

An aerial photograph of a mountain valley. A winding road or path snakes through the green and brown slopes of the valley. In the distance, rugged mountain peaks are visible under a sky with scattered white clouds. The overall scene is a vast, scenic landscape.

*WattsYourPathway?*

Ten Recommendations for  
Supporting your Mission  
Partners through  
Re-entry

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Returning home presents many challenges. Mission organisations don't need to be told that returning to your passport country is mostly harder than going in the first place. On the whole, the mission community leads most other sectors in its understanding of the issues facing returnees. How well are you doing? Are you happy with the level of support you are giving your mission partners? How can you become outstanding as an organisation in your support of your returning personnel?

Research I did in 2013 (see <https://www.wattsyourpathway.co.uk/re-entry-challenges/>) suggested that the biggest challenges faced by returnees are as follows:

Friendships

Reintegrating with extended family

Sharing the overseas experience

Cultural issues

Finding a future career

Spiritual belonging

Sorting through bureaucracy

Identity

Helping children settle

Lack of routine

Feeling overwhelmed

Accommodation

Dealing with grief

Some of these issues are addressed in books, and some just need to be experienced and worked through on an individual basis. Nevertheless, there are many things that Agencies can put in place or do their utmost to encourage, facilitating a smoother transition home. Following the ten recommendations below will help you make sure the right things are in place.

## *Pre-Departure*



### Encourage Reading Books / Websites or doing an online course in Preparation

Make sure they have access to and read a good book on Re-entry. There are many around now:

- Burn up or Splash Down - Marion Knell
- Arriving Well: stories of identity, belonging and rediscovering home after living abroad – Brubaker, Watts & Cumberford
- Homeward Bound – Robin Pascoe
- The Art of Coming Home - Craig Storti

[www.rockyreentry.com](http://www.rockyreentry.com)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/ReEntryStories/>

Online course: <http://wattsyourpathway.thinkific.com/courses/quietly-confident>





## Manage Expectations



One of the hardest things when going home is managing personal and familial expectations. The more you can encourage your staff to start thinking about these things before they leave, the better.

Encourage them to

- Send a re-entry book to family back home, so that they have an idea how tough re-entry is (Burn up or Splash Down has a whole chapter written for those supporting others through re-entry)
- Help their children learn more about their home culture and what to expect
- Enter into conversations with extended family about the expectations on both sides when they return (especially if it is near to Christmas time or other significant family events).

A great article on helping friends and family understand can be found here:

<http://www.rockyreentry.com/for-friends-and-family/>



## Arrange Practical Help



As an agency, you can't possibly take responsibility for all the logistics of bringing staff back. What you can do is **help with the bureaucracy** that needs sorting. And of course **encourage churches to provide practical help**.

One of the major challenges when folk return home is feeling overwhelmed by having to make decisions about so many things – from big things like careers and cars to basic home décor. The more churches and friends can help out with these decisions – such as advising on service providers, getting hold of SIM cards etc. - the better. It takes the onus off the returnee when they have enough to think about already.

Finding people who can advise on fashion / TV for children is also helpful. Churches sometimes need help seeing how much of a difference this sort of help can make.



## Encourage taking a break on the way home



Until 50 years ago, returnees spent weeks on a boat coming home. This gave them a chance to leave behind their host country, to lay it to rest, if you like, before entering their home country again.

These days, people get on a plane and within hours are back home. Even if money is tight, **taking a 7-10 day holiday on the way home is well worth it.**

Packing and leaving is emotionally and physically demanding, so **having a break before re-entering can make a big difference to the initial shock of going home.**

## *On Re-Entry*



### 5 Make accommodation as stable as possible

One of the things that makes people feel unsettled when they return is not having a home base where they can unpack and feel at home.

Obviously in the early days, this is not easy to provide, especially where folk are travelling across the country for home assignment duties.

**But as soon as is feasible, helping partners to settle in one place is a must.**

Their own space is an ideal, but not always possible.



## Make spiritual mentors available



Spiritual belonging is a big issue for many people coming back.

- Their spirituality may well have changed while they have been away
- They may have big questions. They may not necessarily want answers, but might not even feel safe enough to air their questions, knowing others may feel threatened by them.
- They also come back to their home church with a different perspective on life and church, which may be threatening to church leaders back home. A great article on why returning to church at home is so hard can be found here:

<http://www.rockyreentry.com/navigating-church-re-entry-season-part/>

It is really useful for people to have a spiritual mentor during re-entry, someone with whom they can ask big questions and puzzle over changes in spirituality in a safe space. Encourage their church to offer someone they can link with in this capacity. If they don't have someone suitable, provide someone through your agency networks of returnees. Obviously this is very much dependent on personality / desire etc., but it is my belief that it should be offered.





## Provide a Re-entry Buddy



Most returnees highlight the fact that others who have returned before them are a source of massive comfort, reassurance and help. **Someone who has “been there, done that”** and yet survived the journey can provide hope to returnees, and will also provide a safe space to say how they really feel, which is often not the case for risk of being misunderstood of people who haven't been through the process, as well-meaning as they may be.

Offering a re-entry buddy to your returnees, either from your agency's network of returned partners or again through their own church, is invaluable. They just need to be available to meet or chat by phone with the person as often or little as they need it during their first months / year.

Even if they never use or meet up with their buddy, knowing someone is there is helpful, and means they know they are not on their own.



## Offer Debriefs and Retreats



Most agencies provide debriefs for returning staff now, in line with guidelines from People In Aid (now CHS Alliance). See <http://www.chsalliance.org/news/blog/how-can-we-debrief-aid-workers-effectively> for further information on debriefing.

More organisations seem to be moving towards opt-out clauses from debriefing rather than opt-in. The timing of debriefs is important – if you choose a time when the partners are in the middle of sorting accommodation and the logistics of moving back, it is not as effective as when they have less on their plate. I can provide debriefs face-to-face or online.

Retreats are another way of providing partners with space to process their transition back to life at home. There are so many retreats (debriefing retreats and re-entry retreats) offered across the world now (including for children) – make sure your partners can take advantage of them!

“Mission personnel have commented on how much they appreciated being debriefed by Helen, giving them the opportunity to open up to someone who was experienced, insightful and understanding. “

Graeme Riddell, BMS World Mission



## Provide support on future direction



A large percentage of returnees struggle with working out where they are going next. Some people come back knowing exactly what their next step should be, but a larger number return knowing it's the right thing, but not knowing where they should go next. Still more have been thrown out or needed to leave early because of illness, visa issues or civil unrest, and need some support as they work through where to next.

There are increasing numbers of coaches / counsellors / therapists who work in the field of re-entry, and can help people work these things out as necessary.

Get in touch if to see if I can help with coaching, or can point you in the direction of someone in the right geographical location / offering something I can't.

“The sessions were incredibly helpful in redefining and reaffirming who I am, what I want to do and practical ways to get there.”

Coaching client, London



## Check in with partners after their return



Different agencies have different policies on returning staff and how long they stay on the payroll or they provide support once someone has returned home.

Whatever that length of time is, I would recommend checking in with your staff at the very least after **one month**, **3 months** and **6 months** to see how people are coping with their transition and if they need any extra support.

When returnees are busy doing home assignment duties, reverse culture shock is often delayed, and hits later in the transition than for people who have come back straight into a job of some description. Likewise, mothers often struggle more several months down the line once their children and husband are more settled. Some come back thinking they will be fine, but after several months find themselves stuck and don't know how to move forward.

They may not be on your payroll after a few months, but to have a reputation as a supportive organisation with ex-partners who are still engaged and remain your advocates, it is worth putting in that extra time to check in with them.



I am a Life Coach and Debriefer and specialise in helping Mission Partners not just survive, but thrive through their re-entry transition. I help people overcome their sense of being stuck; find confidence in who they are now and what they offer to world; and move forward into the next stage of their lives more self-aware and excited about what's ahead.



I offer debriefing, one-to-one coaching, seminars and webinars on Re-Entry, an [online course](#), and run a Facebook Group, [Re-Entry Stories](#), to facilitate discussion and dialogue between returnees and to provide support for them during their transition.

I lived in Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia with my family on and off over ten years. We were involved with animal-related projects, children's literacy projects, kindergarten teaching, erecting a wind turbine at a collective farm and parenting courses, as well as bringing up and home schooling our two children and mentoring short-term workers. During this time, we experienced isolated rural living, team conflict, changing organisation and civil unrest.

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# Any Questions? Get in touch!

I hope you have found these recommendations helpful – if nothing else to affirm what you are already doing! If you have any questions or comments about the things I have mentioned, then please do send me an email to [Helen@WattsYourPathway.co.uk](mailto:Helen@WattsYourPathway.co.uk) and I will get back to you as soon as I can.





# Re-Entry Checklist

- 1. Encourage reading books / websites or doing an online course in preparation**
  - Provide information 6 months to a year in advance of their return if possible
- 2. Manage Expectations**
  - Encourage reflection on their own expectations and dialogue with extended family on expectations
- 3. Arrange Practical help**
  - Take care of as much financial administration as possible
  - Encourage churches to provide logistical help and decision-making advice
- 4. Encourage taking a break on the way home**
  - 7-10 days holiday away from their host country on the way home is invaluable to mark the break between an ending and a new beginning
- 5. Make accommodation as stable as possible**
  - Encourage them to settle in one place as soon as is feasible
- 6. Make spiritual mentors available**
  - Encourage the sending church to offer a spiritual mentor, or provide possibilities through your own networks
- 7. Provide a Re-entry buddy**
  - Check with the sending church if they have former returnees that can act as a re-entry buddy (willing person who has “been there, done it”), or provide one
- 8. Offer debriefs and retreats**
  - Include an opt-out of debriefing in their contract, not opt-in. Make sure to provide internal or external debriefing within the first three months of return (preferably sooner rather than later)
- 9. Provide support on future direction**
  - Make returnees aware of the options they have for seeking further support
- 10. Check in with partners after their return**
  - Don't assume someone is fine just because they always have been
  - Check in with them at 3, 6 and 12 months after their return