of great personal growth.

During culture shock, one's effectiveness is inhibited. The stress produces a great distraction from work or study, and the more quickly one comes out of the down period, the sooner one becomes more effective. The stress of reentry similarly affects effectiveness and is perhaps even more of a problem because returnees are expected to perform well almost immediately upon arrival. The evidence is also fairly clear that reentry stress is much more severe and longer lasting than culture shock.

Students returning home are expected to be agents for the so-called "transfer of technology." In many cases, their governments sent them specifically to gain knowledge and skills that would enhance national development. Reverse culture shock, however, can interfere with this transfer and sometimes prevent it from occurring.



While most sponsored programs for studying or working abroad include orientation to prepare sojourners for the difficulties of culture shock, few include orientation for reentry. In fact, both sojourners and their sponsors often assume that the journey ends when one arrives home. In truth, the psychological sojourn does not end until one has successfully overcome reverse culture shock. Perhaps greater attention should be given to reentry transition orientation. If not, the stress of this passage may actually defeat the purpose of the sojourn and turn a potentially maturing experience into needlessly prolonged stress and pain.

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