

What is Re-entry Shock?

By: Robin Pascoe

Re-entry shock is simply the shock of being home. It's the reverse culture shock you experience in your own country when you visit places that should be familiar to you, but aren't; try to interact with people you should feel comfortable with, but don't; or face situations you should be able to handle, but can't. There can be no simpler way to explain it. Re-entry shock is when you feel like you are wearing contact lenses in the wrong eyes. Everything looks almost right.

These feelings are particularly disconcerting when they happen in your native country and can be far worse than just a bad case of culture shock. Abroad, you expect to feel foreign; you don't expect to when you come home. When this shock does occur, as it does for everyone in some form or another, it can make you feel extremely unsettled and often, so insecure and inadequate, that it can spark a veritable emotional chain of reactions.

Like culture shock, it has a cycle of its own which must be worked through to its natural conclusion. Depending on various factors discussed in this chapter, re-entry shock can last mere weeks. For others, it may be years before the contact lenses are fitted back in the correct eyes.

Re-entry Shock Can Be Worse for the Spouse

At home with the moving boxes and endless details to attend, the non-working spouse often feels the blows of re-entry shock harder than the partner who goes directly to an office and structured job, or a child who heads off to school. That's not to dismiss the intensity of shocks for the employee or the child, but they are different from the ones experienced by the spouse.

Isolated, lonely, and exhausted from unpacking or chatting only with real estate agents and the service people helping put a home together, the spouse is left grappling with the harsh realities of re-entry, like starting over again and thinking how nice it would be if a new life could just magically emerge from the moving boxes. Unwrapping reminders of the old life can bring on nostalgic tears borne out of that exhaustion and loneliness. Overly-anxious to get everything settled and get on with life already, the inventory of spousal emotions that emerges at this time can be almost as complex as the list of household belongings. These feelings are similar to the ups and downs associated with the culture shock of a new foreign assignment. That's because at first, home can seem like a new assignment especially if the re-entry has been into a brand new city.

It's completely natural to feel like a foreigner at first. Though your own culture's cues may be all around, they are still unfamiliar.

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