

What Every Missionary Needs to Know about Re-Entry

By Sarita Hartz
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“I am a confusion of cultures. Uniquely me. I think this is good because I can understand the traveler, sojourner, foreigner, the homesickness that comes. I think this is also bad because I cannot be understood by the ordinary, mono-cultured person. They know not the real meaning of homesickness that hits me now and then. Sometimes I despair of understanding them. I am an island and a United Nations. Who can recognize either in me but God?” – Alex Graham-

Three years ago, I landed awkwardly into the USA with six suitcases and \$200 in my bank account and spent 2 months living in a friend’s guest room because I didn’t have a place to live. That was my “Re-Entry” process after 6 years living overseas. Obviously I had no idea how to do [transition](#). I didn’t read any books. I didn’t even know there was such a thing as “de-briefing.” I felt like I left half of myself in Africa, and this other half didn’t know how to function in normal society. It was like I needed an interpreter to un-mangle my sentences. Large dinner parties gave me cold sweats, and Walmart made me feel I was having a panic attack. Mostly, I had to [unlearn](#) living my life in [emergency mode](#). I was unfamiliar with the word [balance](#).

I kept thinking, “Where is my home?”

How to live in this world of concrete when I was used to the wide open plains, the grassy compound, the sunflowers, the red earth soaked in rainstorms.

How to fit into this individualistic society when I was used to my women spontaneously coming over for tea, children to hug and kiss through the day, a community I was an integral member of. I was addicted to being [needed](#), so who was I now on the other side?

There are so many things I wish I had known. I wish I could go back and hug that lost girl and tell her it’s going to be ok, she’s going to get through this. She isn’t alone. And you’re not alone either.

Here 10 tips to follow for healthy re-entry whether you’re a missionary or expat:

Give yourself grace

This will be probably the hardest thing you’ve done in your years of service, harder than moving overseas in the first place. The ending of a chapter can be difficult. There is grieving to do, goodbyes to be said, and feelings of not knowing whether you really made a difference. You’re probably feeling guilty about leaving your community behind, wondering if they’ll keep growing in your absence. You’re probably wondering if you failed because maybe you got too sick, or too tired, or suffered a loss, or came to the end of a season abruptly. Especially when there’s violence, or visa’s, governments or illnesses, coups, or a need for more funds that can force our departure, leaving can cut quick and sharp. I was my soul’s own worst torturer. The inner critic was loud and berating.

*You’ve failed.
If only you’d been stronger.
What will happen now that you’re gone?*

*Who will take care of everyone?
Did you really change anyone's life?*

But God wasn't disappointed in me. I'd done what He asked. I'd loved. I'd given the best that I had. But it took me time to realize that.

Remember, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." If your treasure remains in God and His great love for you, His great approval of you, then it will make the leaving easier.

Understand the importance of seasons

You may have thought you'd spend your lifetime overseas. But most of the time God's purposes for our life are bigger than our own. But He never wastes any part of our experience. Sometimes missions is preparing us for something else. Sometimes we're to spread the message of social justice in the developed world. Sometimes we're to be the ones who help those overseas. Sometimes God is enlarging our heart not just for one place or people, but for the world. Sometimes we're supposed to focus on our family. Sometimes we're just supposed to learn how to be enough, just as we are, without "saving the world." Sometimes we're to learn from the anonymous seasons that God is truly pleased with us simply because we breathe. Surrender to your season and let it teach you what important lessons it has to give you.

Prepare your community back home

Oh wow. How I wish I'd done this one. You are going to need help! With everything. The developed world is more expensive than your missionary life most likely. You're going to need practical things, you know, like money. You might need a safe place to live for a while as you get your bearings. You will need finances to buy new things for an apartment or home. You might need a loaner car. You'll need help getting your kids into schools. You're going to need friends and family to network to find a job to pay the bills. Set up the infrastructure and raise support for this process BEFORE you come home. Ask for practical help and prayer from your church community, sending organizations, friends, family, donors, other former missionaries, etc. Be specific about what you need! You might be surprised who might want to bless you.

Explain to everyone how difficult this transition is going to be for you and how you are coming home with literally the clothes on your back.

You've given out a lot. Learn to be on the receiving end of things for a while. It's ok to have needs. It's not selfish to raise some support to cover those needs.

You're not crazy

I know, it feels that way. It's normal to feel lonely, out of place, depressed even. Gosh, I even felt guilty for feeling depressed. Stop it! It's normal to feel like you just want to close the blinds and curl up with multiple seasons of *The Walking Dead* or *Gilmore Girls* and a tub of ice cream. It's normal to have your body freeze up, impaired by too many choices in Target. It's normal to feel "bored" in America. There's actually something called [post adrenaline depression](#) and it follows seasons of high stress or big projects where your body is learning to come off the "high." It's important for your body to enter a restful state again. So it's completely normal you might want to cry every time you leave your house. You might awkwardly interrupt women's conversations about curtain colors to remind them there are people suffering in the world. You could choke on paying \$5 for friggin coffee. You might be struggling with PTSD or [compassion fatigue](#). Loud noises might jar you. You might not know how to sum up your experience when people ask you,

“How was it living in Africa?” Well, gee, where do I start? I tend to quote Charles Dickens, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” as my standard answer. The bottom line is, this is all normal.

You’re not irrevocably broken. You’re just in the middle of the biggest transition of your life. And it will get better.

Learn to celebrate God’s version of success

Most of us don’t think about all the people we helped, instead we’re haunted by all the ones we couldn’t.

Recognize that shifts in individuals and nations are often slow and you may have just planted seeds. You may never know all the people whose lives you have touched. Be thankful for the lives you did see changed. But what comforts me is that God knows. He’s seen every act of love spent, every tear cried, every sacrifice made and He cherishes them all. He doesn’t gauge victory by the results of the world, by wells dug or people saved, or girls rescued out of slavery. He gauges your success by your purity of heart, your motivations, your obedience, your faith, your trust, and your willingness to be used. God is still at work even when you are not there. He’s in charge. You were just a conduit of Him to a place and a people for a time. Trust His sovereignty in people’s lives. It isn’t all up to you. He’s still moving behind the scenes. Rest in the fact that He loves your people more than you do. Rest in the fact that He will fulfill His purposes.

Give yourself a break (a nice long one)

Give yourself permission to just be, to not have to figure out a whole new identity back home yet. You’ve given out everything you have. You’re processing the grief of all the things you’ve seen: people stuck in IDP camps, girls used in child prostitution, child soldiers who don’t have a safe place to go, babies dying of preventable diseases and the injustice of it all. This grief will take a toll on you. Take this as a time of resting and recovery and don’t jump into anything new too quickly. And don’t feel bad if it’s too painful to reconnect with the place you left behind.

Give yourself permission to do what you need while you heal.

You might have to accept that who you are is enough outside of having some large and grand [purpose](#). Take time for self care and healing your body. Go see a tropical disease specialist. Learn the tools to [recover from burnout](#). Your marriage might be in peril because of all the stress like [mine](#) was. Focus on your kids instead of the mission, the transition is hard for [third culture kids](#).

You probably need to regain your sense of humor. You’ve been dealing with tough stuff and the harsh realities of sex trafficking, war, poverty, lack of hope and resources, the plight of orphans can steal your joy out from under you. You start to fit the typical miserable missionary “woe is me” stereotype most of us are afraid of. Watch some funny TV shows. Play some beach volleyball. Hike some trails. Having joy and laughter doesn’t mean you’ve forgotten the ones you love.

Seek out counseling/debriefing

I cannot stress how important this is. You might be one of those people who thinks you don’t need counseling. You’re fine, you’ve got this life thing figured out. Wrong! Trust me, you need counseling and maybe a retreat. You’re trying to meld together two conflicting world views. You’re trying to synthesize extraordinary experiences, you’re trying to work your way through some trauma, some pain, some disappointment. Your soul probably got a little beat up by suffering. The reality is most people will not

understand or will be underwhelmed by your missionary experience. They might find it unique, but they won't really get the blood you bled, the fights you fought, the people you gave your hearts away to. In some ways, you're like a returning war veteran, with a whole set of experiences unknown to the outside world. How can you begin to explain what you've seen, what you've done or how it's affected you? You need somebody who understands. Whatever you do, don't bottle your stories up. Share them.

Find a supportive community

Most people will not understand what you've been through. Reach out to other missionaries. Find online communities. You don't have to suffer alone. Most likely you've been isolated from other Westerners. This is so important you might have to pick up and move to another place like I did where you can have some friends and a solid faith community. If you run an NGO then you'll need an authentic community where you can build a team of people to support your efforts. Remember, you can't do it alone.

Recovery doesn't happen in isolation, it happens in authentic community.

Delve deep into God's arms

Let's face it, your faith might not feel on cloud 9 right now, in fact you might be struggling through your new world view and theology, you might be struggling to believe in God's goodness or that He's even pleased with you. It might be difficult to sort through all the things that didn't go right, or the suffering you wish could have been prevented. Your quiet times might be dry. You might be angry at God or feel like He owes you for your service. Maybe life is harder back in the Western world and you're wondering, *Did I mishear God?*

Don't remain a victim of your emotions. Press in and press through into God's goodness. He is near to the brokenhearted. Journal your prayers out to God and listen to His voice. Let Him breathe you back to life. Spend time with Him. Ask Him how He feels about you. But truly, inner healing and therapy are some of the ways I was able to really hear God's true heartbeat for me again.

You'll always straddle two worlds

You'll have to find a way to navigate a [bridge](#) between your life before and your life now. You'll need to reconcile these polar opposite worlds into your being. You might always feel your heart is in two places. Find some ways to feed that side of you that loves missions and social justice. Volunteer locally. Educate the West about issues of social justice to engage with all over the world. Do a slideshow of pictures and talk about your experiences. Host a dinner party and cook the local dishes. Do a scrapbook of memories. Get involved with missions or missionary care with your church. Help lead short term teams. Write poetry, songs, or create art about your experiences. Reconnect with your old community over Skype when you're ready. Raise money or send resources to projects you are still connected with overseas. Find refugees in your community to love on.

Lastly, I want to honor you for your service. Saying "yes" to Jesus and gaining his compassionate heart for His lost people, for his treasures in the dark, is no easy feat. You've done something most people would be afraid to do. Don't be afraid to let God honor you for your service as well. He loves you so much. I imagine Him in Heaven laughing and clapping and cheering you on.

He's saying, "Well done, you made it. I'm so proud of you." I can see the tears in His eyes as He looks at you. I can see Him holding you tight.

You're not alone. Just rest in His arms. You've crossed the finish line.

**[Resources](#) on missionary care including debriefing and retreats upon re-entry

Books on re-entry for missionaries:

[Burn up or Splash Down](#)

[Between Worlds](#)

[Returning Well](#)

[Looming Transitions](#)

For churches:

[The Re-Entry Team](#)

[Serving as Senders](#)

For Parents of Third Culture Kids:

[Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds](#)

**I now provide pastoral counseling/coaching services to missionaries, social justice workers overseas or in transition with returning home and straddling both worlds. Please email me at saritahartz@gmail.com for more info.*