

Emotional Preparation For Home Leave

by Lauren Muhlheim, Psy.D.

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Home leave: it's supposed to be a wonderful time to reconnect with friends, family and your home culture, and it's something to which most expats look forward. However, from both personal experience and many of my clients' stories, I've found that going on home leave can be a difficult and disorienting experience. For many expats, it can even set back their progress in adjusting to their new culture.



I took my first home leave after being in Shanghai for only 5 months. Just when I had hit my groove and started working, it was suddenly time to go home. Naturally, I was excited to be back in sunny Los Angeles and to see my family and friends but I really wasn't prepared to part with the life I had just set up in Shanghai. It was difficult for my family and friends back home to be enthusiastic to see me when I was ambivalent about being there. I've been home and back three times now in all, and I find that each time I've gone through an emotional rollercoaster. My clients also report that things often go haywire during their home leaves: new behaviors go by the wayside, progress is lost, routines are disrupted.

It is in some ways emotionally overwhelming to live divided between two worlds. When I'm living in either world, I fully enjoy it; it feels like I merely put the other life on hold. It's a little like switching the SIM card in my phone, which I do on every trip between LA and Shanghai. When I switch the SIM, it's almost as if the world I am leaving is cut off and the one I am moving towards becomes available. There is so little interaction between these worlds that they are almost distinct. When I am in one world, the other world feels like a fantasy - even though I have Skype, it's hard for me to reach out and connect with the other world. Integration of these two aspects of myself is an overwhelming mental and emotional challenge.

Why are home leaves so hard?

Most expats are given some education about expatriation and culture shock, but much less is taught about preparing for home leave. On the surface, home leave sounds easy: after all, you're just going home. But it packs a secret punch: it condenses into a very short time all of the elements of expatriation and repatriation, including culture shock and reverse culture shock. There are so many people to see and so many things to do, that there's no time to adjust or to process difficult feelings. Then when you come back to Shanghai, you have to go right back to work or school. Whether coming or going, you're expected to hit the ground running.

Moving, even if it is temporary, involves loss. One minute you're on a roll, and the next the school year ends or the holidays arrive. Suddenly you're separated from the house you've been living in, the people you're used to seeing, and all your usual structures. Even if you're going "back" to a familiar place you're still losing the world (even temporarily) you've built in Shanghai.

Other types of loss are more subtle. An expatriate assignment makes you grow and change in many ways. Moving back to a world you haven't been in for a while emphasizes the changes that you've been through during your absence. The people back home may not have gone through such an intense experience – you may realize that you no longer fit in the way you did before.

How to Prepare

First of all, realize that it's normal to feel disoriented, out of place, sad, angry, or disappointed. It's normal to feel inefficient and even a bit incompetent while readjusting to the rhythms of your other world. You may feel strange being a visitor in your home environment. This is all part of the process of returning home. Just allow it to take place, without pushing too hard or beating yourself up. Things will get better.

Realize you may feel exhausted and allow yourself time to adjust to the jet lag. Pace yourself. Don't interpret negative feelings as a reflection of your desire to be with friends and relatives but just understand that you may be more emotional than you expect.

Try to keep routines going; this may take some planning. Make sure you have time for yourself. Make self-care, such as exercise, a priority. Exercise is a mood booster and is a great way to make sure you get some personal space.

Staying with relatives can be particularly tough; you don't have your own space and must live by someone else's rules. Try to discuss the ground rules ahead of time so you can anticipate and prevent conflicts. If you are staying with relatives make sure you carve out some time for your nuclear family as well. Sometimes two nights in a hotel can give a necessary break. If you are staying in your own home, don't take on more entertaining than you can manage.

Similarly, when you return to Shanghai expect that it may take a little while to readjust and get over the jet lag. Try to get back into your routine and resume activities but realize that setbacks are to be expected.

All in all, despite the fact that home leave can be a physically and emotionally exhausting experience, many people find that it is something they do look forward to each season. Hopefully now that you've got some practical tips to help prepare you, you'll also find the roller coaster ride to be an enjoyable one!

Appeared in Parkway Health newsletter December 2009 and Shanghai Expatriate Association Courier, June 2010.

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