

COMING HOME
BY
Debbie Lovell-Hawker

After working as a volunteer overseas, many people find that it takes quite sometime to readjust to being back “home”. In fact, home may no longer feel like home, as it is so different to what you have become used to.

Although 15% of relief and development workers report that they are glad to return to the UK, another 25% report having mixed feelings, and 60% report predominantly negative feelings, sometimes known as “reverse culture shock”. It is common to feel frustrated with materialism confused disoriented “like a fish out of water”; exhausted, or to have a sense of loss. Some people feel disappointed that expectations they had before they went overseas have not been fulfilled. Others have experienced relationship problems while they have been away, and so have not enjoyed the experience as much as they had hoped. Some people have health problems to deal with, while others have had to return earlier than they expected.

Many returned volunteers have signs of mild depression for a short period after returning to the UK. These may include irritability; difficulty concentrating or making decisions; a lack of energy; a change of appetite; sleeping problems; tearfulness; feeling unhappy; and feeling overwhelmed by little tasks. Some people find that they think a lot about their experiences overseas, perhaps having pictures about these experiences intruding into their thoughts, or dreaming about them. For other people, there is a sense of numbness, and their time as a volunteer seems distant or unreal. Some people try to cope by not thinking about it, as they feel like they are living in two different worlds.

It is important to realise that **such symptoms are completely normal** after living overseas, just as a grieving process after the death of someone you love is normal and expected. Although not everyone has such symptoms, many people do. It is important that you do not criticise yourself for feeling this way; People who accept their feelings as a normal part of the re-adjustment process tend to get over them more easily.

Among the findings of a survey of one group of volunteers who have returned home between 1995 and 1997 were the following:

Difficult aspects of resettlement were:	Report by:
Communicating the overseas experience	58%
Fitting in again	53%
Finding work	41%
Lack of money	32%
Finding accommodation	12%

If you find it difficult to fit in again, you should remind yourself that so do most other returned volunteers – but they are able to readjust in time.

The most common adjustment difficulty reported was in communicating the overseas experience. Most returned volunteers want to tell their family and friends about the things they have experienced, but find that this is difficult. People’s eyes glaze over,

or they ask seemingly stupid questions and seem to miss the point. There are a number of reasons for this. Some people may not want to hear about your experiences because they feel guilty about their affluence, or guilty because they have not been volunteers themselves. Other people feel that their lives are boring in comparison to your life, and they can't think of anything to say which sounds as interesting as your stories, and so do not want to listen to you. But in the majority of cases, the reason why you can't get through to people is that they can't imagine the sort of things which you are speaking about, as they are so far removed from their world.

In spite of the above, there are people who are genuinely interested in your stories – including other returned volunteers. It is worth seeking out people who will listen to you and help you reflect on your experiences. Whether your experiences were positive, negative, or mixed, relating them to someone who understands can help you move on to the next step in your life. In jargon, that can be called find some “closure”.

Personal debriefing has been defined as “telling your story to someone who understand, until you are heard in such a way as to bring “closure” to your experience, so that you are free to move on”. As well as talking with friends and family, many people find it helpful to have a more formal debriefing session.

Some people find it helpful to write down all the positive things which have occurred because of their time overseas. This is not to deny that there may also have been negative experiences, but it does help the person to see that the experience has not been meaningless. Some of the positive results which are often mentioned are new friendships; being of help to others; personal growth; a deeper appreciation of the simple things of life, a sense of achievement and greater confidence. Putting such a list in writing can help you feel more positive. Many volunteers also find it helpful to write about their thoughts, feelings and experiences in a diary, letters or reports.

Change is tiring. It is important that you take sufficient time to rest and relax and “recharge your batteries” on your return. It may be helpful to turn down some invitations at first, and just give yourself time to adjust slowly. On the other hand, if you feel depressed it is important that you do not avoid all forms of activity. Doing things which you enjoy and which give you a sense of achievement can help defeat depression. Moderate exercise, like walking, can also act as a natural anti-depressant.

Accidents are more common at times of tiredness and stress, so do take extra care, especially when driving (remembering that driving in the UK is quite different from driving in some other parts of the world!) Avoid increasing your alcohol intake or using recreational drugs, as they can interfere with your readjustment. To look after your health, try to eat a balanced diet. If you feel physically unwell, it is best to go to your GP and tell them where you have been working overseas, so that they can test for any relevant illnesses.

If you still feel depressed after being home for two months, or if you have recurrent thoughts about your experiences overseas which are interfering with your ability to get on with life, you should seek professional help.. Your GP can arrange this (free of charge), or you can phone Interhealth (0207 902 9000), who specialise in working with overseas volunteers. It is a sign of self-awareness and strength, not a sign of weakness, to ask for help.

If you experienced any traumatic events while you were overseas, it is possible that you might develop “flashbacks” (pictures of the scene) or other difficulties, even long after the experience.

Although this description of difficulties might sound very negative, most volunteers get through the adjustment process relatively easily. Even those who experience depression or a stress symptom completely recover when they receive help. It is important to remember:

- Having some difficulties fitting in when you first return is normal
- Adjustment takes time
- It is best if you don't bottle up your feelings or criticise yourself for having them
- Talking about your experiences can help
- If you are worried about any difficulties, or if symptoms persist, contact Interhealth or your GP for help.

Useful Book: *Re-entry* by Peter Jordan (1992). Seattle: YWAM Publishing (NB: This contains a lot of useful information, but was originally written for missionaries, and so has a strong Christian perspective).

From Lovell-Hawker, D. (2009). Debriefing aid workers and missionaries: A comprehensive manual. London: People In Aid. (Available from www.peopleinaid.org).