

**Chapter 1**  
Preparations for Going Home

**Chapter 2**  
Reverse Culture Shock and Re-entry

**Chapter 3**  
Further Education

**Chapter 4**  
Post-JET Employment

**Chapter 5**  
JET Alumni Association (JETAA)

# Chapter 2:

## Reverse Culture Shock and Re-entry

## Reverse Culture Shock: Surviving and Thriving

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When I arrived in Japan on the JET Programme, just like so many other participants, I was living large - having my flight paid to Japan, being feted by government officials, and earning a respectable salary for a recent college graduate that made me financially self-sufficient for the first time in my life. Times were good. I made many new friends - both JETs from all over the world and local Japanese. Fast forward two years later after my return to the U.S. I was living at home with my parents, jobless, and getting used to those dear words from my mother which I hadn't heard in many years, "Adam, it's time to take out the trash." Like so many other JETs, I found getting used to my "home" country a tricky proposition. I missed Japan more than ever - my Japanese colleagues, my students, and my JET friends. I yearned to eat truly fresh sushi again, bask in an *onsen* bath, and have people bow to me in a department store instead of greeting me with a scowl and saying testily, "What do you want?"

This article is designed to bust a couple of myths about reverse culture shock (RCS) and also to give some hot hints on how to handle returning home. Hopefully, you all can benefit from my experience not only as a former JET who has returned to my culture of origin, but also my insights as an intercultural communication trainer who has been giving workshops on RCS and advising JETs for the past ten years on how to gracefully, gently transition back home.

### *What Is RCS?*

According to Nancy Adler, a world-renowned expert, RCS occurs during the transition from living in a foreign culture (for a significant amount of time) back into one's native culture. It is the cousin of culture shock, or the frustration and confusion that result from being bombarded by cues, signs, and symbols with different meanings from those in one's home culture. With RCS, the cues and meanings that one expects to encounter upon returning home are nowhere to be found.

During RCS, people often experience similar stages to culture shock:

1. "Honeymoon Period" in which you are elated to see old friends and family, visit your favourite restaurants, and soak in your hometown's atmosphere
2. "Disintegration Period" in which the stress of readjusting to home accumulates
3. "Deep Reverse Culture Shock," or when people often feel depressed, angry, and/or alienated from their "home" surroundings
4. "Autonomy," in which you finally begin to feel readjusted and some equilibrium.

As this process involves an emotionally deflating time after the Honeymoon Period and a positive rebound during Autonomy, it is referred to as a U-Curve during culture shock. When these stages are repeated during RCS, it can be visualised as a W-shaped curve, or W-Curve.

### *Busting a Few Myths of Reentry*

When it comes to RCS, most people who have not yet experienced it wince when they hear about it. "Ooh, that sounds horrible," their worried countenances say. Yes, RCS can be tough. However, the first myth about RCS, as well as culture shock, is that it is *not* a sickness. For example, culture shock is a positive sign that you are actually involved in the cultural milieu surrounding you. If you lived in Roppongi, worked and socialised only with people from your home country, and enjoyed your favourite foods from back home every day, then you would probably never experience culture shock. Nor would you ever learn anything new from being exposed to people with values, communication styles, and customs different from your own. Therefore, a healthy case of culture shock means that you are actually learning something while abroad. It can be painful, but your perspective on the world and self-understanding are expanding.

Congratulations!

Likewise, RCS is usually positive (as long as you do not become irreversibly depressed and/or want to harm yourself or others - then it is important to seek professional help). Your discomfort from RCS not only indicates that you changed while abroad, but that you are actively involved in making sense of the difference between who you are now and your former self.

Another myth is that coming home is easier than going abroad. Often, this is not the case. All JETs hear about culture shock during the Post-Arrival Orientation, if not far sooner. We all expect some bumps as we adjust to Japan. But when we return to our native cultures, we often expect to slip into our former lives like an old, comfortable set of clothes. It doesn't usually work. Furthermore, because we don't expect to have trouble readjusting to home, the "shock" becomes intensified and can be far more difficult to traverse than the culture shock that we experienced in Japan. Who would expect that seeing family, former friends, and roaming our old neighborhood would be difficult? It becomes challenging because we have changed in Japan, and more often than not, home, and all of the people living there, have changed, too.

### *Hot Hints for Mollifying RCS*

So what can you do not only to make RCS pleasanter, but also to maximise its potential benefits? Here are my hot hints:

**1. Realise that people will not always be as good at listening as you need them to be.**

You will want to share many stories of your adventures abroad, but not everyone will take interest after the initial "Honeymoon Period" of being home. Even sympathetic listeners may have difficulty truly understanding what you've been through in Japan. Instead of trying to share all of your stories with each special person in your life, try to share one story, and every time a different one, with each person. Then, you can tell all of your stories without testing the resolve of your confidants.

**2. Use the distance as an excuse to keep in close touch with the people you left in Japan - and to master kanji!**

When I returned home, ironically, I felt home sickness for the people and places I'd left in Japan. Since I was jobless at first, phone calls were out of the question. So I wrote a letter a day. Also, I wrote in Japanese to my Japanese friends. Although I could only write in hiragana and a few basic kanji at the time, I bolstered my writing skills to the point where I was teaching Japanese one year later. Through letter writing, I still felt close to my friends in Japan, and I also developed new language skills.

**3. Give yourself plenty of time.**

Not everyone experiences RCS, but among those who do, it typically lasts from six to twelve months. It is important that you understand its peaks and valleys (remember the W-Curve!) and give yourself the time that you need to traverse it.

**4. Relearn your home culture.**

While you were in Japan, your significant others may have changed. Also, popular culture has moved on without you: new movies, catchwords, music, and political events have shaped both what people are saying and how they are speaking about their surroundings. Practice the skills that you used to decode Japan's foreign culture: ask questions, observe what people do and talk about (as well as what they don't), and be patient as you decode your new environment.

**5. Seek support networks.**

Of course, you will rekindle some old friendships, and others will fizzle. But this is a perfect time for meeting people - people who understand the "new you." Take this chance to volunteer in organisations and seek out community events where you can find both Japanese and internationally-minded non-Japanese who can relate to your experiences abroad and of being a global nomad. The JET Alumni Association (JETAA) likely has a chapter either located in your city or nearby and can put you in touch with a large community of people.

**6. Don't compartmentalise your JET experience.**

This is perhaps most important. First, you need to figure out the aspects of the “new you” which you value. It may be a skill you developed in Japan - such as speaking Japanese, practicing ikebana, or public speaking. It could be subtler; you may pride yourself in being able to work with diverse types of people or have a newfound interest in diplomacy. The key is to identify these new skills, interests, or attitudes - whatever they are - and find a regular time, place, and people with whom you can actualise them. Finding this silver thread in your experience and continuing to weave it through your reentry will guarantee that you create value from having been abroad. Those who do not may feel as if their time in Japan has no connection to their lives' next chapter. For me, this continuity came from finding a Tai Chi teacher and meeting other former JETs and local Japanese through JETAA activities. Also, in my next job, I taught Japanese and Asian studies, which allowed me to share my newfound knowledge and all of the stories that I'd been dying to share since I got home. In a broader sense, I was promoting intercultural understanding - this time by teaching Americans about Japan, rather than the opposite as I'd done on the JET Programme. By identifying the aspects of myself which I'd developed in Japan and treasured most, and then finding the means to enjoy them back in my home country, I could transform RCS from a tribulation to an experience that promoted my growth. You can do it too. Just follow these hot hints!

*Advice: Leaving JET and Returning Home*

Contributed by Okinawa JET Alumni

*What was good about leaving JET?*

- *Going back home, seeing old family and friends, catching up with everyone. The Pubs too, they are the best. Getting a large fruity tax rebate 6 months down the line is nice too!*
- *Seeing family and friends again was great and having access to all my old familiar stuff (food, routine, fitness, recreation, clothes, shopping) felt good!*
- *You are free to do whatever you want. You can finally move on and do new things. Also seeing friends and family after so long was really nice.*
- *Leaving and coming home, not missing the job, finding clothes that fit, having those odd flashes where you start grinning like an idiot because you are happy to be home. Listening to people talking in English around you. Realising how you have changed and how much you learned from the JET experience.*

*What was bad about leaving JET?*

- *I guess I wished I had stayed another year. Life in Japan is so much easier than trying to get into the UK job market. And after a month back home, I was tired of it already!*
- *I miss the carefree camaraderie of my school. I never thought I felt a part there but I still miss it. I miss the fresh air, warm seas, heat, laughing with/at my kids and...THE MONEY! Good god I miss that!*
- *Saying good-bye to a great experience and people and family and friends that you had gotten to know and love. This was definitely the hardest bit.*
- *The job rejection letters. Missing the people that you left behind. That one, old, dear friendship that is different and you realise that your time in Japan probably cost you that friendship. Missing tofu chanpuru. Being back in a closed off, non-multicultural boring place.*

### What were you glad you did?

- I made plans and dates to catch up with all the people I wanted to before I left. It takes a long time, so I'm glad I started early. I'm also glad I organised what I wanted to do when I got back home. I began studying right after the summer. That kept me from getting lost in the transition of it all.
- The goodbyes were pretty exhausting and went on longer than I thought possible. I was glad I started those early.
- I'm glad I knew the tax back system inside and out. We ran into a few glitches but since I knew it so well, it worked out fine. I'm really glad I picked a responsible and reliable tax representative, but even she got confused with all the paperwork. I'm glad I knew it myself.
- Saying good-bye to everything and everybody. That was really important and made me feel like that part of my life was really over. Closure.

### What do you wish you had done differently in your preparations to leave?

- Also a note for Brits, there are stringent weight limits on baggage so don't get caught trying to bring too much home. My friend was made to empty her wallet and give all the money she had to get her too plentiful bags home. SEND STUFF HOME EARLY! Save yourself the airport headache.
- I forgot to send a copy of my passport to prove that I had left the country but that was only a minor hitch. I got the 80% pension refund in January and the 20% in April. KEEP TRACK OF YOUR SCHOOLS' ADDRESSES AND FAX NUMBERS! You will probably need to contact them in sorting out the tax stuff.
- I wanted to get out FAST! I wish I had taken more time in the preparation to leave. It would have made the closure more complete. I should also have done more regarding a job when I got home. I should have done more research on that.

### Did you experience any re-entry shock? If so what was it like?

- No re-entry shock but if you go back without any plans of what to do, the job market gives you a slap in the face. JET tends to lend too much weight to "transferable skills" that you may have learned while on the Programme. In reality it's different. People here are not going to over praise you, as they tend to do in Japan. Be realistic about what you can do.
- I had a few pangs of "man I could have stayed another year." That was pretty hard at times but then a lot of good things started happening at home and it balanced itself out.
- I experienced a lot of re-entry shock. Most striking was meeting friends once again and realising the extent to which their lives and mine had diverged. Even through email and mail contact, we were not able to keep up to date with each other. I was really out of the loop and that was really hard. I also had to guard against Japan talk. People don't want to hear about Japan, they are not interested in more than a few short stories. Take a SMALL photo album with you to friends and family, if they want to see more, bring out the big ones. I also found people to be rude and macho and boorish. I felt so out of place in clubs, it was funny...I found that the country I had so longed to come back and be a part of, was not suited to me anymore. It was a bit disturbing.

### Do you have any advice for people preparing to leave?

- Get help writing your farewell speech. It may be the last thing people hear you say. Leave a good impression.
- Make sure you have your tax stuff sorted out with your tax rep. If they've never done it, they will be very confused and it takes awhile to get all the forms done.
- Don't give up on your schools, do your best to still get involved. Some of my best memories come from those last few months. Don't pack your suitcases two months in advance and watch the calendar. Your home country is NOT as great as you remember it to be.
- Make sure to have a plan or focus for your life when you return home to help carry you through the rough, re-entry shock times. If you don't have this, you can feel quite lost.
- Prepare now, getting rid of cars and stuff is always more difficult than you think! Get to know your Tax Back system really well. Choose a representative that you KNOW will do a good job and who you can contact from overseas. Maybe a teacher who will be at your old school for at least another year would be good. Don't expect career options to be suddenly open to you because you speak a little Japanese. Most places want certification. Expect the best but plan for the worst. I made copies of EVERYTHING and kept track of everything. Things went wrong and I was able to figure it out and fix them.
- Get an idea of what you want to do when you get home, school? Work? Nothing? Having a plan helps! Also, start sending stuff home in boxes! Don't wait till the end and have to lug it home with you on the plane...it's a pain and it costs a lot!
- Be prepared to miss Japan. You will!

### Results from the 2010 JETAA Survey \* Reverse Culture Shock/Settling into Life After Returning Home

Did you experience reverse culture shock after leaving Japan?	
Yes	65.7%
No	20.5%
Not Certain	8.4%
Still living in Japan	5.4%
When did reverse culture shock occur?	
Within the first two months	71.2%
Within two to six months	21.2%
Within six months to a year	5.8%
After one year	1.9%

\*The JETAA Survey asks former JET participants questions about their life after completing the JET Programme. 269 former JET participants responded to the 2010 online survey, which was accessible on the JET Programme website from 15 October 2010 to 15 January 2011.

*Reverse Culture Shock/Settling into Life After Returning Home***What form did your reverse culture shock take? (Comments of Survey Respondents)**

- I noticed that I became uncomfortable with the rudeness of my culture.
- I missed Japanese food and customs and I missed spending time with my Japanese friends.
- It took a little while to adapt to being back in the UK, and suddenly not having a job to start with. I am still constantly surprised by poor service, the loudness and relative rudeness of people. I have struggled linguistically since returning home and a lot of my prior language abilities were lost.
- Adjusting to a new culture and language as well as a new working situation and colleagues was difficult.
- Felt nervous around large groups of English people in public places.
- Getting used to American culture again, everybody speaking English, not being a foreigner surrounded by Japanese, being able to "blend in." Also, Had difficulty dealing with my future plans.
- A feeling of being out of place. Irritable with some aspects of Canadian culture. Feeling out of place at times. Everything was so different and boring. I felt a great sense of dissatisfaction coming home. Life was different back home. Friends had moved away, couldn't get a job etc
- Comparing everything to way things were done in Japan. Largely it was when shopping, especially in the supermarkets. Sometimes also in the informality of American culture (for example, I found myself bowing to everyone). Trying to figure out my new identity - I was no longer an ALT, or a JET, and being an "Australian" didn't matter.
- Having different foods and different cultural practices to follow. I miss Japan. Nothing serious, just odd moments of "oh I need to hand people cash directly at the till, there's no little tray for me to put it in". And other similar moments. I was homesick for my life in Japan. While I was happy to reconnect with family and friends, I missed the new friends I had made. I was different and life was different.
- A desire to return to Japan. Expecting things to be a certain way and being off-put when they weren't - simple things like the lack of politeness from clerks in stores. Not being on the same level as old friends.
- I really want to go back. Anxiety, frustration dealing with everyday communication Very extreme. I was gone for 3 years, and only visited back once for 1 week. Every thing was very different. They way people talked, did business, ate, etc. Many of the customs I learned in Japan I still use every day, like taking off shoes in the house, "itadakimasu", even bowing into the phone (yes sometimes). Plus I feel I have a higher tolerance for things that are different than my co-workers.
- I did not return to South Africa immediately after my JET year. What happened when I returned is that I was no longer used to the way most things are done back in South Africa. e.g. having to wait for a long time at the bank or post office. Also, most of the conveniences in Japan were a thing of the past. e.g. transport, stores, etc. A car let me cross the road in front of it, and instead of waving to thank the driver, I bowed!
- I was also very much in shock when I saw how people were not conservative in the way they dress here. When i got off the plane I was shocked at what everyone at the airport was wearing. I thought they were exhibitionists.