



RE-ENTRY & DEBRIEFING

Walking Your Students through a Healthy Re-entry Process

Some students struggle upon returning home from an overseas project. This is for various reasons explained in the documents below. They primarily struggle with processing their experience and integrating the life change they have gained into their current context on campus and/or after they graduate. There are some important steps that your ministry and OneLink can do to assist with this process.

What You Can Do

- **Personal Contact**
 - The first few weeks home can be the most challenging for your students. Calling or texting them and being available can be extremely helpful to help them with reentry stress and integrating into life back at your campus.
- **Plan Post-Project Debriefing**
 - One of the most helpful things you can do for students is to bring them all together for some time of intentional debriefing. This can be as simple as an evening with the whole team or teams, or a structured debrief or “re-entry” weekend. Please contact OneLink for resources and ideas.
 - The OneLink Re-entry Booklet is available to all Team Members and can be used as content for a re-entry retreat.

What OneLink Does

- **Re-entry Booklet**
 - OneLink provides each team member with a digital copy of a Re-entry Booklet that includes content and questions for the team members to go through upon return. The booklet includes 10 sections of material.
- **Parent Letter (Email)**
 - OneLink will send all parents of team members an email explaining what Re-entry Stress can look like and how to help their son or daughter through the process. See example email below.
- **Personal Contact**
 - OneLink will text or contact each team member within a few weeks of them returning home, just to check in on how they are doing and be available for further debriefing.

Example Reentry Letter to Parents

Sent from OneLink to parents about a week before team members return home

Dear Parents,

Soon your son or daughter will return from their OneLink project. I am sure you are excited to see them. It has been our joy and privilege to walk alongside these young men and women. We are confident that God has worked in and through them and believe they will look back on this summer as a positively transformational time in their lives.

As your student returns, we think you will have an important role in welcoming them home and helping them readjust to life in America. During what we call “re-entry,” the time of spiritually and emotionally re-entering American culture, it is normal and expected for your son or daughter to struggle as they process all they have experienced overseas. This is known as “re-entry stress.” The amount of stress each person struggles with varies and will look different for each individual. For some it may be minor. Others may have more difficulty. We have provided some tips that may help you make their adjustment as easy as possible.

What to Look For

Re-entry stress could have any combination of the following characteristics:

- Loneliness – feeling like no one can relate to them, even their family
- Feeling out of place – being unsure of where they fit in now, after such a unique experience
- Detachment – desire to be a spectator rather than a participant
- Confusion – even common things may create unusual responses or feelings
- Frustration – feeling like no one can understand them because they have changed and do not know how to express it
- Anger – may be expressed as critical feelings toward America and the American church or perhaps disgust towards materialism
- Discontentment – may desire to be back overseas rather than at home
- Exhaustion – due to jet lag and emotional fatigue

How to Help

- Have realistic expectations of your child. They may need to sleep more than usual before he or she is ready for much interaction
- Listen to them. There will be a lot of stories to tell. Listen even if stories are repeated several times
- Realize that your son or daughter may not be ready to answer all of your questions immediately. They may need time to mentally process their experiences before they can dialogue about them
- Ask specific questions. Avoid general questions such as: “How was it?” Instead, ask questions such as: “What was your favorite part of the trip?” “What was the most difficult part?” “What funny things happened?” “Can you see yourself doing this again?” “Can you share about a friend you made?” “Describe the people, food, customs, housing, religion, etc.” “Did you learn any of the language?” “What did you learn about God, yourself and others through the experience?” etc.

Please pray and trust God to work in their lives during this process. He will be faithful to help your child not only to adjust to life back home, but also to allow this summer experience to transform them in many positive ways. We will also be sending your child a re-entry booklet with content that will help with this transition. Please don't hesitate to contact our office if there is anything we can do for you.

Reentry Help

An extensive resource created by a long time OneLink friend and overseas partner

Helping Student Return Home

Why does this topic matter?

We care about our teammates as members of the body of Christ, not just for the period they live on the field, but also as they return. We have seen recurring struggles among those who have returned, and want to facilitate dialogue among the field in sending churches and campus organizations about how to best support those who are going and returning home from the field.

What we have observed over the past few years:

- Students experience various degrees of struggle after returning from the field, many crashing and burning after return. These struggles are usually in some combination of moral, spiritual, emotional, or professional areas. Some teammates struggle in all categories, but some just one or two.
- Returning students often do not know how to ask for help or even what to share. Questions like "How are you doing?" are daunting. Even some of our most articulate students have expressed that they did not know how to express the struggles they felt.
- Those welcoming students back usually do care, but often don't know what to ask, when to ask it or how to help.
- Orientation tends to be multi-faceted, from many different places over an extended period of time. It happens at home and on the field. Debrief tends to happen in one or two meetings just before or after returning, often from a single source. Debrief and re-entry is rarely an emphasis.

A few parameters:

- We are looking at teammates who are 18-25, primarily current college students or recent graduates.
- We are examining teammates who have worked overseas from eight weeks to two years.
- These are our personal observations from recurring conversations, written reflections from teammates, debriefs, and conversations with their pastors and campus leaders. They aren't necessarily reflected in every teammate, but we see enough commonality to make some observations and suggestions.

Contributing factors to rough returns

Contributing Factor: More help preparing than returning.

- Preparation for the field is in-depth and involves much time and involvement from the community. Our students raise funds, recruit prayer supporters, read books, attend multiple orientations, meet regularly as a team, etc. They receive help from a variety of sources, often including their church, campus organization, field leadership, former volunteers and current teammates.

- On the flip side, we observe that returning involves a day-long (or two) debrief on the field, a handful of opportunities to give testimonies about their experience, and brief conversations with local pastors, leaders and friends immediately upon return to the states.

Contributing Factor: Lack of other focuses on the field

- On the field, student teammates spend their time in almost non-stop ministry. They step out of their “normal” life, and also leave behind school, work and family obligations to a place where most of their responsibilities are highly relational, ministry intense and spiritually stretching.
- For student teammates who are with us for just a summer, this is especially true. Teammates who are with us six months or longer usually have to settle into more normal rhythms of life that offset this some, but they still are primarily focused in ministry work with almost all they do.
- Teammates intentionally have almost no relationships on the field that don’t involve regular conversations about the Gospel.
- When students return from the field, they don’t have the time to spend in ministry 24/7, as they resume “normal” life responsibilities of school, work, family, etc. They can tend to see these as inferior to what they were doing on the field instead of opportunities for God to utilize what they learned on the field within a new context. According to one, it “felt like we weren’t doing anything.”

Contributing Factor: Levels of accountability and community

- On the field students live in a high level of accountability, often living with their teammates and sharing deeply and regularly about what they are experiencing. Upon returning, they don’t necessarily have these built in outlets to share, debrief, motivate, encourage, etc. While community, as well as mentoring and discipleship relationships might be there, the shared experience and understanding isn’t necessarily there.

Contributing Factor: Not engaging returning students in the mission

- This is tied to the struggle of not having deep community upon return. Students leave deep community that was founded around a mission and come back to people who often don’t understand their experiences or how they have changed. These students often desire to minister on campus or in the community, but don’t always know how.

Contributing Factor: The Spiritual Battle is Intense

- We cannot overlook the realities of a spiritual battle. Many of these students have made a deep impact, are feeling pulled toward long-term service and have great potential for impacting their local church, campus and community with the Gospel. Our enemy will not sit idly by, and we should expect them to face challenges and opposition in various forms.

How can we help students return home well?

These are things that are happening that former teammates (or we) have seen as helpful and valuable to continue and expand...

Mentoring Relationships

Meeting regularly one-on-one with someone in the church who has a mentor-like relationship with the student. These are people who had relationships with these students before they went and pursued them in a discipleship context. They asked questions, listened, prayed together, shared life and pointed students to the Gospel.

Prayer and accountability with other students

Praying together and meeting with former teammates. One on one campus, this took the form of a new Friday morning prayer meeting that modeled what they did on the field, and continued to include more and more people who hadn't gone on a summer project. They also were intentional to check in with one another to see how they were doing and provide support to one another.

Sharing the Gospel Regularly

Sharing the Gospel regularly. Students who came back and continued patterns of looking for opportunities, sharing the Gospel, studying with non-believers, discipling others, and initiating Gospel-centered relationships were not immune from struggle, but they had an easier transition in many aspects.

Sharing their story

Telling the story. Writing things down, taking advantage of opportunities to give testimony of what God did in their trip location. Churches and campus ministries can facilitate this by giving students chances to talk to others who are interested in missions, putting returning students in front of groups to speak about their experiences, and just providing good community so that those involved in the students lives genuinely listen to and care for them.

Making goals for returning to the States

Writing down the reasons and dreams you have for going back to the US before you leave the field. One teammate did this before going to Asia, then at the end of her term before going back to the States. It helped give some perspective when she did arrive back home of what she wanted the Lord to do through her.

Bible Reading

Continuing spiritual disciplines like daily Bible reading and regular personal and communal prayer that were established on the field. We find that for even many mature believers, they dramatically increase the amount of time they regularly spend in the Word and in prayer while serving overseas.

Remembering God's Faithfulness

Bringing back reminders of God's faithfulness during the time in the culture (for one, this was a bilingual Bible, a favorite pair of local-bought clothing, meaningful souvenirs, etc...). Just as many Old Testament saints set up monuments to the work of God in their lives, students can benefit from placing reminders in their lives of what God has done.

Taking Time to Rest, but not too long

Student teammates who return at the end of a summer and head from the plane straight to meetings, events and campus life often crash hard sometime that semester. Taking some time to decompress and reflect is helpful. Engaging back in life is good too after taking a few weeks to rest physically and spiritually.

Further suggestions and ideas for continued conversation

Long-term perspective

Churches and/or sending ministries need to spend as much (or more) time helping students adjust back as they do preparing them. Debriefing well isn't a one time thing. If orientation is made of many layers and comes from multiple sources, we should view re-entry in a similar light. Field personnel, other teammates, former volunteers, church members, pastors, parents, mentors, and many more people may all play different roles.

Good debrief is multi-faceted. It is one-time sessions on the field and soon after arriving from sending agencies to talk about the experience. It is ongoing discipleship from a sending fellowship. It is continued conversations with others who shared the ministry experience. It is long-term in range, and continues long after the students return.

While a “debrief” time at the end of the term (often on the field, but also done soon after returning), has high value, more ongoing relational discipleship that is in the context of ongoing church community and ministry carries longer lasting effects. It is here that those “what are you going to take back with you” kind of questions are fleshed out.

If churches are invested relationally in the students before they come, this follow up becomes easier, although not automatic. The relational lines are already there, but sometimes mentors need to be aware of what questions to ask, what issues to watch for, etc.

Engaging Students in the Mission

Students who struggle with a lack of community when they return need to keep in mind where the community came from on the field. Yes, they had affinity with teammates, but they also had community on the field because they pursued people with the Gospel and created such community. We need to receive and minister to these students, but also encourage them to continue doing the thing that is life-giving. Help them find ways to share the Gospel, disciple others, create Gospel community where they are. Those who seek community will miss out on mission, but those who live on mission will find community with others doing the same.

More conversations about how to take back what they learned

On the field, we should be helping students think through how they will take lessons learned back to their home communities and cultures. This doesn't take a, “How will I go teach my pastor to do ministry” kind of perspective, but rather, “How can I share the Gospel effectively at home? How can I create relationships that are Gospel-centered and deep? How can I help cultivate a heart of compassion and humility in my home church?” We need to help students begin to distill their experiences and take back some lessons.

Awareness among the church body

Equipping community group leaders and mentors with some basic questions and understanding could help them know how to engage returning students in conversation about their field experience.

Pray intensely and specifically

As the battle is real and often more intense than we expect, we should continue to pray for these student leaders not just while on the foreign field, but also as they take on new (or old) places of influence at home. We find that our student teammates are great at expressing deep, significant prayer requests if you just ask.

Know the field and help students prepare for further service

We desire for our partner churches and campus organizations to know well what we are about so that they can better help students prepare and return from the field.

Pastors and mentors should also be aware of possible desires awakened in these students for future ministry overseas or at home. They carry a daunting task of preparing them for ministry as long as these students are in their fellowship. How can you help encourage this God-given desire and pour into them the things they will someday pour into those who haven't heard the Gospel yet? Kindling the fires of passion for all nations to see the glory of God will also bring life to our home churches and passion to our praying for our community.

At the same time, many of those returning also become paralyzed in the waiting to come back overseas. Loving communities will help those who desire to return overseas stay focused in working toward that end. Sometimes that will be as simple as asking, "How does this help you move toward getting back overseas?" or "Could you do that thing (pay off debt, do seminary) overseas since you have expressed a desire to be back as soon as you can?" At other times that may mean pushing them not to put life on hold until they can get back overseas, because the best preparation for coming back is daily obedience and surrender.