

## Health Watch

### Reverse Culture Shock

Welcome to your next Health Watch bulletin, aimed at helping GAP volunteers and expeditioners stay healthy on their international pursuits.

#### So, what is Reverse Culture Shock?

Reverse Culture Shock is a common response experienced by people returning home from another culture. It can often be worse than culture shock as it's often unexpected. Returning home should be the easiest part of the trip, and sometimes it is, however, your trip may have changed you, your values and expectations. Sometimes it may be difficult to acknowledge that you have changed and home is still the same. Your family and friends may have unrealistic expectations of you. This may be hard on you but it will also be hard on them.



#### How it feels

You may feel a major loss upon returning home, almost as if you have been bereaved. There may also be a communication barrier between yourself and your family and friends back home. You may not be able to express the magnitude of what you have been through abroad.

Your view of your home country may have changed in the light of your overseas experience, and you might find yourself rejecting some of your old values and ways of living. This may cause conflict between you and your friends and family who may be affected by your lifestyle change.

You may try to re-adapt to your old lifestyle and re-connect with your old friends but find it hard to do so. Situations and relationships back home are bound to have changed in your absence; especially if you have been away for a long time. You may feel that you no longer belong and that joining in is hard.

If you have returned home without an immediate plan for the future you may feel as though there is a lack of purpose to your life, which sorely contrasts to when you were abroad and perhaps carrying out an important role.

All of the above can leave you feeling isolated, anxious, or depressed. It is important to remember that you are not alone in these thoughts, and that things can be done to help.

It is also important not to engage in maladaptive coping strategies, such as:

- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Risk-taking behaviour (e.g. risky sex or dangerous driving)

- Social withdrawal
- Leaving again shortly after your return home

These behaviours not only affect you, but also your family, friends, and colleagues.

## What can I do about it?

Everyone is different, and nobody knows you like you do. However, here are some tips that you might find useful:

- **Prepare:** prepare yourself before you go by learning more about reverse culture shock.
- **Keep in touch:** keep in touch with your friends and family while you are away.
- **Give yourself closure:** say a proper goodbye to your friends and colleagues.
- **Take a break:** when you get home, take at least a few days off.
- **Write:** writing can be a cathartic experience and can help order your thoughts. If you have experienced some life-changing or difficult events, write about them.
- **Avoid indulgences and rash behaviour:** avoid self-indulgence in alcohol, drugs, and food - these comforts make you feel good in the short term but are guaranteed not to help your recovery process. Also try to avoid making rash decisions; you may feel bored and want to accept the first offer that comes your way, but it is best to be patient and let your emotional state settle.

## In the long-term

Usually you will settle down quickly, depending on certain factors such as the effectiveness of your coping strategies and the extent of your overseas experiences. The experiences from your international assignment are likely to become incorporated into your values and the way you live. You may find yourself drawing on them to inform your decisions and thoughts, and when advising others.

If, after a few months, you have not settled after your return we recommend you talk to a trustworthy friend or a psychological health professional. You can book a **Confidential Review** at InterHealth or email [phs@interhealth.org.uk](mailto:phs@interhealth.org.uk) for advice.

## In summary

Reverse Culture Shock is a common response experienced by people returning home from a different culture. It impacts the individual and their family, and can be worsened by maladaptive coping strategies such as over-indulgence in alcohol or food. Most people recover quickly from reverse culture shock and are able to use their overseas experiences to enrich their lives and thoughts.

[www.interhealth.org.uk](http://www.interhealth.org.uk)