



Swedish Civil
Contingencies
Agency

Returning home from a mission



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Layout: Advant

Order No.: MSB2164 - February 2023

ISBN: 978-91-7927-357-6

Preparing for coming home

Homecoming can be an emotional time for both you and your family, and as with pre-deployment, it is also important to plan for your departure from your mission and adjust to your home base. Moving from mission life to life at home will usually entail a transition process and being aware of the factors involved and taking steps to address them will make the transition smoother.





Getting Closure¹

An essential part of re-adjusting to life at home is getting closure. If you don't feel like you've said "goodbye" to your life at the mission, then you might have a harder time accepting the transition to your home base. Do everything that you can to make sure that you have no regrets when you return home.

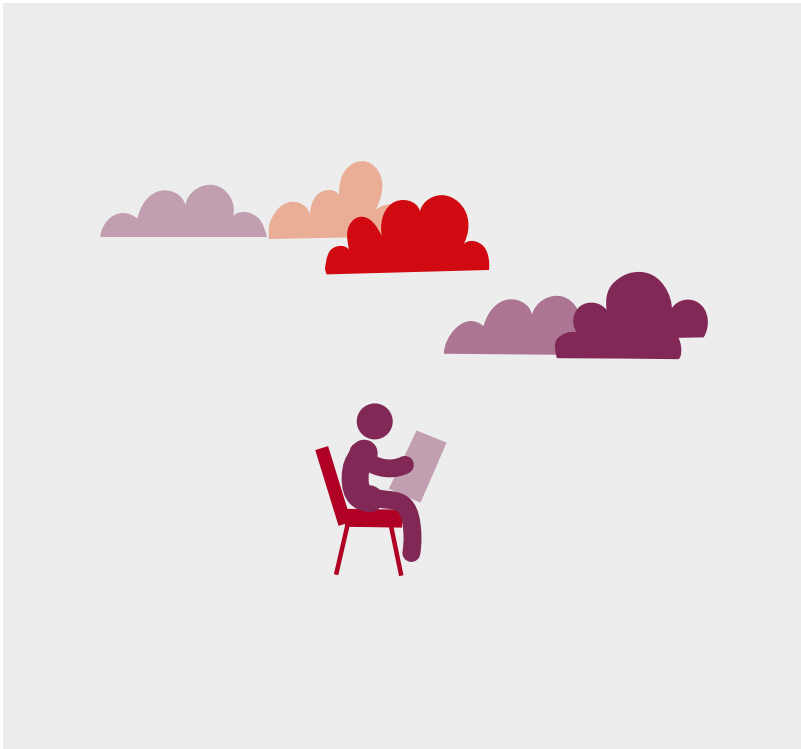
This includes things like:

- Taking pictures and videos;
- Buying souvenirs and keepsakes;
- Saying farewell to friends;
- Hosting an end of mission party;
- If security allows, visiting places and sites you have wanted to see before departing;
- Sharing your contact details with those with whom you want to stay connected; and
- Making a list of closure-related activities, i.e., visiting your favourite restaurant or eating your favourite local dish.

1. (McKay, 2007)

Mental & Psychological Preparation²

Before you return, it's a good idea to sit down and think through some of the potential problems you may face and how to deal with them. Reflecting on the following questions can help you prepare for the differences and expectations you might have about what life might be like when you return home.



2. (McKay, 2007)

Questions to reflect on to prepare you for the homecoming:

- How do I expect to feel about being home?
- What will I find frustrating in my own home (country/town)?
- What do I want to accomplish after I return home?
- How are others likely to feel about me?
- How will my role be different?
- What new things might I have to get used to?
- What stress management techniques and coping strategies can I use to help me cope during the reintegration phase?
- What activities can I get involved with to cope with the stress of transition?

Equally important is reflecting on your coping strategies for dealing with changes and stress once you are back home.

Here are some questions to consider:

- What stress-relieving methods will I use?
(Exercise / Health / Diet / Organisation)
- How will I organise my time?
- What are some cultural habits I can take from this culture to my home?

Getting involved in various activities and groups when you are back home can be grounding and familiar, especially if it involves groups and activities you have participated in in the past. Alternatively, you might choose new activities that can provide fun and exciting outlets to help you cope with the stress of transition.

Examples of such involvement include engaging in:

- School activities with your children
- Studying a new subject
- Professional organisations
- International and intercultural groups
- Religious and spiritual groups
- Community service projects



Ubangi river in CAR. Photo: Elektra Noutsou

Adjusting to life at home means reconnecting with family and friends³

Studies have shown that one of the important factors for our overall wellbeing is to have strong and healthy relationships, so the best you can do is to invest time and energy in strengthening your social network. Reconnecting with family and friends is essential for adjusting to life at home; however, returning comes with challenges. The main one concerns the changes that have probably occurred in your relationships with your partner, children, relatives and friends. It is important to be aware of the possible changes, understand why they have occurred and work through them.



3. (UN HR Portal , 2015)

Common challenges for staff returning from non-family missions:

- Coping with a dramatic change in purpose, status, intensity, and/or pace of life.
- Coping with the practicalities of returning home, like unpacking, re-organising, and returning to work.
- People don't seem very interested in your stories about being away and you are disinterested in their stories of daily life.
- You miss the excitement of deployment and want to leave for a new mission.
- Some things may have changed while you were away; roles may have changed in managing basic household chores.
- Upon your homecoming, both you and your partner may experience difficulty re-establishing intimacy.



A successful reunion with family entails a successful reintegration and renegotiation of your relationships with them.

Expect to experience reverse culture shock, also known as re-entry stress⁴

While many are aware that they may experience culture shock in the initial stages of their deployment, perhaps fewer anticipate having difficulties re-entering their own culture. Instinctively, people seem to feel that coming home is the easy part of the deployment, but the truth is that you can face a number of challenges during this stage. A disruption of the routines you had established and cultures you had familiarised yourself with during deployment can lead to anxiety, disillusionment and frustration when transitioning back to once familiar but now distinct behaviours and norms at home; this stress is referred to as reverse culture shock or re-entry stress.

Reverse culture shock has been observed in international aid workers among other globetrotters and can affect both you and your family. Reportedly, an estimated 60 percent of humanitarian workers experience stress after coming home. 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.

4. (US Department of State, 2009)

However, during re-entry you may experience some or all of the following:

- Various mixed emotions like feeling excited, disorganised, resentful or frustrated;
- Struggling with a sense of loss of freedom and independence.
- An initial period of euphoria and relief at being back home
- Feeling fatigue and perhaps getting sick.
- Feelings of loss, grief, and sadness as you miss your colleagues and friends in the field.
- Feeling isolated, as no one can understand what you've experienced.
- Feeling disillusioned, judgmental, and angry at your culture and its materialism (an especially common reaction for returning Westerners).
- Feeling critical of the values of people you love, and angry at the perceived apathy of the people around you.
- Having difficulty making decisions, even easy decisions.



Western Equatoria, South Sudan. Photo: Elektra Noutsou

Managing re-entry stress^{5, 6}

Start managing re-entry stress by psychologically preparing yourself for the difficulties you may experience upon returning home. Speaking with friends who have had similar experiences may help relieve some of the stress and at the same time offer you an opportunity to discuss your feelings with those who understand your situation.



5. (UN HR Portal , 2015)

6. (UN HR Portal , 2015)

People have different ways of adjusting at home after a mission. What is important is knowing what works best for you, your partner and your family and being intentional about doing that.

Consider whether any of the following suggestions can help you cope better with the re-entry process:

- Create a buffer zone between the field and home, like a stopover somewhere on your way home or create personal space during the first days you're home (i.e., delay telling people of your return; give yourself time to unpack and restock the fridge).
- Prepare for receiving questions from family and friends about your experience and be prepared to change the topic of conversation if people don't show any interest.
- Debrief your experience with people who will understand you.
- Get back into routines and get involved. The feeling of belonging to a community will help with re-entry.
- Plan a realistic work schedule and have realistic expectations for how fast you can reintegrate.
- Take more than enough time for rest, relaxation, reconnecting, and attending to your personal needs.

Just as any other period when you're under stress, you should try to avoid making decisions about important issues right after you get back.

Give yourself a spiritual check-up. Ask yourself questions like: How have your beliefs been challenged? How has this experience changed the way you see yourself, the world, and home?

Psychological support for MSB field staff

To support you in understanding and managing the personal changes that you may encounter upon your return, arrange an end of mission debriefing session with an MSB Staff Counsellor. This should take place either before you leave your current mission or immediately after your arrival home. Knowing and understanding what sorts of reactions to expect from yourself and others around you will help make your reintegration less stressful.

If one month after your mission you:

- experience long-lasting stress symptoms; or
- are facing challenges in adapting to life back home,

Do not hesitate to contact MSB staff counsellor

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Order No.: MSB2164 - February 2023 ISBN 978-91-7927-357-6