

Presentation to a gathering of ngos concerned for the Psycho/socio/physical health of field workers

Re-entry : the neglected story

Purpose: To highlight the duty of care agencies have to assist their personnel in the integration of their cross-cultural experience and in developing appropriate roles for a healthy transition into their home culture.

Introduction

We hear a lot about preparation, support in the field, methods of debriefing and evaluations but very little about the psycho/social aspects of re-entry and reassignment

How many of us working in the field know of “wandering lost souls” never finding a place to land? People who return, take up new assignments or return to old ones without addressing the impact of the transitions they have undergone and are undergoing

The inner challenges and often painful lostness experienced in re-entry and reassignment are by and large the neglected story, the missing aspect of the cycle of the cross cultural project.

What is re-entry?

Re-entry, as described by Maureen Connors of the Maryknoll Institute, is an acute life transition. It is not merely a few debriefing sessions, telling your story to your agency and maybe a few times to the public, finding a job and having a medical check up. They are part of it but it is much more. It is the psychological process of integrating the changes that have happened to the person through their immersion in another culture.

In going to another culture a lot of outward change was experienced which disrupted what the person was accustomed to, introduced unknowns and threatened their inner balance. What was predictable could no longer be predicted. So there was in most cases an accompanying process which involved quite a shift in prioritising one's previously unquestioned value system and the lens that shaped one's world view.

So the person comes home changed

Re-entry then sets up this process again but with a different intensity and less cognitive and affective understanding because in going away the changes were expected and were so remarkable that the adjustments made sense. But in returning to one's own culture the changes are much more subtle both for the person and the receiving group, and the sense of disorientation and disconnection is less comprehensible. The person needs help to come to terms with what is happening and be given tools for negotiating the process.

The kind of remarks that reflect this disconnection:

“I've come from Samoa where I was beautiful and could enjoy my clothes - here I am overweight and dressing is a hassle - I hate the self-consciousness Australia puts on me.

"In Chile I was 'Ted from Australia' with a worthwhile job - here I'm nobody looking for a job. I just wish someone would say 'you must be Ted from Chile'.

"The hardest thing for me was leaving a culture that values relationships above all else. I find it hard to cope with sitting with someone staring at the TV.

What happens if this is not addressed?

At best the process gets prolonged beyond what is necessary. At second best it is aborted and the person functions below their capacity for effective involvement, OR there is a persistent sense of non-fulfillment, disappointment or loss. At worst, especially if there has been unaddressed trauma in their experience, they reach burn out and their recovery requires specialised intervention. And trauma does not happen only in critical situations - it can happen from severe disillusionment with one's organisation, abusive relationships, the daily witnessing of unrelenting poverty and injustice, and a host of other vicarious sources

The re-entry program

At the last conference we presented an outline of a program called Cultural Transitions that is designed to address the psycho/social aspects of coming home using story telling, group sharing, psychodrama, and input.

The content of the program is:

- STORY TELLING
- CULTURE JOLTS/SHOCKS AND RE-ENTRY
- SYMBOLS OF YOUR PERSONAL JOURNEY
- AUSTRALIAN CULTURE: CHANGING SCENE - CHANGED PERCEPTIONS
- INTEGRATING THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

We want to take you briefly through the part we call the re-entry walk. This is the structure of the day given specifically to the story of what it has been like coming home and gets people ready for further work with symbols of their personal inner journey.

We do it with music so there is an element of fun as people walk through the various stages of their re-entry story - the fun creates safety for the stories to gradually surface, and sharing different parts of the story with a new partner each time establishes a sense of normalcy for people who have often felt isolated in their experience.

So let's begin a mini re-entry walk.

Reentry Walk

Think of a time when you were in another culture

Go back to the time when you decided to terminate or when you noticed it was getting close. What kind of preparations did you make to go home? Who were the people who helped you, or hindered you? What kind of information did you gather or not gather? What did you think was waiting for you or what was not waiting for you? What unfinished business did you have to leave behind? - The farewells said or not said - all that went into moving from the decision to return to actually packing your case and getting to the airport. Share with your partner

The next walk involves remembering the plane trip, the time of touch down, who was waiting at the airport, what were the surprises, the delights, the fears, the

emotions, the other than expected things? Share with a new partner that first day and the few days that followed. What was really happening for you?

As you move on be in touch with the times when you started to miss people, other ways of doing things, the roles you had and the good things that were part of it. Think about the times when your thoughts were more back there, than here in Australia.

The last part of the walk is about where you are now in your reentry? Are you feeling negative or positive towards being home? What's jarring you and what is delighting you. Are you wanting to go back? are you stuck in the middle with no way of moving forward or backward? Have you jumped into activities that will give you a sense of getting somewhere? How does the future look - possible, positive or in a void? Share.

To group: Any comments about that experience?

Summary To summarise we suggest there is a duty of care that makes organisations responsible for their personnel's well being both in the field and in the time of re-entry. There are different psycho/social needs in these two distinct phases.

Often the personnel are unaware of the dynamics of re-entry and it is the duty of the organisation to provide them with information as well as opportunities to address its impact in a structured way. As we see it re-entry is crucial, but in the cycle of the overseas project it is the most neglected aspect.

When is the best time for the re-entry program?

In our experience, the best time to do a program is no sooner than 3 months after returning, however the actual re-entry process itself can take anything up to two years depending on how long the person was away and the quality of the experience.

The program is designed to give the person tools to manage this time of transition.