

Understanding & Coping With Travel and Re-Entry Stress



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ONLINE TRAINING MODULE THREE

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The information contained in these modules is provided solely for educational purposes. The self-examination exercises and scales on this website are not intended to be used as diagnostic or treatment tools. Any concerns you might have about mental health issues should be discussed with a qualified mental health professional. If any of the material in this module raises concerns for you, please contact the Headington Institute staff or other appropriately qualified mental health professionals.

INTRODUCTION | *Traveling and Humanitarian Work*

“It’s 10pm in South Africa, noon in California, and right now I believe I’m somewhere over Greenland. During the last ten days I’ve gone from pale winter sunshine in California, to snow in Colorado, to summer in Cape Town. I’ve spent 49 hours in the air and not nearly enough hours sleeping. On Thursday I ran a workshop for humanitarian workers who’ve spent the last three months of their year working in Sudan. The focus of the discussion was the stress associated with living life in a state of almost constant transition, and on this, at least, I am able to speak with conviction. With this assignment behind me I’m starting to think about everything that must be done before I leave for Christmas at home in Australia next week. I am too tired to sleep. It seems fitting, therefore, to use the time to write this year’s Christmas letter at 39,000 feet...”

— Lisa McKay, December 2004

A career as a humanitarian worker can bring many things – hard work, wonderful adventures, personal growth, and heartbreak at the scope of suffering in this world. For many, it also means a lot of time spent on the road. Sometimes this travel is international – while your friends back home are collecting furniture and other trappings of “normal life,” you end up collecting stamps in your passport. Sometimes it’s domestic – long days and weeks away from home overseeing disaster relief efforts, running workshops, and implementing aid projects in remote areas of your own country.

For humanitarian workers, traveling can be exhilarating and enriching. However, frequent travel can also be stressful. Some of the most common reasons for this stress include:

- 1. The cumulative impact of constant change:** Experiencing constant change in your work routine, living environment, and professional and social networks, can be stimulating, but it can also be exhausting. While many humanitarian workers thrive on novelty and challenge, constant change is stressful and will eventually take a toll if efforts are not made to compensate.
- 2. The dynamics of traveling:** Traveling is tiring even if you’re not battling crowded airports, long flights, cross-cultural differences, and the difficulties of crossing multiple time zones. Packing and getting organized to be away, being in unfamiliar environments, and playing catch-up when you get back, all take extra attention and energy.

3. **Dramatic changes in purpose, intensity, and “status”:** “On the field” humanitarian workers can get used to being different, being noticed, dealing with intense and life-changing issues, and making important decisions. “At home” they are usually not a “special” person, living in a special place, doing special work. In comparison to the intensity and purpose that can be associated with life on the road, life at home can come to seem mundane and less meaningful.

4. **Personal changes that occur in you as a result of the work:** Humanitarian work impacts your attitudes and values. Even a short-term mission will result in some change. Some of these changes are permanent - being exposed to different ways of thinking and doing things can alter your perspective for good. Often, however, people at home have not changed the same way you have. The more you are away from home, the more likely your attitudes and values are to change, and the more likely you are to feel like you no longer belong where you once did.

5. **Difficulty maintaining important personal relationships:** What you have experienced, the ways in which you may have changed, and the important events you have missed in other people’s lives – these can all combine to make it more difficult to relate to people back home after you have been away.

Travel is a normal part of life for many humanitarian workers, but they are not protected from finding it stressful just because they are working for a good cause. To date, the research on humanitarian workers suggests that practical travel difficulties and distress at being separated from family and friends are among the most stressful work-related challenges that they face.

There are a number of ways that humanitarian workers can prepare to meet the challenges of a high-transition lifestyle more effectively. **Every humanitarian worker should understand how they personally find travel challenging, and how to proactively manage travel-stress. It is very important to take** the time to think through the costs and rewards of this work, and identify and practice work-life boundaries that work for you. It will help to ensure that you can still be happy, healthy, and effectively doing your job five years from now.

This is the third in a series of online training modules produced by the Headington Institute that explores aspects of traumatic stress related to humanitarian work. **This online training module aims to help humanitarian workers:**

- Identify differences between life “at home” and “on the road”
- Better understand the dynamics of the transitions that humanitarian assignments demand (preparing to leave, life on the road, and re-entry)
- Identify strategies to better cope with travel stress during these transitions

This module builds on material presented in the first module in this series, Understanding and coping with traumatic stress. Readers who have not completed that module are advised to do so before continuing.

Additional online modules provided by the Headington Institute include:

- [Module One: Understanding and Coping with Traumatic Stress](#)
- [Module Two: Trauma and Critical Incident Care](#)
- [Module Four: Understanding and Addressing Vicarious Trauma](#)
- [Module Five: Family Matters: Self Care for spouses and family members of humanitarian aid workers](#)

Visit our [website resources page](#) to find these and other free resources provided by Headington Institute.

As you work through the different sections in this module, take the opportunity to reflect on how this information is relevant to your work and life. To help you in this process, we have included questions at the end of many study sections in boxes that look like this:

For personal reflection...

- Taking the time to think through your answers to these questions will increase your learning and retention over time.
- Writing down your answers to these questions may be even more helpful to you. Studies have shown that guided journaling can be very beneficial to your physical and emotional health. Writing down your answers will also leave you with a written record that you can refer back to and reflect on as you set self-care goals.

PART ONE | Research Summary: Frequent Travel and Your Health

Many humanitarian workers spend a lot of time traveling. While there are definitely fringe benefits, traveling regularly can be tough. You might be faced with sudden and dramatic changes in:

- Climate
- Time zones
- Culture
- Daily routine and responsibilities
- Amount and type of contact with colleagues, friends, and family

Research is starting to suggest that frequent travel eventually takes a physical and mental toll. For example, frequent travelers risk increased sleeping and eating problems, upper respiratory infections, and other less obvious manifestations of wear and tear.

Exploring the impact of work-related travel has only recently become an area of interest for researchers, and there are relatively few published studies on the topic. However, interesting findings are emerging from the research that has been conducted. Some of this research is summarized below.

Research by the World Bank

In the year 2000, the World Bank hosted an International Travel Health Symposium examining the impact of international business travel on families and travelers. (Follow [this link](#) to view data from these proceedings.) At this symposium, leading experts from different fields discussed the results of a large research study conducted by the World Bank, as well as a number of other studies on the topic.

The World Bank's research consisted of reviewing all of its medical insurance claims made in 1997 that were associated with international business travel. During this time, the World Bank operational staff took about 18,000 international business trips, often several weeks long and usually to destinations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

After reviewing the more than 10,000 health care claims involving visits to physicians, psychiatrists, or psychologists, the Bank found the following:

- There was a strong correlation between the frequency of travel and typical travel-related diseases (such as upper-respiratory-tract infections, skin disorders, food poisoning, and other physical illnesses). Men who traveled were 80% more likely to submit a medical claim than men who did not travel, and women were 18% more likely.

- Healthcare claims related to psychological disorders (especially anxiety disorders, adjustment disorders, and acute reactions to stress) also increased in proportion with the number of missions traveled. The increase in health insurance claims for stress-related psychological disorders were similar across men and women who traveled four or more missions a year. These staff were three times more likely than their stationary colleagues to file health claims for psychological problems like anxiety and acute reactions to stress.

It's irresponsible to take the results of a single study, no matter how large its sample size, and assume that its findings represent the experiences of everyone who travels for work. However, these results are noteworthy for at least two reasons: (1) World Bank staff work in the development/humanitarian field; and (2) Their travel often takes them to developing countries for extended periods of time. It's therefore reasonable to assume that these findings have some relevance for the broader population of humanitarian workers, many of whom have similar travel patterns in terms of mission length and destinations, and who work on similar relief and development projects.

It was not surprising that the World Bank study found a link between regular travel and risk to physical health. The fact that those who travel (especially those who travel internationally) risk physical illness is a finding that has been documented in a number of other studies of tourists and other travelers. What was surprising was the strong correlation between increased claims regarding psychological disorders and increased travel. These findings are especially significant given that only 30% of the World Bank staff at the time of this survey were from the US or Canada (the remainder being from Europe, Asia-Pacific, Africa, or Latin America). As Bernard Liese (formerly the Medical Director for the World Bank) said in his opening address at the World Bank symposium on *Stress, the Business Traveler, and Corporate Health* (2000),

“While it is most common here in the United States to occasionally visit a psychologist or even have a family psychologist, it takes a long time for a European to make up their mind to seek treatment from a psychologist and it takes an extraordinarily long time and a high degree of suffering for an Asian colleague to do so.”

Dr. Liese goes on to discuss findings that he regarded as even more startling:

“The business traveler’s experience, the increase in psychological disorders is mirrored—let me repeat it—is mirrored in the family. The bottom line, this phenomenon does not only affect the traveler, it affects the household. And if it affects the traveler, if it affects the household, it is very likely, almost certain, that it affects the workplace.” [This issue will be discussed in more detail in the section on: Unique issues for singles, families, and children.]

The point of this brief discussion is not to imply that the costs of traveling outweigh the often considerable benefits that humanitarian workers (not to mention the beneficiaries of relief and development programs) derive from the time that they spend on the road. Travel is often an integral part of humanitarian work, and a part that most humanitarian workers would not want to give up even if they could. However, the research highlighted here does reinforce the need for humanitarian workers to be alert to the potential physical and emotional costs associated with traveling, and to be intentional and proactive about caring for themselves and their loved ones as they prepare for the next time they hit the road.

“Home” and “on the road”

The word “home” evokes different associations for different people. Some may struggle with trying to identify what home means to them. Others will know immediately. Home is not merely a geographic location. It is a mixture of personal and social memories, experiences, and emotions, attached to both people and place. Our vision of home can also change with time and experience.

When I have asked people in workshops to consider what home means to them, I’ve gotten a wide variety of responses. For example, in one workshop alone I got the following diverse answers: family, stability, laundry, a sense of belonging, responsibility, love, paying bills, cooking, owning the furniture, relaxing, long-time friends, the cat, helping kids with homework, familiarity, and comfort.

Likewise, people have a wide variety of experiences they associate with being on the road. In the same workshop, the humanitarian workers associated being on the road with: freedom, excitement, independence, having a single focus, lots of work, hotels, drivers, discomfort, airports, bad food, new food, intensity, motivating, CNN, internet cafes, different languages, distance from family and friends, serendipity, loneliness, waiting, harassment, and reading time.

Home tends to be associated with familiar people and places, and routine, predictable tasks and interactions. “On the road” tends to be associated with novel people and places, and challenging, unpredictable tasks and interactions. These examples highlight a number of differences that humanitarian workers typically experience between their lives at home and their lives on the road. Some of these differences are outlined below.

Physical differences between home and the road

There is usually a difference in your level of familiarity and comfort with your physical environment (e.g., food, accommodation, and transport) at home versus on the road. Consequently, the ease with which you can navigate that environment is also different. Usually, being on the road means that you have to spend more time and energy being alert, processing a novel environment, and figuring out how to do things that you would do routinely at home.

Relationship differences between home and the road

There are two themes related to relationships that will be highlighted here – general disruption and different types of relationships.

Disruption: Frequent or extended travel can be very disruptive to important relationships. You will change as a result of your experiences. Your family and friends will change in big and small ways while you are away. As a result of your time away you will have fewer shared experiences, memories, and stories. It is not impossible to maintain close relationships at home when you are often on the road, but it does take more effort, energy, and attention.

Over time, living life on-the-go all the time can have a lasting impact on your “rootedness” in a social, cultural, and/or spiritual identity. This is especially true for expatriates. After a few years of fieldwork, expatriates can begin to feel that they have more in common with their international colleagues than with friends and family back home. Eventually, they may begin to feel that home no longer truly exists for them.

Different types of relationship: In this line of work, people can find that their field/collegial relationships are different and more intense than their relationships with home-based friends. Humanitarian workers tend to share physical and emotional hardship and common service interests. They often spend a lot of time with a small group of colleagues and friends who have a deep understanding of their worldview and experiences on the road. All of these factors can interact to form fast, intense, and deep relational bonds. In contrast, other relationships (although still important) can come to seem shallow, superficial, circumscribed, and untested. Beware of any tendency to become critical and arrogant towards your home-based and non-work-related relationship networks, and to separate yourself from them completely.

Emotional differences between home and the road

There is a certain amount of dissonance that comes with flipping back and forth between home and the road – they can feel like entirely different worlds. The combination of the stress of traveling, abrupt changes in your social support network, and your experiences on the road, can lead to experiencing different emotional patterns on the road than you typically do at home.

Some people find that they are more emotionally stable on the road. This may be because they use extra energy to deal effectively with the various challenges that the trip presents, and defer processing their thoughts and feelings until they get home. In these cases, accumulated emotion may hit them extra-hard upon re-entry. Other people, however, can find that they experience more intense emotional reactions and/or mood swings on the road in response to the extra challenges that traveling presents.

Spiritual differences between home and the road

Experiences that you have while traveling can teach, inspire, and refresh you. However, the disruption to normal spiritual routines and being separated from a faith community can also lead to feeling temporarily un-refreshed, disconnected, and unstable.

More fundamentally, the experiences you undergo on the road can act to stretch, expand, and change your worldview. Humanitarian workers typically encounter suffering, disaster, and moral dilemmas during the course of their work. This can pose significant spiritual challenges and raise questions of meaning, purpose, and hope. Over time, this process can act to broaden your worldview. This, in turn, can make your home faith community seem more provincial, inward looking, and perhaps intolerant.

Behavioral differences between home and the road

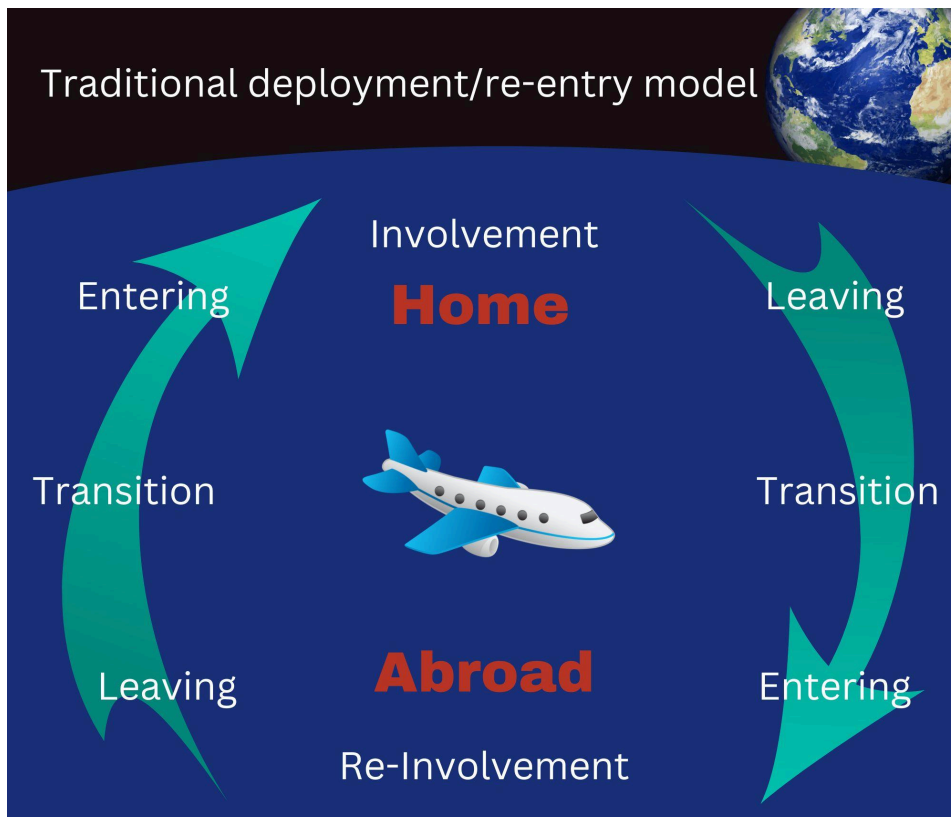
There can be many differences in the way you behave when you're at home versus on the road. Two simple examples might involve changes in sleep and exercise patterns. A more complex example may involve your willingness to entertain danger and risk. Some humanitarian workers find that they are more reckless with their personal safety and self-care on the road than they are at home. For example, they may neglect to take elementary precautions (like not walking alone at night) when they're in a new place, whereas they would never walk around their own neighborhood alone at night. Some humanitarian workers also find that they increase their use of substances such as alcohol, sleeping medication, and other prescription and non-prescription drugs when they're on the road.

PART THREE | Deployment and Re-Entry

The term “re-entry” is most commonly used to refer to people who are returning to their home culture after having been posted abroad for a year or more. However, humanitarian workers who travel within their own country or undertake multiple short-term international missions don’t escape travel and re-entry stress just because they have not been away from home long.

This section of the module outlines the classic deployment and re-entry model. The next section explores common travel stress reactions. Then we will discuss how your experiences as a humanitarian worker might differ from the traditional model. This will lay the groundwork for the final sections of the module, where you will reflect on how you can better cope with travel stress before you leave, on the road, and after you return.

The classic deployment and re-entry model is based on the assumption that the traveler is moving abroad for at least a year before returning to their home country. It outlines several different stages of transition. A picture of it might look something like this:



Here is a brief explanation of what these different stages usually entail:

- **Involvement:** In this stage you are “at home”. You feel settled, comfortable, and like you belong in your work and living communities.
- **Leaving:** During this stage you are preparing to depart. You are detaching and pulling away from your home environment by loosening familiar emotional ties and concluding and delegating various responsibilities.
- **Transition:** This stage begins when you leave one place and ends when you make the decision, consciously or unconsciously, to settle in and become a part of your new context.
- **Entering:** During the entering process you are starting to find your way around, meet people, figure out the context, and build new relationships.
- **Re-involvement:** During this stage you have learned many things about your new context and understand your relative place and position in your new community. You and those around you know where you fit in. You feel secure and you have a sense of intimacy with the new group(s) you are part of.

When you leave your international posting and return home you typically go through all of these stages again.

Now we will briefly discuss some common “travel stress” reactions during each of these stages. These reactions vary depending on a number of variables, including how long you will be away, the purpose of your trip, and personal differences. (For more on this subject see Pollock & Van Reken, 2001, p.61-73.)

Humanitarian workers tend to be naturally resilient, good at coping with change and travel stress, and are typically well-suited to this work. These generalizations are not meant to be prescriptive or unduly sobering. They are meant to help you think more deeply about your own experiences and improve your coping strategies.

Leaving

The process of leaving means detaching and pulling away from your home environment. This can involve:

- Feeling tired and overwhelmed as you attend to numerous details related to work, packing, and other family and practical logistics.
- Grief, sadness, conflict, frustration, and/or anger related to the process of loosening emotional ties, and saying goodbye to friends and family.
- Excitement and anticipation at the prospect of new experiences and challenges.

Transitioning

Being in transition can feel chaotic. All the “normal rules” for how to do things tend to change. You lose your familiar and reliable support systems, and you don’t yet have new ones in place. This can lead to some or all of the following:

- Struggling to orient in the midst of what feels like chaos may make you more self-centered than normal. You can find yourself worrying more than usual about things like your relationships, safety, health, and finances.
- If you’ve gone into the transition with well-defined expectations, you may end up disappointed. The difference between what you expected and what you experience can make you feel completely out of control regarding the process.
- The effort involved in navigating physically and socially through an unfamiliar environment can make you more tired than normal.

- You may feel stupid, vulnerable, and helpless as you struggle to understand the new context and effect positive change.
- Conflicts can occur over issues that usually wouldn't bother you.
- The novelty and adventure inherent in traveling can also be stimulating and invigorating. It can help you see your life through "new eyes" and with a different perspective.

Entering

During this stage you are starting to find your way around, learn the local customs, and build new relationships. During this period you may feel:

- Increasingly independent and competent.
- Vulnerable, tentative, or unsure that you know the acceptable social cues and rules for interacting.
- Ambivalent about your new context and very aware that you miss the familiarity of "home."

Re-entry

Re-entry is perhaps the least anticipated type of travel stress. Instinctively, we seem to feel that coming home should be the easy part of the trip, and in some ways it can be. However, you can still face a number of challenges during this stage, including:

- Coping with a dramatic change in purpose, status, intensity, and/or pace of life. For example, you may be going from a work environment where you had measurable goals and a high degree of autonomy, to a work environment where goals are less tangible, you have less independence, and you must search for new sources of motivation.
- Processing any changes in the way you see yourself, the world, and home.
- Reconnecting with friends and family.
- Coping with the practicalities of getting back, dealing with jet lag, unpacking, re-organizing, and returning to work.

The shape, intensity, and longevity of re-entry reactions will vary depending on how long you've been away, where you've been, and what you've been doing. However, during re-entry you may experience some or all of the following:

- An initial period of hours or days of euphoria and relief at being back (often referred to as the honeymoon stage).
- A physical let-down that involves fatigue and perhaps getting sick.
- Feelings of loss, grief, and sadness as you miss people you spent time with.
- Feeling isolated, as though others are not interested in your stories and can't understand what you've experienced.
- Feeling disillusioned, judgmental, and angry at your culture and its materialism (an especially common reaction for returning Westerners). You can find yourself feeling critical of the values of people you love, and angry at the perceived apathy of people around you.
- Decision fatigue – difficulty making decisions, even decisions you may normally make fairly easily.

Your behavior

All of the experiences discussed above, and others not mentioned, can influence your choices and behavior at different stages of your journey. Here are a few of the less healthy choices you may be tempted to make:

- Increasing your use, or abuse, of alcohol and other substances.
- Engaging in risk-taking behavior (for example, risky sex or dangerous driving).
- Withdrawing socially and isolating yourself from the people around you.
- Leaving again shortly after you return home in an effort to escape the pressures and responsibilities of a more “normal” lifestyle.

PART FIVE | Humanitarian Work & the Dynamics of Travel/Re-Entry

In the third section of the module I described one model of the deployment and re-entry process. This model can be a useful tool for helping understand the experiences and reactions of humanitarian workers who relocate for an extended period. However, many humanitarian workers have very different travel and re-entry experiences. They may be deployed on multiple short-term international missions, or travel domestically as national humanitarian workers.

This section explores some common experiences and concerns of the three “types” of frequent travelers mentioned above (long-term expatriates, short-term expatriates, and nationals traveling domestically). Probably no traveler will have all of these experiences, and some will experience reactions not included here. Again, these generalizations are not meant to appear prescriptive. Instead, they are designed to prompt you to think more deeply about your own experiences.

Long-term expatriates

Long-term expatriates may experience many of the stages described by the classic deployment/re-entry model. Of particular interest are the following points:

- Planning, preparation, and a good understanding of the processes involved in moving abroad are vital, as the true success rate of adjustment to living abroad may not be as high as most people think. For example, Robert Kohls (2001, p.1) suggests that, “if left to luck, your chances of having a really satisfying experience living abroad would be about one in seven.”
- Brayer Hess and Linderman (2002, p.2) suggest that when spouses and children are involved, “family adjustment problems are the number one reason for failed or prematurely terminated overseas assignments.”
- It often takes about 4 months for “culture shock” to start to dissipate and for expatriates to begin to feel that they are beginning to understand and “settle in” to their new context (Kohls, 2001).
- Most expatriates find readjusting to home (also known as reverse culture shock) more difficult than adjusting to being abroad ever was (Storti, 2003).

Much of the material in this module will prove relevant for long-term expatriates, especially those who also travel regularly while posted abroad. However, the remainder of the module focuses primarily on the experiences and needs of short-term expatriates and national staff who travel domestically. The reasons for this include:

- National staff and short-term expatriates make up the majority of humanitarian workers.
- A number of excellent resources already exist that explore the typical relocation and re-entry experiences of long-term expatriates. (See the Resources section of this module.)

Short-term expatriates

Many humanitarian workers (such as human rights advocates and disaster relief workers) undertake multiple short-term missions every year. Short-term expatriates' experiences of the home/field/home cycle tend to differ from long-term expatriates' experiences in the following ways:

- **Time frame:** For short-term expatriates, all the dynamics associated with entry, departure, and re-entry are compressed into a time period that can span anywhere from a couple of days to a couple of months. As “culture shock” doesn’t typically begin to subside until the fourth month, this suggests that there may be significant parts of the “entering” dynamic that short-term expatriates do not experience during a typical assignment.
- **Repetition:** Short-term expatriates may repeat the home/field/home cycle numerous times a year.
- **Intensity:** Short-term expatriates can find that their times on the field are intense, focused, and both professionally invigorating and stressful. In contrast, the time they spend at their home base, while perhaps not as stressful, can seem unproductive, frustrating, and even boring.

Collectively, this suggests that short-term expatriates spend an increased proportion of their time in “transition.” This means that the fundamental issue for this group is more pervasive than just managing the transitions inherent in one cross-cultural move, as challenging as that can be. Rather, short-term expatriates must learn to cope effectively with a “high-transition lifestyle” – a lifestyle that presents repeated and intense transitions and a high degree of novelty and challenge. There are a number of traits and skills that help with this. Section Seven of this module, Resilience: Skills that make a difference, looks at some of the skills that can help you cope effectively with a high transition lifestyle.

In previous sections I touched on some of the experiences and feelings you may have while traveling that can influence the way you relate to others. Sometimes these emotions can seem almost contradictory. For example:

- Before you leave: You may be sad to say goodbye, nervous about the upcoming challenges, and/or excited about the experiences awaiting you.
- On the road: You may become more aware of how much you love your family and friends, and you may feel more lonely and isolated.
- When you return: You may be excited to share what you have experienced with family and friends, and/ or you might find this difficult. This may be because you want to protect people from being burdened by harsh realities, or because you feel they can never truly understand what you have experienced. You can battle feelings of frustration, scorn, and anger towards those around you – even those whom you love and long to reconnect with.

Issues for those with partners and families

If you have a partner and/or kids, then you are part of a family system. Your regular coming and going forces adjustments to that family system - for you and for them.

For you: One of the main challenges can come after you return, as you adjust from being solo and primarily in work-mode, to being back in a home-routine where there are other people that you have a responsibility to share your life with. While you have been gone, perhaps dealing with life and death issues, your partner may have been dealing with a broken toilet and sick kids. They might seem more interested in telling you all about that, than in hearing the details of your trip. You may have a hard time being interested in those details after the intensity of what you have been experiencing, and you may find their lack of interest in your experiences hurtful and isolating.

For them: The challenges are not all one-sided. Your family may have some difficulty re-adjusting to your presence. If you are a regular traveler, your family probably has two “routines” – one for when you’re there, and one for when you aren’t. Often, it’s the periods around your leaving and returning that can prove most disruptive for them, as they must transition between routines. Children, for example, can find the shift in authority and discipline dynamics disruptive.

For partners or spouses, just as it can be hard for them when you leave, it can be difficult when you return. They will usually have adjusted to function effectively without you around. When you return, they are suddenly faced with consulting you on decisions, timetables, and/or discipline issues again. In addition, while the broken toilet and the kids' colds can seem relatively trivial to you in the grand scheme of life, these are the details that have been complicating their lives while you were gone. They can experience your lack of interest in what was important to them as another form of abandonment.

Issues for singles

It can be exhausting (although rewarding) to come home to the demands of a family after an intense assignment. It is easier in some ways, but probably more dangerous, to come home to an empty house. The demands that other people place upon you, and the responsibilities you have to them, can pull you out of focusing only on yourself.

One of the biggest risks for single humanitarian workers who travel frequently may be the degradation of their relationships with family and friends. After several years of frequent travel they may get to the point where they have few close supportive "home-base" relationships with people that they can share with and depend upon. A second significant issue for singles who travel regularly is the temptation not to care for themselves properly, even at home, because of the effort and time that is needed to do things like grocery shop regularly and cook for one.

Summary

Our relationships are so important that recent research suggests that when it comes to our overall well-being, "it may be our relationships that save us rather than our knowledge and skills" (Fawcett, 2003, p.124). The most protective relationship networks aren't necessarily large, but they are interconnected. Families or groups of friends who know each other well are examples of interconnected networks. If you do not have strong and healthy relationships, one of the best things you can do for yourself is to invest in building such relationships.

The skills you have just listed probably contribute to resilience – which is the ability to recover quickly from disruptive change without being overwhelmed or acting in dysfunctional ways. Here are some of the skills that have been identified as contributing to resilience (Kohls, 2001; Conner & Davidson, 2003).

Skills that make a difference

- Tolerance for ambiguity
- Lower goal/task orientation
- Realistic sense of control/having choices
- Active, problem-oriented coping
- Flexibility; adaptability
- Perceptiveness
- Open-mindedness
- Nonjudgmentalism
- Tolerance for differences
- Ability to handle unpleasant or negative feelings
- Empathy
- Communicativeness
- Curiosity
- Willingness to learn
- View change or stress as challenge/adventure/opportunity
- Willingness to tolerate physical hardship
- Confidence in your own ability to deal with challenges
- Sense of humor
- Optimism
- Close, secure and warm attachments in relationships
- Motivation
- Self-reliance
- Persistence, not being easily discouraged
- Strong sense of self
- Ability to fail
- Altruism
- Strong sense of purpose and meaning
- A defined moral compass
- Spirituality and faith (belief in a power apart from your own existence and a coherent “meaningfulness” in the universe)

This is a fairly long list, though not exhaustive. If you answered the question at the beginning of this study section, you probably wrote down things that were not mentioned. Add your contributions to this list of skills that contribute to resilience. Now, take some time to answer the following questions.

Researchers focusing on different topics give different answers to the two questions above. For example, Robert Kohls writes about the experiences of Westerners moving abroad and effective cross-cultural communication. In that context, he identifies the following three skills as especially important (Kohls, 2001, p. 111):

- **Sense of humor:** “No matter how many of the other traits you have, the ability to laugh things off will be the ultimate weapon against despair.”
- **Low goal/task orientation:** Many Westerners going abroad for corporate posting set unrealistic and unattainable goals that lead to failure. Those who are less goal-oriented and task-driven will be more relaxed, flexible, and possibly more effective.
- **Ability to fail:** “Everyone fails at something overseas; it is absolutely built in.” Yet many Westerners who move abroad for a corporate posting are successful high achievers who may have very limited experience of failure at home.

There’s no one “right answer” regarding the resilience skills that are most effective in helping humanitarian workers cope well with frequent travel. All of the qualities listed above are helpful for different reasons. However, in my opinion, these are three of the most important types of skills for humanitarian workers who are often on the road:

- **Flexibility and adaptability:** If you travel enough, plans will change and things will go awry. Flights will get canceled, you won’t be able to get a visa, your luggage will get lost, you’ll get food poisoning, or you’ll land in Indonesia expecting to be working in Jakarta and find yourself assigned to northern Sumatra where you’ll be sharing a tent with three other people – and these are just the personal challenges.

Being able to “go with the flow” when these things happen, while still maintaining some necessary sense of personal control, will serve you well.

- **Optimism and sense of humor:** A general tendency to expect the best, regularly experiencing positive emotions (even alongside negative emotions like frustration), and a propensity to seek out the funny side of life, will all help you stay balanced emotionally in the face of the extreme stressors humanitarian work can bring.
- **Communicativeness and good social support:** Without close, warm, trusted relationships (especially at home) and the ability to form those sorts of relationships, you will probably find that the isolating effect of frequent travel will eventually prove destructive to your general happiness, your sense of purpose and meaning, and your desire to continue in this work.

Different people will have different approaches to preparing to leave. However, even if you're a seasoned traveler, there may be some things that you could do differently before you leave that may make departing less stressful for you and those you love. Leaving without having taken the time to practically and emotionally prepare for being away can be the source of considerable stress. Consider whether any of the following suggestions might be helpful:

- Address the concerns of people close to you. Especially if you are going somewhere they have never been, or somewhere dangerous, they will probably worry. You can help by giving them your travel itinerary, telling them how and when they can contact you, and whom to contact in your organization if they are concerned about you. You can discuss the issue of security with them and reassure them that you, and the organization you are working for, will do everything possible to ensure your safety. Listen to their concerns, and try to reassure them with specific, positive information.
- Establish family contingency and emergency plans. This may mean writing a will, leaving clear instructions on how to deal with a medical emergency and/or your death, and identifying trusted people who are available to help your family in the event of a worst-case scenario while you are away (such as all the children getting sick at once).
- Pre-pay your bills. You may want to suspend mail/newspapers/email lists if you will be away for an extended period, or somewhere with limited email access.
- Anticipate important obligations (like birthdays) that will occur while you are away or shortly after you return, and pre-prepare.
- Make sure there's something in the house for you to eat when you return. Stock up on soup and pasta, or pre-cook meals and freeze them. This is especially important if you live alone.
- Leave your house and your workspace clean and organized.
- Do what you can to have "normal" waiting for you when you get back. This will mean different things for different people, but one thing to be wary of is packing your schedule full of appointments, meetings, and gatherings during the first few days after you get back (even if this is normal). Remind yourself that you will probably be tired, and deliberately build in a little extra breathing room.

- Plan for some time off when you get back, and schedule it before you leave. If before you even leave you plan for a short break after you get back, you are more likely to take time to rest than if you wait until you return and then see if you can squeeze it in.
- Pre-schedule a welcome home “party” or gathering so that you have something to look forward to.
- Pre-pack certain items. Staying “packed” to a certain extent can take some of the hassle out of packing. One thing that many people find helpful is keeping a cosmetics case fully stocked with toiletries.
- Pack with a packing list. Ironically, the more frequently you travel the more casual you may get about the process and, consequently, the more likely you are to make silly mistakes (such as missing flights and forgetting to pack important items). Packing with a packing list will take some of the mental effort out of packing and help prevent you from leaving important items behind. Click [here](#) to download a sample packing list that you can customize.
- Try to ignore unusual pre-departure behavior from those you love. In the days before you leave, your family is starting to anticipate your being gone. During this time they may act and react differently than they normally would; for example, they may be withdrawing to try to protect themselves against the pain of saying goodbye. This can be hard, but try not to take it personally. Remember that they are also under some strain as they prepare to say goodbye to you.
- Bid a temporary farewell to people close to you. How you do this will depend on the departure rituals your family or friendship group has in place, but some ways of doing this are: having dinner, meeting friends for drinks, or leaving cards or little gifts for children under their pillows so that they will find them when they go to bed that night. Find a departure ritual that works for you.

How to best cope with travel stress on the road will depend partly on the length and nature of your assignments, and on what works well for you. Even if you're a seasoned traveler, there may be some things that you could do differently while you're on the road that will make traveling less stressful for you and those you love. Consider whether any of the following suggestions might help:

- **Slow down. Leave plenty of time to make flights.** Consciously move, talk, and behave, in a more relaxed manner while traveling. This will help you feel less tense and stressed.
- **Stay connected to family and friends back home.** Especially if you'll be away for an extended period, try to send out regular updates about your experiences. Tell a couple of stories that will keep people informed about some of the little details of your life, not just the broad brush-strokes of where you are and what you're doing. Send photos to help them visualize where you are. Ask someone at home to agree to be in regular, consistent, communication with you (perhaps weekly).
- **Stay connected to your home office.** Especially if you're traveling solo, communicate regularly with colleagues at headquarters. This will help you feel up to date on news and current projects when you return.
- **Try to keep up with some of the news.** For example, you might want to set your homepage to CNN or your local online newspaper. This will help you feel connected to the world outside your current posting.
- **Be organized in how you file receipts for expenses.** This will mean that filing your expense report will not be such a tedious chore when you return.
- **Don't neglect basic self-care.** Take time to eat right. Carry some bottled water and packaged food (e.g., muesli bars, nuts, dried fruit, and chocolate) with you. Find ways to exercise regularly. Look for opportunities to do things you enjoy.
- **Draw a line around the job, even on the road.** This can be very difficult, especially when you are working in crisis situations, disaster zones, and refugee camps. Try to ensure that you take at least two hours a day away from work. On deployments longer than 10 days, take at least one day off each week, and take your rest and relaxation leave. Taking adequate time off to rest and decompress is necessary to help ensure that you don't arrive home completely exhausted. In the long run this will help prevent burnout.

- **Remind yourself that you're functioning in a new environment and facing more challenges than usual.** Don't be surprised if you find yourself unusually tired. This is probably the result of doing your normal work, as well as the "work" associated with coping effectively with all sorts of changes that range from eating different food to cross-cultural communication challenges. Try not to expect quite the same level of productivity and efficiency from yourself as you would at home.
- **Seek out ritual and "normality."** Travel tends to remove us from rituals and routines that usually guide how we live and how we interact with others. People who travel frequently are more likely to be in environments low on ritual, surrounded by mental and physical chaos. Look for ways to establish some new rituals in areas that you find meaningful. For example, develop "on the road" rituals around nurturing yourself spiritually or unwinding at night.
- **Carry some "sacred objects" and good books with you.** Sacred objects are things that remind you of what you value most in life (e.g., photographs of your family, or objects that have spiritual significance for you). These serve as reminders that this trip is just part of the bigger story of your life. Books are always helpful to have on hand for times when you temporarily need to focus on something other than work. Make sure that at least some of these books are uplifting, humorous, and/or light. Humanitarian workers can see a lot of suffering, trauma, and violence during their day's work. It's wise to be careful of how much of these things you ingest via "entertainment."
- **Look for ways to build something enjoyable into your travel schedule on at least some of your trips.** For example, if you're visiting another city for a conference, build in some time to visit a local attraction. If you find you never have time while traveling for something educational or enjoyable, start being more proactive about making time.
- **Look for ways to capture what you're learning from each particular trip.** Find ways to capture what you are experiencing and what you are thinking and feeling. Some common ways to do this are through journaling, writing letters, drawing or collecting art, writing poetry or fiction, photography, and collecting stories and/or recipes from the places you visit.

- **Prepare for times when you find yourself feeling really “down” on the road.** Dealing with tough times on the road can be made easier by thinking beforehand about what may help. It’s hard to think of things that will make you feel better when you’re already feeling bad. You might want to carry a list of suggestions that you can refer to during these times. One thing that might be on that list is calling family or friends. Another activity is making a list of all the positive things you can identify about your current situation. Temporarily ignore the negative—you’ve probably been focusing on that enough for a while anyway—and challenge yourself to phrase things in positive terms. Get creative.
- **If you have a choice regarding your schedule, be intentional about the day of the week you return.** Many people prefer to return from trips on Thursday or Friday, to allow them a couple of days to rest and spend time with friends and family.

For personal reflection...

- What else, from your experience, would you add to the list above?
- Are there one or two of these suggestions you feel may be especially helpful the next time you are on the road?

How you experience re-entry will depend on any number of factors (including your personality, how long you've been away, where you've been, and what you've been doing), so it's not surprising that people have different ways of adjusting to being home after a trip. Some want to unpack, check e-mail, and get organized the minute they walk through the door. Others want to ignore their luggage, sit down for a cup of tea and time with their family, and delay unpacking for days.

One important theme of this module is knowing what works best for you and being intentional about doing that. Sometimes this will mean compromise, as what works best for you may not be what your family wants and needs. Talking through your needs and desires with your partner, preferably sometime when you're not both tired and stressed, is an important part of the process. Consider whether any of the following suggestions may help you cope better with the re-entry process:

- **Expect that you may experience some re-entry reactions.** Recognize that even good changes and transitions usually require adjustment, disrupt routines and relationships, and take some energy. People often criticize themselves for feeling irritable or more emotional during re-entry. These emotions, and others, are normal in the face of change.
- **Create a buffer zone between the field and home.** This can be a geographic buffer zone, like a stop-over somewhere neutral and comfortable on your way home. Or you can take steps to create personal space during the first two days you're home; for example, you might delay telling people of your return (and even ignore email and phone calls) to give yourself time to unpack and restock the fridge.
- **Prepare for "those" conversations with family and friends.** Pick one funny anecdote, a little known fact, or an interesting (and not too grim) prediction about the future development of the place you have been working in. Then be prepared to change the topic of conversation if people don't ask follow-up questions.
- **Debrief your experience with a counselor or people you trust who will understand.** Ask and answer questions such as: Tell me about the faces and lives of the people you met? What stories were significant to you during this trip? What did you learn about yourself? What lessons are you carrying away with you?
- **Get involved and back into "routine."** The feeling of belonging to a community again will help if you're struggling with re-entry. Get involved in your regular home routine (e.g., community or church groups). Continue reaching out to people and working to reconnect. However, be wary of packing your schedule too full.

- **Plan a realistic work schedule.** Don't add to your stress by crowding your schedule or having unrealistic expectations regarding how quickly you will be able to tie up the details related to your trip and how much work you will accomplish immediately after getting back.
- **Take enough time (and then some extra) for rest, relaxation, family reconnection, and your personal priorities.** Now is the time to make some space for yourself to wind down and devote some time and attention to your personal priorities. Relax and indulge yourself in moderation.
- **Avoid making big decisions in the immediate aftermath of returning home.** Just as any other period when you're under heightened stress, you should try to avoid making decisions about important issues right after you get back (such as whether or not to quit your job).
- **Give yourself a spiritual check-up.** Ask yourself questions like these: Do you feel closer to or more distant from God or your source of spiritual energy? How have your beliefs been challenged or changed? Do you need to try something new in the way that you are nourishing your spirituality?

For personal reflection...

- What else, from your experience, would you add to the list above?
- Are there one or two of these suggestions you feel may be especially helpful next time you are on the road?

PART ELEVEN | *Conclusion*

As stated previously, the point of this online module is not to imply that the costs of traveling outweigh the often considerable benefits that humanitarian workers (not to mention the beneficiaries of relief and development programs) derive from the time that they spend on the road.

Travel is often an integral part of humanitarian work, and a part that most humanitarian workers would not want to give up, even if they could. Just because traveling, like most experiences in life, can sometimes be frustrating, lonely, and generally unpleasant doesn't necessarily mean it's a harmful experience. These feelings can be precursors to insight and personal growth. And sometimes it is largely because the time spent on the road feels so rich and stimulating that readjusting to home life and routine can be problematic.

However, the research highlighted in this module does reinforce the need for humanitarian workers to be alert to the potential physical and emotional costs associated with traveling. Humanitarian workers who are serious about maintaining their ability to cope effectively with the pressures of this type of work should think honestly and strategically about the impact on travel on their lives. Be intentional and proactive about caring for yourself and your loved ones as you prepare for the next time you hit the road, suitcase in hand.

RESOURCES

This module provides an introduction to the topic of vicarious trauma and humanitarian work. It is intended to provide you with some basic information about vicarious trauma, and to guide you towards additional resources. Other helpful websites and books are listed below.

If you would like more information, or if you wish to speak to a mental health professional or desire a professional referral, please contact the Headington Institute at support@headington-institute.org or phone (626) 229-9336.

On the internet

[Families in global transition](#)

Supports families and individuals who live and move internationally by providing resources and holding a yearly conference.

[Interaction International](#)

Focuses on issues relevant to third-culture kids and internationally mobile families.

Books

The Expert Expatriate (2002). By Melissa Brayer Hess and Patricia Linderman. Published by Intercultural Press - A very practical guide for those moving abroad, full of information about everything from packing to preparing children to moving pets.

The Art of Coming Home (2003). By Craig Storti. Published by Intercultural Press - An excellent resource for expatriates returning home after a lengthy international assignment.

Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing up Among Worlds (2001). By David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken. Published by Intercultural Press - An outstanding resource and essential reading for families living abroad with children, and for anyone who spent time abroad while they were growing up.

Survival Kit for Overseas Living: For Americans planning to live and work abroad (4th edition) (2001). By Robert Kohls. Published by Intercultural Press - Written for Americans planning on relocating internationally, explores some of the essential concepts associated with moving abroad and re-entry.

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