



Horizons: Going Home Again, The Re-Entry Process

"I experienced two trips and two experiences abroad. One was in Japan; the other was going home. The first trip influenced me. The second influenced everyone around me."

This reaction of a North American exchange student is very common. Most exchange students find that the process of going home is stressful, just as leaving home and going to live in a host country was difficult.

Exchange students learn so much and become more mature, thoughtful and independent as a result of their family living experience in another country. But they are frequently unaware of how much they have changed. They are, therefore, surprised that going home requires adjusting their "new" selves to their "old" home. Natural families and friends of exchange students are often also unprepared for the changes they see when the student returns.

Here are some useful ideas and suggestions for leaving your host family and community and returning home and re-involving yourself in life back home. They are intended for exchange students, host families, natural families and friends.

Going Home

You are about to begin a process much like the one you experienced months ago when you left your home to go to your host country. Like your trip to your host country, your return home will also have several steps: Preparing to Leave, Saying Goodbye, Traveling and Arriving, and Readjusting to Home.

Preparing to Leave

Most students face returning home with mixed emotions. On the one hand they are excited to see their natural family and friends again, but on the other they may find the idea of saying goodbye to their host family, new friends, and the host country way of life very difficult.

It will help you get through this difficult period if you plan ahead. One thing you should think about is what you will take home with you. This includes gifts for family and friends, of course. But you should also think about what you can take home that will help you share your experience with others. Do you have photographs of host family, friends, your home, school, and neighborhood? Can you, for example, give an illustrated talk on "A Day in My Life in (Finland)?" Have you written down some recipes of your favorite new foods and learned how to cook them? Can you take samples of any special foods, drinks, games, etc. that you have learned to like and would like to share? Have you purchased copies or made recordings of your new favorite music? What other ideas do you have to carry a little of your experience home with you? Another thing to think about is yourself: think about the person that is returning home. How have you changed since you left home? What new ideas and attitudes do you have? What new skills have you developed, such as independence, or ability to solve problems? You may not be aware of any changes in yourself without some careful reflection, but it is important to think about it. Your natural family and friends will probably notice some differences. You should be prepared for their reactions to the "new you."

Saying Goodbye

Saying goodbye properly to your host family is very important. Give yourself and your family the chance to separate one part of your life experience from the next. Begin to express your personal feelings about the separation well before you depart. This will serve as a release so that your feelings don't build up and become overwhelming. Talk about your life in your host country and what it will be like back home. Don't forget to show your host family how much you appreciate all they have done for you. They need to know this. They need to hear this. Take time early to let them know.

Take time, also, to say goodbye to all your favorite people, places and things. Plan to see and spend time with all the people you wish to say goodbye to before you leave. Perhaps someone will have a farewell party for you. Besides your party, you will probably also want to arrange to meet and talk to special people for some time alone. You need to do these things informally. Just planning a short chat over a soda or to have a brief visit to a favorite teacher's classroom or to a friend's home to say goodbye to the family will make you feel better. Don't leave all these farewells to the last couple of days or you'll run out of time! Think ahead a little. It will make leaving a lot less hectic and emotionally overwhelming.

Visit your favorite places. Have a last pizza at your favorite hang-out, one more view of the city at night from the surrounding hills, a last family picnic at the lake you all like, or whatever places are special to you.

Say goodbye to your favorite things. Enjoy one more serving of your favorite food, play that crazy game with your youngest host brother, take one final swim in the river, or just sit in front of your house and take a long last look at the neighborhood that has been your home.

It is important to take the time to say goodbye well. It will help you leave behind what must be left and get ready for all that is ahead of you.

Traveling and Arriving

Many students have mixed feelings of excitement and anxiety when they near home. The anticipation of seeing family, relatives, friends, home, school, and a familiar city with the old favorite places is usually exciting. But wondering how everyone will be, if there have been big changes, and how people will react toward one, may cause some apprehension.

It will be helpful to take things a little easy when returning home. If possible, try to slowly get back into the old life, taking a little time to look around and figure out what and how things have changed, what you may have forgotten about, what things are very different from the culture you have just lived in.

Also take your time explaining all that you have experienced as an exchange student. Your natural family and friends will be interested, but they may not understand all you have to say. It isn't necessary to tell everything in the first week! Besides you may not even realize what things were really important to you until a few months later when you recognize that some wonderful things are missing in your life. Talk about your experience as you develop perspective on it.

Make yourself a schedule for what and when you want to learn specific things. For example, during the first part of your stay, you may want to really get to know your immediate neighborhood. What stores, shops, services (post office, police station, etc.) are near? Learn about the transportation system, restaurants, and recreation facilities. After you know your immediate surroundings, you can expand to other parts of the community.

Readjusting to Home

Strange as it may seem, most exchange students find it difficult to adjust to being at home again. Many experience the same adaptation process that happened when they lived in the foreign culture. The excitement of the first few days and weeks may change into more normal, routine feelings, and then slip into feelings of confusion. Some exchange students get frustrated because people don't understand them or the new things that are important to them. This is sometimes called "reverse culture shock" and is very common.

Why might it be hard to adjust to living in your home culture again?

- It is easy to glorify your home when you're away, especially when things are not going well in another place. When you return, sometimes home is not quite as perfect as it seemed from a distance.
- You may feel like an outsider. Many things might have happened while you were gone which you don't know about. You need to have some time to catch up with friends, family and current trends in your country.
- Your support system has changed. While living with your host family, you learned new behaviors and new family rules. You became used to them. Now they have all been changed again. It takes time to readjust.
- Your role may have changed. While you were an exchange student, you were someone special and different. In your host community, you may have received lots of attention. When you are home you may be viewed as "just like everyone else."
- You probably have changed. Through your exchange experience, you have matured, gained new skills, have a new appreciation for different points of view and ways of doing things, and perhaps are more aware of the world than are your classmates and friends. One student said, "Overseas living brings about a great deal of maturing. Unfortunately, when I returned home, I found that I was a bit out of place with most of my peers."

Readjusting to your own culture can be difficult, but most students don't accept this idea while they are still in their host country. Those who do find it very disturbing to think that they might not easily fit back into their own culture. You will fit in, but it may take some effort on your part. The first step is to recognize that readjustment is a normal process, and most exchange students experience it. Another former exchange student writes: "People can be unintentionally insensitive to the changes in us. They may feel uncomfortable so they ostracize us. Some just assume the communication problems are because we students feel superior. Sometimes friends make remarks about our host country or its people that are unfair or unkind, but our friends think they are just being funny..." Be prepared to experience some reverse culture shock when you return home. But have the same confidence in yourself that has helped you overcome the problems you encountered during your exchange experience. If you are aware that you may experience an uncomfortable period, you will be better prepared to handle it.

In summary, remember you have responsibilities to your host family, community, and yourself before you leave, and you will have special needs as you return home and re-involve yourself in life there.

Three Activities

The following activities will help you think about saying goodbye and returning home. They should give you some help in sharing your feelings and anticipating your readjustment to your home culture once again.

1. Arrange time with your host family to talk about your exchange experience. Together talk about the most important things you've learned and experienced. What have you learned about yourself? How do you all feel about what you've learned and experienced? How do you all feel about the relationships you've established? How do your new values relate to your previous ones? What of your experience will you be able to share with your family and friends at home? What new ideas do you have about your own family and country? What have you learned about the world?
2. Consider the positive and negative aspects of returning home. Divide a sheet of paper into two columns, listing "Positives" on one side, "Negatives" on the other. When you finish, look at each column carefully. Hopefully you will have several things listed in each. It is not helpful to be overly positive, as you may be disappointed when you get home. On the other hand, try not to be too negative as it may worry you and make you anxious. You should be able to really see some positive and some negative things about returning home.
3. Think about changes in yourself as a result of your exchange experience. Divide a sheet of paper into three columns. Label the first column "My Changes," and list the changes you notice and ones you think your family will notice.

Title the second column "Family Reaction" and opposite each item you have listed in the first column, write how you think your natural family may react to the change they see.

Title the third column "My Reaction to Family" and write down how you will react to your family's behavior. For example, maybe you will write in the first column that you are more aware of the world. In the second column, you might say your family's reaction may be anger or resentment that you think you are superior. What will you write in the third column? Perhaps it will be: Be patient and try to share more of your experiences. Encourage discussions to show different viewpoints, etc.

This activity may help you anticipate some reactions to your behavior when you return home. Perhaps you will not accurately guess what reactions you will get, but just thinking about these things should help you look for positive ways to handle situations that may arise.