

Reverse culture shock

When we go abroad, we prepare for culture shock. We know the food is going to be different, as will the weather, and people's attitude to life, and there'll be many habits that will take time for us to get used to. But we're not prepared for it to happen the other way. But while you were away, things changed. People moved on. That girl who you did everything with now has a husband and two kids demanding her time. The guy you used to play football with now has a heart condition and watches tv instead. The church has a new pastor and it feels completely different. Your parents moved and their house isn't your home any more.

Then there are other things that haven't changed, but are in such a marked contrast to your life in the field that you find it hard to adjust. We've all heard the stories about people having panic attacks in the supermarket because they don't know how to choose between the 60 different types of cheese, since back in the field it's simply a choice of cheese or no cheese. The sad fact is that this is quite symptomatic of reverse culture shock. Other similar symptoms may include your disgust at the wasteful extravagance of people who don't appreciate the poverty you live side by side with, or you may find that you're accustomed to Christians being teetotal but the members of your church seem like drunks in comparison.

These are just some of the many things that are challenges to us. While they're not necessarily a problem in themselves, we tend to come back from our assignment not expecting things to change. So the fact that they have unsettles us. Add to that the fact that we've changed too, and we just don't fit in where we used to. We have a vague feeling of not belonging, or of frustration that the church doesn't care about things that are important. This is a cause of subconscious stress, which suddenly manifests itself in unpredictable outbursts of anger, guilt or uncontrollable tears. This is reverse culture shock. It's often the case that the longer you have been away, the more likely you are to suffer from it.

Once you're suffering from reverse culture shock, there's not much you can do to get rid of it. Time is the biggest factor, as you gradually learn to adjust. But time can be helped by some very simple practical steps:

Recognise it. Once you realise this is what you're suffering from, you have the reassurance that you're not cracking up. In fact, your apparently erratic behaviour may be perfectly normal!

Link up with people who understand. Other people have been there before. Really, we have. Find us, talk to us, hang out with us. It provides you with a lot of comfort just to know others can sympathise with what you're going through.

Find some stability. One of the causes of reverse culture shock is that fact that you don't fit back in where you left. So find somewhere you do fit in. Seek out new friends, particularly among former mission workers who can see things from your point of view. Take up an old hobby, try and find old haunts that haven't changed, listen to your favourite music and read your best books. Eat your favourite food.

Talk it over. It's crucial to talk to an experienced debriefer. Most sending organisations will organise a debrief, many church missions committees are able to offer this service, and **Syzygy** is very willing to help you with this. Just email info@syzygy.org.uk to arrange a debrief.

Have a medical. Sometimes, the effects of something as simple as a vitamin deficiency due to poor diet can cause fatigue and lethargy that can be mistaken for reverse culture shock. A proper medical can also reveal other long-term problems like bilharzia. You should definitely have a medical before seeking counselling. Visit your GP to arrange a medical or see our **healthchecks** article for information on where to find specialist medical help.

Have counselling. Occasionally people can refuse counselling because they mistake it for psychiatric treatment. Counselling is a series of conversations with a fully trained and qualified therapist who can help you diagnose the causes of issues like sleeplessness, anger or depression. We recommend that everyone who has been in a traumatic situation, had a serious illness, or a significant conflict with colleagues or leadership should have counselling to help ensure that they are in the best possible state of mental health. See our **healthchecks** article for information on where to find specialist medical help.

Make no major decisions. Because reverse culture shock can cause emotional instability, it's important that you don't rush into making decisions during the first few months you are back in your home culture. You may feel tempted to rush back to the field because you feel guilty about the wealth of your lifestyle in comparison to the people you've been working with, or feel that you're not cut out to be a missions partner because you can't cope. Once your emotional equilibrium begins to return, you'll be better equipped to make a rational and prayerful decision rather than a knee-jerk reaction.

The most important thing to do about reverse culture shock is to recognise it for what it is. Once you have done that, you are well under way to recovery. Sadly, we know of too many cases where it was not even heard of, and people have suffered for a long time as a result of unresolved issues.

Here are a few handy tips to help you settle back into life in your home country:

- Milk is a liquid
- Post comes through a hole in your front door
- Church services last an hour and a half max
- Preachers don't shout
- 'On time' means on time, except for church meetings
- To buy your groceries, you have to go to a shop, not merely stop at traffic lights
- It is safe to stop at traffic lights, even at night
- Buses don't reverse up the road to pick you up before another one gets you
- Civil servants are paid by the state, not the user
- Taxis are fitted with a little box that tells you how much to pay
- Toilet paper goes down the loo
- You need an umbrella and a coat, even in summer