

How have I changed? What have I gained from my AFS Experience?

Listed below are statements describing many of the changes that have been felt by AFS returnees.

Some of these might be changes that you, too, have felt. This list may help you think about how you have changed and what has happened to you during the last year. Read through the list and place a check by each change that you believe has occurred to you.

- I have greater ability to understand others, that is, to put myself in their place when making judgments.
- I can accept failures and shortcomings in myself and others more easily.
- I understand more fully my own strengths and weaknesses.
- I am more confident and positive when meeting new people.
- I am more able to share my thoughts and feelings with others and am more open when others wish to share theirs with me.
- I have more curiosity about and respect for new ideas.
- I know better what I want to do with my life.
- I am more flexible and able to adjust to changes in others.
- I communicate better with others.
- I have a greater sense of responsibility for other people.
- I am more able to ask for and receive help from others.
- I feel greater respect and appreciation for my natural family.
- I have improved my observational skills.
- I am more confident in myself and the decisions I make.
- I have a deeper understanding of the problems and issues that face the world and its people.

SUMMARIZING MY AFS EXPERIENCE

<p>Through this experience, one of the most important things I discovered about myself was . . .</p>	<p>One of the most important things I discovered about people whose backgrounds are different from mine was . . .</p>
<p>One of the most important things I discovered about how to get along with people from different backgrounds was . . .</p>	<p>One way in which people in my host community are the same as people in my home community is . . .</p>
<p>One way in which people in my host community are the same as people in my home community is . . .</p>	<p>A fact or idea about human nature that I now understand more thoroughly and deeply is . . .</p>
<p>In order to fully understand the people of my host community, it is necessary to realize that . . .</p>	<p>Something about myself that I found difficult to accept before I left home, but now I accept is . . .</p>
<p>Something about other people that I found difficult to accept before I left home, but now I can accept is . . .</p>	<p>An attitude or value that I rejected or had never considered before I left home, but now I hold as my own is . . .</p>
<p>An attitude or value that I held before I left home, but now I reject is . . .</p>	<p>An attitude or value that I held before I left home, and I still hold despite many opportunities to question or change it is . . .</p>

One thing about people in my host community that I came to accept only with much difficulty was . . .	One thing about the people in my host community that I still do not understand is . . .
For me, the single most difficult feature of living in another family and community has been . . .	For me, the single greatest benefit of living in another family and community has been . . .

RE-ENTRY AND RE-ADJUSTMENT

LETTER FROM JOAO

Dear Mom, Dad, Dominic, and Alexis,

I hope this letter finds you all happy and in good health. I have thought of all of you so often. Please excuse me for not writing sooner. I got back only about a week before school began, so I have been muito atarefado. (Do you remember when I taught you that phrase? I'll never forget that weekend!)

So much has happened during the past four or five weeks. There was the Chapter picnic, frantic packing, the bus trip, Departure Day, the flight back to Portugal, family reunions, frantic unpacking and preparations for school. It's only been during the past weekend that I've had a chance to relax and think. I think most often of the day I left you and boarded the bus. It was too painful – I don't want to write about it now. OK? Perhaps you would like to hear a little about my return home. I hope so. You may be the only people who can really understand. You helped me get through those first months in California, when I felt so ignorant about everything. It sounds crazy, but I feel a little ignorant again even though I'm back in my native country.

I truly looked forward to seeing my family again, but I felt a little out of place for a week or two. I didn't feel "at home" as you say. First of all, I think my parents didn't like that I spent so much time talking about you and about California. They listened politely, but my sister told me off. I probably was hard to get along with, too, because I kept waking up early in the morning. The donkeys and chickens that our neighbors keep were making so much noise I couldn't sleep. Your place was so quiet, and I had gotten used to it. Also, I had grown to like the informal ways of your home. Before I left last year, I had never noticed that my parents expect a certain formality and respect from us children. Now it's as though I'm seeing my family with different eyes. I'm realizing that what I used to think of as natural is actually something that I learned to do just because I happen to be Portuguese. Why? Because I'm having to learn it again now that I'm back in Portugal. It's not that it's so difficult. The problem is that I know from living with you that there are other ways. Like, I could joke around with you even though I respected you. But my parents don't appreciate joking around. So I'm having to readjust.

What else? Well, I'm having to work at slowing down. Do you remember how terrified I used to be at the speeds you drove on those California superhighways? I didn't ever quite get used to it. But now that I'm back, I feel cramped by our two-lane roads, and I'm frustrated and angry every time our car gets caught behind a mule cart or a flock of sheep. It never bothered me much before I left. I don't know. In my mind I think that our less hurried, more social way of life here in Portugal is better. Yet, I don't seem to be synchronized with my countrymen any more. Oh, I'm improving, so don't worry. Maybe, I'll learn to be both ways – faster when I'm with Americans, slower when I'm here. One more thing. Now that I'm back in school here, I've remembered how hard it was for me at first in high school in California. I'm sorry I complained so much to you. After all, I finally got to really like some of the ways American teachers run their classes, I especially liked being able to ask questions in class at almost any time, and being able to have long discussions – even disagreements – with the teachers during class time. Yesterday I almost opened my mouth to offer an opinion about something my teacher was lecturing about. Except for some of the younger ones, most Portuguese teachers will not tolerate a student's offering an opinion or even asking a question during a lecture. It's considered very impolite. Teachers in Portuguese towns are among the most respected people, along with priests and medical doctors. One just doesn't do anything that appears to question their judgment, as one can with American teachers. I keep having to remind myself about this.

I hope you don't mind my telling you all these things. It's hard for me to find anyone around here who can understand what it's like to come back to Portugal after ten months living in another country. Last year's AFS student from my town left for the University of Coimbra only a few days after I got back, so I only was able to talk with her briefly on two occasions. She was very understanding, having had many similar reactions when she returned. But now that she's gone, I feel somewhat alone with my thoughts.

I think of you all the time. I hope you're working on those plans to come to Portugal next year. I can't wait to see you.

Saudades e abraços.

Joao

EXCERPTS FROM STUDENT'S LETTERS

“My first few weeks after I came home were a little problematic. I felt that I didn't know where I was supposed to live/be. Where was my home? Also, everything here was the same as it was when I left. Sometimes this made me feel like my AFS year was a big dream. Of course, I will stay here for a while and finish school, but I feel like I want to go out and explore the whole world!”

“Tomorrow is my first day of school and I am a little frightened to go back there. I hope I will make it and that my teachers and friends will help me. I do not remember how to study the way I used to. Well, I hope I will do it. My family and friends think that I changed a little bit, but I think my sister who is 21 has changed a lot. It is very difficult for me to talk to her or even listen to her. I hope that will get better in a few weeks.”

“Everything here is all right..well, some people change a lot..and I did too!! Some “problems” I faced were: people saying always “Oh my, you're so fat!!” and “You really dress weird!” things like that. Then people just realized that I had changed, that maybe I was more crazy, but I was more responsible too...I think that the exchange student begins to feel after a month that he came from the country where he has lived. I mean, the first month, everyone throws parties and everything, they ask “tell me what happened,” and all that. Then, it is over and you get back to normal, only it isn't normal anymore.”

“I've been home for three days now and I'm not doing very well, I'm afraid. It was very nice (an understatement) to meet my family again. My mother looked older, my father looked skinnier, and my brother was very, very much taller! I had expected great feelings and grand reunions with my friends — and it just doesn't happen. I have now seen all those that have meant something to me...and it hurts more and more each time. It's like we have nothing common, nothing to talk about. Not that I need attention and to be praised for my presence all the time, but I have to admit that after being a “celebrated” and “important” person for a year, it's hard to accept that it doesn't make much difference if I'm home or not. What is most confusing is that I feel I'm the same exact person as when I was ready to leave year ago. This AFS year made me feel so much stronger and alive as a person. I really felt I had achieved something personally, and have developed through facing and working through challenges, and I felt it so strongly and clearly and I was so happy. Now it's like there's nothing left of it. I wish I could take the new me out and show everybody, but it's not that easy. Anyway, the “old me” seems to be the only one right now...I'm fully aware that coming home is just a part of the whole exchange experience and that problems like these are not unusual. It just hurts so much!!”

“I think to my friends, I seem pretty much like the same person. They've had an exciting, challenging and eventful year at school, they've gotten closer through that and I'm outside of this. We've developed in different directions. I have a lot to catch up with...During my year in the U.S., I became very patriotic and was so proud of being Norwegian. But as soon as the Norwegians were reunited at CS Post, I realized that maybe it wasn't that simple. There are some not-too-positive sides in every culture, I've discovered since coming home.”

“Soon after I got home, I was living a very passive readjustment, into which I wasn’t putting very great effort, other than always pointing out that I really just didn’t want to be here, but all I wanted to do was to go back to the U.S. where my life had already been started and settled and I didn’t need any more work to fit in, as I need here. But I was feeling so bad that I didn’t write to anyone, even to my family in the U.S. I cannot believe that I did this! They kept writing to me and I had letters from my AFS friends and I finally pulled my act together. I guess I felt that no one deserved to get the depressing letters I would write...I preferred to keep it all to myself until I had worked it out. I was being stubborn. I know that now because I think it would have been better if I did not try to hide!

I’m only now beginning to understand some very important things of my experience. I used to say my AFS experience helped me grow up and mature, confident and secure with myself and I know this is due to AFS. I just feel so rich now, like I own something rare and priceless.”

“I had a terrible time adjusting back to my previous life. I exactly was a pain in the butt for my family, or rather “pain in the heart!” For a month or maybe more I acted so isolated, so selfish, so unfriendly. I didn’t want to be with anybody. I had always had very close relations with people around me. So my family felt very sad. They couldn’t accept my situation (well, I couldn’t either but my emotions were pushing me that way.) The worst is I didn’t allow them to try to come close to me (emotionally, that is.) In except for one or two very close ones. Even with them I was irritable and hard to be with. After I had time to spend time alone, I had time to realize who I am now, and what I want, and what I can do. This is such a big relief. Now I’m mostly back to myself.”

COMMON CONCERNS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

You may feel confused, especially in the first few weeks after you return because the values, attitudes, and lifestyles you learned in your host family conflict with those at home.

Deep cultural differences require time to explore and understand. Take time to consider both cultural perspectives before deciding on your preference and integrating it into your lifestyle.

Sometimes friends and family at home do not seem interested in hearing about aspects of your AFS experience that you find meaningful and important.

Try to realize that they may be adjusting to changes that have taken place in you. Furthermore, they may never have had an experience comparable with yours and may have difficulty sharing your enthusiasm. Be patient and seek other returnees who can help put your experience into perspective.

Friends and family may treat you as the same person you were before you left without recognizing the changes you have been through; you might feel a need for new or different personal relationships that acknowledge the changes in your life.

Remember that your friends and family may be feeling uncertain about how you have changed or grown. Discuss your feelings about yourself and others with them. Try to encourage positive changes in old relationships. Also, seek out new friendships with people who are compatible with the “changing you.”

You may feel uncomfortable talking about your feelings of affection for your host family because your own family feels left out or possibly jealous. Friends might also seem to be envious or jealous of the experience you have had.

Be sensitive to the feelings of others who have not had the opportunity you have had. If necessary, try to tone down your discussions; perhaps you are encouraging these feelings in others by dwelling too much on your own experiences. Try to listen to what has happened to them while you were gone, too.

You might be anxious or apprehensive about your academic situation because the subjects you enjoyed studying abroad have little relevance to your education at home. You might also be confused about future educational and career plans in light of new or uncertain goals and priorities.

Take advantage of the wide range of educational opportunities and alternative available to you by finding informal and nonacademic ways to continue the study of your favorite subjects. Take time to consider educational and career plans that include your areas of interest. Seek out the advice of other whom you esteem.

If you find that your attitudes and opinions have changed considerably during your stay abroad and are not widely shared in your home community, you may feel isolated or

rejected. Furthermore, you may feel highly critical of your home country because you have new perspectives on it; you may be criticized by others for your “negative attitude.” Try to keep a perspective on your feelings; remember that your opinions and ideas may initially be greatly influenced by the perspectives of your host culture and may not represent your final balanced view point. Share your feelings with others, but be cautious in choosing situations in which to bring up controversial issues.

You may become frustrated because people at home are uninformed about, or uninterested in, other peoples and cultures, including those of your host community. Faced with this lack of concern, you might feel that there is no way for you to take an active role in helping solve the problems of others in the world community.

Attempt to generate local interest in other peoples and their concerns. Use your special status as an “intercultural sojourner”/exchange student to educate others through one-on-one conversation or through public speeches and presentations.

PERSONAL SAFETY AND WELL-BEING

As the end of the program nears participants are often tempted to do things that they wouldn't normally do, for example getting a piercing, a tattoo, shoplifting, having sex for the first time, dying their hair, using drugs or alcohol, driving, etc. Why do you think this is?

Possible answers:

- They want to reinforce or solidify positive feelings of independence, individuality, love that they have developed up to that point.
- They find they have spent all of their money and don't have money to purchase souvenirs for their family and friends.
- "I was so good all year..."
- . "What are the chances that I will get caught, pregnant, an STD, if I only do it once?"
- They feel that they wouldn't be sent home for breaking the rules so close to the departure date.
- They feel that it doesn't matter if they get sent home so close to the departure date.

Why is it not a good idea to engage in these risky behaviors despite the ways that participants often try to justify doing so?

- Making drastic physical changes to yourself or within your relationship ultimately won't change how you feel about yourself or how someone else feels about you.
- One time is all it takes to make a mistake that could impact you in a negative way for a lifetime.
- You will be sent home early for breaking a rule even if it is within a week of departure resulting in missing the experience of getting together with all of your friends at the gateway, good bye parties, D-Day etc.
- You will leave behind a negative impression of yourself, your country, and AFS by breaking the rules.
- Your host and natural family may be hurt and angered by your behavior.