

A letter from business development volunteer Emma to our local partners at Mapoch, South Africa

“When I arrived in South Africa I remember you saying to me that I would cry when I arrived and cry when I left. I didn't cry when I arrived, but, when I left ...

Leaving was very much harder than going. Going home was really hard, but I've struggled to verbalise why exactly to anyone. I'll try to do it here.

First of all, I was exhausted, for about 2 weeks. The flights and travel didn't help, but then I both struggled to sleep but also returning to work and life was tiring. In Mapoch, I slept a lot and getting back to my normal cycle of sleep just wasn't enough. Being in work was a different way of life, although I don't know why I didn't have the reverse problem when I got to South Africa.

I think, well for me anyway, that I'm really emotional when I'm tired, so I think I got into a bit of a vicious circle. So ... second, I was really really emotional. I struggled to know what emotions I was feeling, but I was up and down, constantly.

One of the things that was going on in my head was that my life was bland. In South Africa, days didn't pass when I didn't feel valuable, or like I was learning/seeing new things, and certainly feeling things about what was going on around me. Here, I can go hours without having real thoughts or feelings - because of my routine, or because of how easy, relatively speaking, life is. So, since I've been back (6 weeks now) I've made some really big decisions and changes to try and maintain that level of care and attention in my life - I don't know if they're the right decisions - I guess time will tell.

I also felt in the first couple of weeks when I was back that I needed to find a way of reflecting on my time, but actually really struggled to find time alone to do that - I was back in work, I was catching up with people after so long, I had parties and all sorts ... I just wanted some down time, alone, to read or write or, just think. In fact, I even found it difficult to tell people about my time in SA until I had found that time alone to put it all into place.

Finally, but probably most significantly, I felt like I'd changed (I couldn't say how, but ...) and that "so much" had happened while I was away, but yet the life I came back to was identical to the one I left in every way and the people expected me to be exactly the same too - and that felt like a complete mismatch. So, again, I've consciously introduced changes and new experiences into my life here.

How would I advise someone to deal with it? I don't know if everyone will have had the experiences that I did (there were some specific issues in my case - on my first day back in work I was offered 2 new jobs which didn't help), but maybe the following will help a bit:

- Be prepared for it - know and expect that it might be that hard.
- Ensure you have enough "recovery" time - take a day or two off before starting work, don't make plans for your first weekend, make sure you have your "outlets" available to you - either friends to talk to, a diary, somewhere to walk ... whatever it might be.
- Get enough sleep!
- Have some room for some time alone
- Spend some time with your photographs pretty early on. For me, it helped me start to know how to tell the story of Mapoch and decide how to cherish your memories
- Be ready to take some control or make some decisions”

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Comment from healthcare volunteer Lynn, Port Elizabeth

“Nothing can prepare you for all the emotions that you will go through during your stay. Equally, nothing could prepare me for all the emotions I felt when I returned.

Usually after a holiday I am ready to return – to get back to my bed and my comfort food. I didn't feel this when leaving PE after a month. Of course I was pleased to be seeing my family and friends but I felt different!

It's all too easy to say it was 'life changing' because that's what it's meant to be – but it is more than that. To fit into life in a township in PE seemed easy and within days everything from wandering dogs to children playing with tyres is normal. Coming back to the UK and returning to my comfortable life was not so easy. Why not? I guess there is the comparison of my lifestyle ... and everything seeming so inane. Why are people moaning about the weather and why do children say they don't like peas? It all felt a bit like – so what? I really wanted to get on my 'high horse' and say 'you have no idea, do you?' I think I may quickly lose friends using that method.

I felt numb and was looking for the friendly faces of the children and carers ... knowing they were not there. Remembering all the lovely memories is a good process but the yearning of wanting to have them again is painful. I can't look at photos easily or watch videos without becoming a bit emotional. I can't listen to the CD of local songs without a huge smile coming on my face.

It is getting easier and my energies are channelled into raising money for Emmanuel. I have spoken to other volunteers who are ready to face the experience and I get very passionate about what they will experience.”