

Reverse Culture Shock and the Re-entry Transition

A Singaporean student referred to her readjustment back home as “re-caging a freed bird”. This picture captures her own understanding of what life would be like when she returns home. It anticipates the places of difficulties and challenges, as well as potential places of personal growth.

She will definitely experience **reverse culture shock** - which can be defined as *‘the emotional, mental, and physical response to life and changes back home’*. The term ‘culture shock’ was first used by an anthropologist named Kalervo Oberg in the late 1950’s. It took another 10-15 years for the term ‘reverse culture shock’ to be recognised and utilized to describe the stress and disequilibrium upon returning to one’s own culture.

Kalervo Oberg identified six symptoms of culture shock:

1. **Strain** as a result of the effort required to make necessary psychological adaptation
2. **Sense of loss and feelings of deprivation** in regard to friends, status, profession, and possessions
3. **Rejection** by and/or rejection of members of the new culture
4. **Confusion** in role, role expectations, values, feelings, and self-identity
5. **Surprise, anxiety**, even **disgust** and **indignation** after becoming aware of cultural differences
6. **Feelings of impotence**, as a result of not being able to cope with the new environment.

Similar symptoms are also true of **reverse culture shock**. There is strain and stress in re-adjusting. Feelings of loss and grief are present in regard to friends and the community the returning student left behind. There could well be jealousy and rejection from people back home. There is definitely confusion regarding roles and expectations and a need for values clarification. Various feelings surface when confronted with the daily demands of life back home. The change in weather conditions, the freedom or lack thereof, the living conditions, the family expectations, protocol in the workplace, the social norm, the political climate, economic situation, spiritual and church life, and the pace of life can all bring surprise, frustration, anxiety, disgust or indignation. The returnee may also experience a sense of helplessness and inability to cope with life back home.

There are obvious difficulties in the next transition of returning home. However, once the student has overcome the initial reverse culture shock, new growth, fresh insights, and avenues of influence and impact will open up. Like many returnees, they could change the spiritual, economic, political, educational, and social landscape of their countries.

How then can we help in the international student’s re-entry transition?

Here are some ways:

Understand the re-entry transition process

The re-entry transition has similar components to the entry into another culture. In 1955, Lysgaard developed a tool to help describe the transition phenomenon. He called it the “U” curve. It described the different feelings that one experienced when entering a new environment. The feelings resemble the letter “U” with a definite high point, a clear low point, and another high point, signifying recovery or adjustment. Although life in another culture is not a clean series of ups and downs, the model nonetheless helps identify the feelings and when they occur in the transition (See appendix I).

In the early 1960’s, Gullahorn and Gullahorn studied a similar pattern of feelings when returning home and called it the W-curve. (See appendix II).

(N.B. The ‘U’ and ‘W’ Curves have been disputed and should not be seen as definitive. However, they do provide a helpful illustration of the ‘ups’ and ‘downs’ of cultural adaptation. It should also be borne in mind that few people pass smoothly from one stage to another; often people go backwards and forwards for quite a while. (Ed)

I have called the different phases the Fun, the Flight, the Fight, and the Fit stages.

The Fun or 'Honeymoon' Stage

This period is characterised by a brief or an extended time of euphoria and excitement over being back home or over certain features of the home environment. The returnee will cherish the time spent with family and friends. The initial days and weeks will be spent visiting people, enjoying local food and sights, and sharing photos, stories and souvenirs.

The Flight or 'Avoidance' Stage

The honeymoon stage may last days or weeks, but the feelings of loneliness or 'homesickness' for friends and experiences abroad may begin to dominate the returnee's emotional landscape. The returnee will also be more aware of how different home is from the life they left behind. The returnee may have feelings of being the 'foreigner' in their own country, of being out of step in the cultural cadence of home. The returnee may begin to withdraw or limit their social interaction. The 'reverse culture shock' may be so intense that they may begin to be critical of home. The emotional response is 'flight', or avoiding interacting with the home culture.

The Fight Stage

This is the bottom of the W-curve. This is where the returnee may question the decision to return home. This is that stage when one may hear "I hate this place..."

David Pollock, Executive Director of Interaction, Inc. (Houghton College, Houghton, New York) has done a regular re-entry seminar around the world for children of missionaries, diplomats and business people. In his seminars he suggests two different ways this stage is experienced:

Anger: different and bad

For some the transition gets harder and they feel worse. This stage is characterised by anger. They see what is different around them and they see them as bad. 'Bad' because it is not the same as their overseas stay or 'bad' because what they see and experience violates their conscience or threatens their new values and beliefs. They respond by being angry at their own culture or people. They can become overly critical of the way things are done at home.

Mockery: different and foolish

Sometimes the returnee's response is mockery towards some aspects of the home culture. They may see some practices as unnecessary and a waste of time. Reverse culture shock sets in during the 'flight' stage and gets more acute during the 'fight' stage.

The Fit Stage

Over a period of time, the returnee will make some mental alignment with the home culture and a readjustment of attitudes. In the 'fit' stage, the sojourner makes their peace with what was 'different' in the home culture. Internal disequilibrium is now replaced by equilibrium. They may find themselves more open and more understanding. At this stage, they may also be energised to engage in the culture and be a participant again. Their full re-engagement in the culture, however, does not mean embracing everything uncritically, but it means that they are able to hold on to their new values and still relate with others.

Obviously, reaching the 'fit' stage does not mean everything will be great and wonderful forever. There will still be 'bumpy' times along the way but the dips will not be as often and as low.

Understanding the transition experience will enable you to prepare and forewarn the returning international students with what to expect in their re-entry.

1. Address different re-entry issues

Recognizing and accepting change in oneself and changes at home is a very important first step in minimizing the effects of reverse culture shock. The 'Think Home' booklet is a good place to begin. Use the exercises in the book to help the student identify the places where he or she has changed. ('Think Home' is available online at <http://friendsinternational.uk/resources/books-to-buy/think-home>)

Self-worth and self-identity are issues that merit attention. Where does the returnee base their identity? In what areas has the returnee become more secure? What may threaten their security when they return home? Who is the returnee now and who are they becoming?

'Expectations' is another issue to talk about with the returning international student. How realistic are they? How willing and able is the returnee to adjust expectations?

Closure, the process by which one puts an appropriate ending to an event or an experience, is another topic to discuss with your international student. Victor Hunter, an American, reflecting on his last days in England, wrote,

Today I must say goodbye. Goodbyes are important. Without a meaningful goodbye, an effective closure, there cannot be a creative hello, a new beginning, and hopeful commencement..."

In saying goodbye to each other and to current 'home', we are able to greet and affirm the new hope and anticipation.

You should encourage the returning international student to take steps in putting closure to their time in the UK. This will include saying proper goodbyes, thanking people, settling accounts (both financial and emotional/spiritual), and collecting appropriate souvenirs.

Loneliness and depression are also issues that accompany re-entry. The returnee should be aware of the emotional cost of returning home and encouraged to look for someone who can be a friend to help process their international experience.

Feelings of loss and grief are natural consequences of leaving people, places, and experiences behind. The returnee should know that these feelings will come and go as they transition back home. Those photos and souvenirs, e-mails, phone calls and Facebook connection help to lessen the pain of loss and distance from dear friends.

Returnees need a support group to belong to when they reach home. This can be a church group, a group of former returnees, or a group of expatriate workers. This group will meet the returnees' need to connect with people of similar experiences and interests.

For some the issue of fear needs to be addressed. Help the returning student identify their areas of concern. Their fear may be in their inability to make the adjustment, or in regressing in their personal growth, or in the lack of resources back home. Ask what areas of fear they had when they first arrived in the UK and how those fears were overcome.

For Christian students returning home, the re-entry issues need to be seen in the light of God's call, His provision, faith, vision, and obedience. See 'Think Home' for different questions and exercises on these topics.

2. Identify key attitudes that would make a difference in the transition

Flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity, and patience are necessary attitudes that can make the re-entry transition a growing and fun experience. In addition, having a learner's attitude, humility, and willingness to serve will carry the returnee to new levels of maturity and impact with their own culture and people.

The same attitudes that made for a successful entry into another culture are indispensable in making a smooth re-adjustment back home.

A Swiss student considered her time away from home a transforming experience. Yet she feared that returning home would interrupt that transformation. The re-entry experience need not be seen as aborting the transformation process. If viewed in the light of the larger life experience, re-entry can contribute to a person's growth and transformation. The re-entry experience will provide a new environment to test and validate, push and challenge the returnee to apply what they have learned in their overseas stay.

3. Connect them with friends, mentors, or a church when they return home

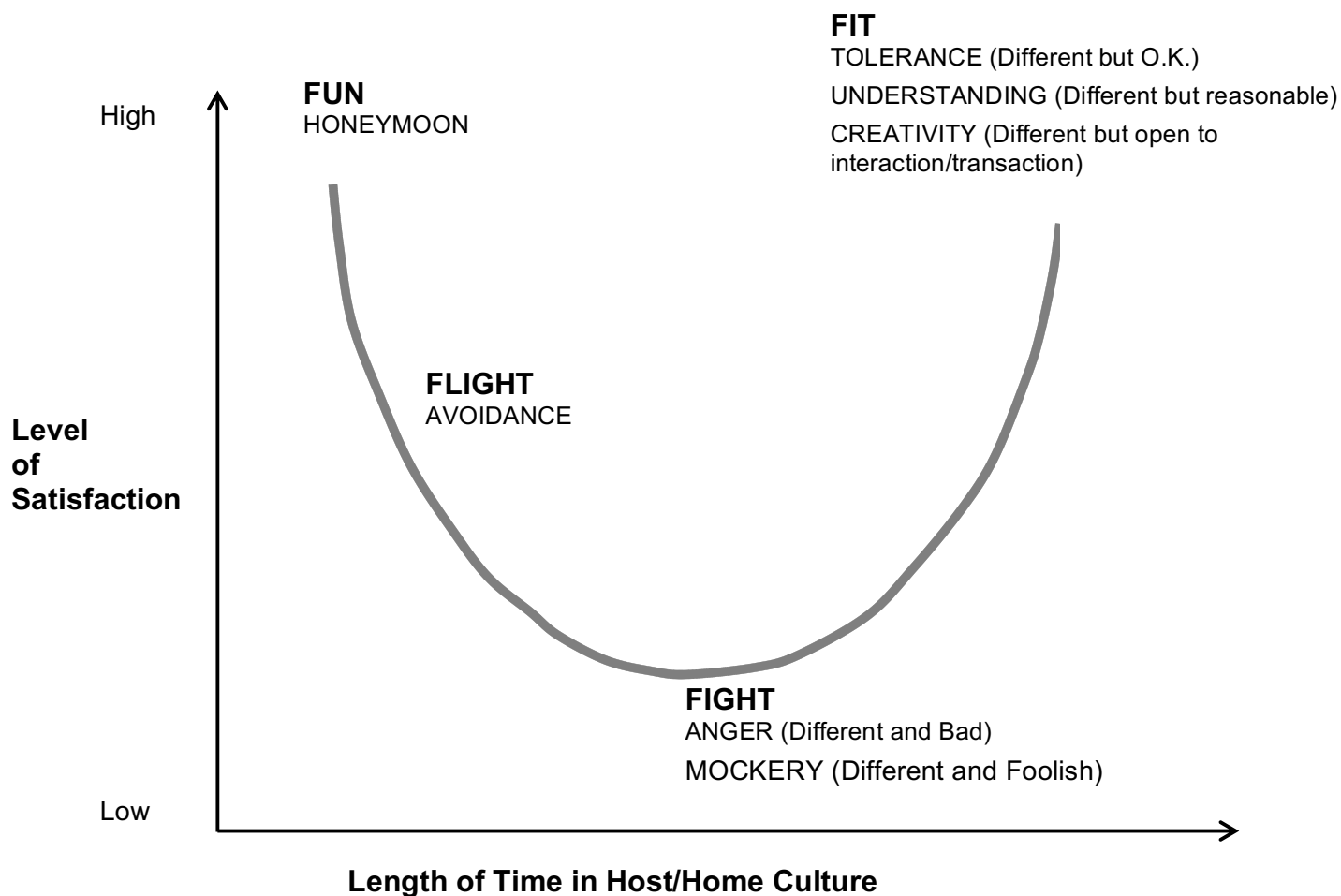
There is an increasing network among international student workers around the world, and a partnership among agencies, that would facilitate this connection. Please contact Friends International for more about this: info@friendsinternational.uk

Summary

Helping your international student friends understand what reverse culture shock is, what to anticipate in re-entering their home culture, and what attitudes to have in their next transition will empower them to move ahead with confidence. Your input into their lives in this area can make a difference in their survival and significant contribution in their home countries. In addition to preparing them well, **pray** for them regularly, and **connect and communicate** whenever possible.

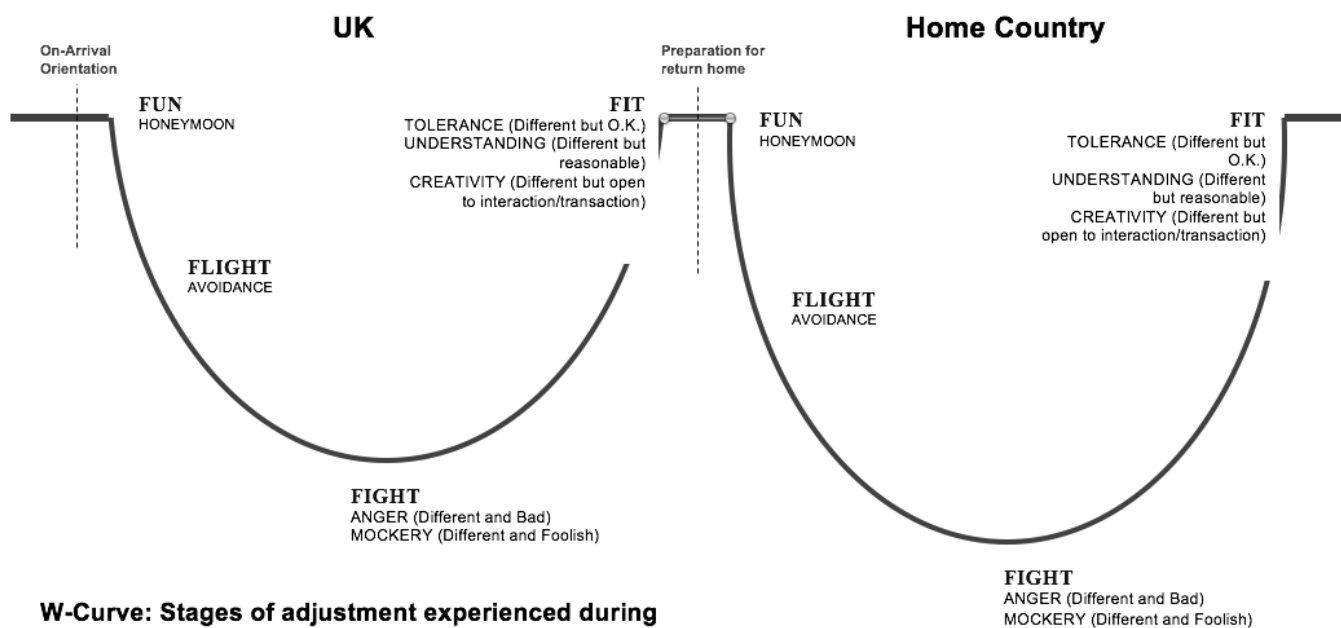
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Appendix I - Culture Shock U Curve



Lisa Espineli Chinn - National Director, ISM
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Based on S Lysgaard 1955

Appendix II - Reverse Culture Shock W Curve



Lisa Espineli Chinn – National Director, ISM
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Based on S Lysgaard 1955 and Gallahorn & Gallahorn 1963