

Reacculturation

Adjusting to Life Back Home After Your Overseas Tour

It is not at all surprising that many military families transferring overseas experience feelings of insecurity and fear. Unsure of what awaits them in their new home, they often develop initial opinions based on rumor and speculation. Upon arrival, they must adjust; gain understanding, dismiss hearsay and ultimately find a way to "fit in," and establish a new life in a new culture for themselves and their families.

What may be very surprising and somewhat ironic, however, is that returning stateside after having lived abroad has been proven to bring with it many of the same issues: pace of life, community makeup, family dynamics and individual identity (especially among children) once again are affected and require adjustment.

While there are a number of resources and programs available to assist military families in adapting to life overseas, the realization that re-entry into the American culture might require equal attention only recently has been considered.

This phenomenon has been defined as reacculturation. What are its short- and long-term effects? How can one anticipate and minimize its potential impact? What are third culture kids, and how do they factor in? And finally, what resources are available to assist in understanding and dealing with all of these issues? Answers to these questions and more are addressed below:

Q. What is reacculturation?

A. Also known as a reverse culture shock, it is the long-term process of re-adaptation after the return home. The re-entry transition now is widely considered one of the most difficult aspects.

Q. What are the effects of reacculturation?

A. While no two people are alike, and everyone reacts differently to change, studies show that even those who adapted easily to life overseas are susceptible to the effects of reacculturation upon return home. For those who expect everything at home to be exactly the same as it was before they left, this re-entry adjustment process often stings the most.

Short-term effects of reacculturation may include (but are not limited to):

- **Feeling isolated and out of place.** A sense of disorientation. While everything is familiar, you feel different. Even walking through the airport and hearing American English spoken can be a surreal experience.
- **Temporary loss of self esteem.** You're used to being "the American," unique and special. When living abroad, native people often are interested in your hometown and what your life is like in America. Your

height, the color/texture of your hair, even the unique opportunity to speak to you and practice "American English" draws people to you. There often is a period of remorse for that loss of notoriety. What set you apart and made you special overseas may be pretty commonplace stateside.

- **Strain on previous relationships.** You may find it difficult to relate to people to whom you once were close — even those with whom you kept in touch. You've grown and changed, and your unique experiences set you apart.
- **Perceived disinterest or jealousy.** Since only you have had your experience, expecting anyone who hasn't to appreciate and understand fully what you have experienced is unreasonable. While people will be interested in what you've done abroad, nobody will be quite as interested as YOU.
- **Over-romanticizing your experience abroad.** Remember, life never is cookie-cutter perfect. Home may not be the Mecca you remembered it to be, but it is important to remember life would not be flawless if you were back in your host country either. Beware the "grass-is-always-greener" phenomenon.

- **Loss of family time.** All too often as service members and their families are forced to reintegrate into American society, they find themselves caught up in the "rat race" of their culture once again. Commuting, commitments, excessive activities (especially among children), and a loss of that small communal camaraderie that results from sharing in a unique experience with others may be lost and sorely missed.

A. Long-term effects of reacculturation: The good news is that over time, readjustment inevitably should take hold. Although it was easy to become frustrated with aspects of U.S. culture that no longer may have made sense to you, it is important to reflect back on those adjustments you were forced to make/and did make overseas as well.

Long-term effects usually are well worth the short-term adjustments and include:

- A better appreciation of and respect for other cultures and countries.
- A willingness to reach out to others at home who are different.
- Ability to take risks, adapt to new circumstances and try new things.
- Increased value placed on true friendships.
- Maintained communication with those who shared your experience.

Q. How can one anticipate and minimize the effects of reacclimation?

A. Anticipating and accepting that this phenomenon exists is a first step toward dealing with it. Realizing that you and your family have changed significantly due to your overseas experience and discussing these changes ahead of time will make a big difference as well. Following is a list of additional tips and ideas to help ease you through the re-entry process:

- **Take time to say goodbye.** Believe it or not, many who return stateside suffer deeply from reverse homesickness. Abruptly ending relationships and leaving a social and physical environment without formally saying goodbye may seem like the easiest way out but can prove much more stressful than simply slowly letting go.
- **Find mentors who have re-adapted successfully.** Contact friends or acquaintances who have been there and done that. They can suggest ways of overcoming obstacles, because they know how you feel. While these returnees can be a good support group, be careful that you don't alienate other friends when you return.
- **Bring some of your host country home.** Before leaving, make sure you each have a special memento and the names and contact information for your overseas friends. During your first few months home, writing/e-mailing and phoning these friends will help you cope with re-entry stress.
- **Use coping strategies you developed overseas.** You learned how to be self-reliant, and you developed many coping skills as you went through culture shock. Now apply that learning and those skills as you go through reverse culture shock.
- **Realize that reacclimation is normal.** Most people return home more self-confident, flexible, tolerant, creative and with a widened worldview. The challenge of adapting and readapting brings about enormous personal growth. The

advantages of these experiences far outweigh the costs as, in the end, you will have a deeper, richer understanding of and appreciation for the world at large.

Q. What are TCKs?

A. "Third culture kids (TCKs) are those who, having spent a part of their developmental years in a culture other than the parents' culture, develop a sense of relationship to both/all cultures while not having complete ownership of one. Elements from each culture are incorporated into the life experience, but the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar experience."
—David Pollock, *Interaction TCK*

Q. What effect does being a TCK have on long-term development?

A. According to an in-depth study by Drs. John and Ruth Hill Usem of Michigan State University, long-term effects of being raised as a TCK vary but for the most part are very positive. They include:

- **International involvement.** Ninety percent of respondents reported having a better awareness/understanding of other cultures. They keep their passports current and keep informed on the places they lived abroad.
- **Adaptability and relating easily to others.** Eighty percent responded that they feel at home everywhere (and nowhere) and relate to everyone, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity or nationality.
- **Being helpers and problem-solvers.** Nearly 90 percent said they usually can figure out a way to handle unexpected or difficult situations.
- **Feeling different but not isolated.** Nearly half say they feel different from those who never have lived overseas and do not feel central to any group. A majority, however, appreciate much in the U.S. that they feel other Americans take for granted and believe strongly that the U.S. is the best place in the world to live.
- **High achievement:** Nearly 90 percent have some post-secondary education, and nearly 40 percent have graduate

degrees. Over 80 percent are professionals, executives or managers/officials.

- **Volunteers.** Over 75 percent actively volunteer in their community or a broader network.

Q. Are there resources available to assist me in learning more about reacclimation and reverse culture shock?

A. Absolutely. The following list should provide you with a great start:

Websites

- TCK World www.tckworld.com
- Interaction, Inc. www.tckinteract.net
- National Military Family Association www.nmfa.org
- Reverse Culture Shock, by Gary Weaver www.ccrussia.ru/?mod=s_page&sp_id=332
- Monterey Institute of International Studies www.milis.edu/lang-sp-living1.html
- TCU Education Abroad www.studyabroad.tcu.edu
- Military Brats www.militarybrats.com

Books

- *The Art of Coming Home*, by Craig Storti, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2001.
- *Culture, Communication and Conflict*, by Gary Weaver, Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- *So You're Coming Home*, by J. Stewart Black, Global Business Publishing, 1999.
- *Strangers at Home: Essays on the Effects of Living Overseas and Coming "Home" to a Strange Land*, by Carolyn D. Smith, Alethia Publications, 1996.
- *Third Culture Kids: Growing up Among Worlds* (3rd Edition), by David C. Pollock, Ruth Van Reken, and Michael Pollock, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2017.