

Transitioning Back to Home

...after Working in a Remote Environment

After working in a remote community, you might experience a time when you feel a need to readjust to your own life, your own family and work role. It is natural to experience strong reactions during this readjustment.

The following information may assist you in understanding your reactions and help you manage them.

Living and working with another culture can be psychologically demanding. The process of adjusting to an unknown environment is called 'culture shock'. Culture shock is a type of exhaustion that results from the extra mental and emotional effort required to exist and work in an environment that is different.

While your work may be satisfying, the mental and emotional effort required to observe, comprehend, and respond to a myriad of differences from morning 'til night, day after day, can have a cumulative physiological effect over time.

Likewise, when you return to your own life, you may enter a period of readjustment, which can be more difficult than adjusting to the new culture.

Working in a remote community may have stretched all your capabilities. You may have been required to make decisions directly impacting people in significant and powerful ways. You may have formed deep attachments to the people with whom you have been living and working.

After such a challenging, rewarding and demanding time, life can suddenly feel trivial or superficial. You can find yourself questioning the values of your own culture. This is all part of transitioning back to 'home'.

Some common reactions:

- Feelings of disorientation
- Feeling unsettled
- Numbing of feelings
- Feeling immobilised
- Feeling that everyday life is superficial or trivial
- Feeling isolated
- Feeling unmotivated
- Irritability or outbursts of anger
- Difficulty making decisions
- Difficulty problem solving
- Difficulty concentrating
- Avoidance of thinking or talking about experience
- Limiting contact with others
- Sleep disturbance
- Periods of crying
- Change in appetite
- Upset stomach
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Find it hard to give meaning to life when the remote work is over
- May feel overwhelmed when having to leave colleagues behind
- Disturbed sleep patterns
- Reduced ability for domestic or social activities (e.g. sport, self-care, engaging with children)
- Relationship difficulties (e.g. communication, unmet expectations, responsibilities, role conflicts)

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Stress

Some reactions are due to stress. Dealing with so much cultural difference requires extra energy, *constantly*. Stress is a normal and natural part of life, but too much stress can make it difficult to cope with everyday life.

Individuals need to socially reconnect with their friends who may not understand their experience, while workers who have adapted their skills to a different environment, now return and look for challenging goals. Sometimes, returning workers will have to solve material issues like financial support or accommodation. Integrating such intense experience can require psychological support, particularly after the organisation's contractual liability has ended and the worker is left without backing.

In addition to the psychological aspects of stress – feeling a loss of control – stress triggers a physiological response. *Stress can be managed* by using various techniques that can enable you to feel more in control of your life.

When under stress, the body:

- mobilises stored energy by increasing the heart rate and activating the immune system
- redirects blood from non-essential systems to the brain and muscles
- sharpens senses, cognition and memory

Stress management techniques include:

- Recognising and accepting the period of readjustment
- Getting more uninterrupted rest
- Talking to loved ones
- Debriefing with work colleagues
- Writing down the experience to gain perspective
- Making time for activities you have always found enjoyable
- Deep breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, creative visualisation
- Exercising regularly to release muscle tension and accumulate adrenalin
- Finding a suitable counsellor if your reactions are prolonged or intense

Stress management can increase the possibility of:

- Achieving a clear, calm mind
- Utilising acquired skills appropriately
- Gaining motivation to achieve personal goals

Re-entry Syndrome

Re-entry Syndrome (ReS) is the psychological response experienced by individuals returning home from field work in a different environment. After a few days of initial euphoria, many returned (aid) workers can experience feelings of bereavement, loss and isolation due to feelings that nobody really comprehends what they have been through or that others are not really interested. Unaddressed ReS is a problem when the individual turns to alcohol or drugs to cope, adversely affecting family and friends. When returning from remote work, they need to relax, or seek out other returned workers to share common emotions and experiences. It is important for remote workers to reintegrate with their *own* community.

Trauma

Experiencing a traumatic event in a remote community can cause reactions that may last a few days, a few weeks or several months. Those who interact with victims of trauma (i.e. injury, loss, or serious threat) can acquire 'secondary trauma' and therefore experience their own reactions. Their world view might be challenged and trust in others undermined.

Fortunately, we are resilient and usually recover quickly, though it still may be useful to seek professional support from a qualified counsellor. It doesn't make us weak or crazy -- it simply indicates that specialist advice is required to learn how to minimise and manage the personal impact of a traumatic event.

Avoid excess consumption of drugs, alcohol or food as coping mechanisms -- they bring only temporary compensation -- as well as rushing any major decisions (i.e. choosing to return immediately to the remote community).

Support information for remote workers in the NT

CRANA Bush Support Services (24 hour counselling): 1800 805 391