A Global Worker's Guide to Resilience in Re-entry



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Hi, I'm your coach Sarita Hartz

I'm a passionate advocate for missionaries and expats going through the difficult transition of re-entry. Over the years, I've worked with many clients, helping them to heal and thrive during the disorienting experience of re-entry. Through my experience of living 7 years overseas in Uganda and repatriating back to the States, **I've healed myself and developed resources to help you navigate this challenging process with support.**

I'm here to be a compassionate guide to walk you through this process, so you don't have to feel lonely, Isolated, or without tools. You are worth taking care of, and this guide will show you how to support yourself through re-entry. I have over 10 years experience as a life coach and re-entry expert. I'm also a Christian author--my book ***Healing Her***, a memoir of trying to save Africa while It ended up saving me, Is due out In May 2024. I live In Puerto Rico with my husband, 5 yr old son, Atlas and fur baby Zoe. Follow me on IG!





I truly believe that re-entry doesn't have to destroy you, but In fact It can be a redemptive process full of healing, hope, and health.

- Sarita

What Is Re-entry?

Re-entry is the *painful and disorienting transition back to your home country* after living in another for a period of time. It requires a great amount of support, resilience, and inner reflection.

Re-entry is like navigating the world underwater, everything disorientating and muted. It's like severing a limb as you reach for the phantom leg, missing all that was before. It is not feeling at home anywhere in the world, but rather feeling as though your home is spread over continents, with the people you've loved in each place.

Like you, I am a global expat who has gone through the re-entry process several times after serving as a missionary for 7 years in Uganda. **Like most of you, I had no idea what re-entry would cost me.** So I went on a journey of recovering my lost identity that was wrapped up in what I did for the ministry, and *learned to heal myself, grieve, and accept the re-entry process and have now become a re-entry expert.* This topic has been my most asked for, so I decided to create an e-book as you navigate the re-entry process.

Nearly half a million foreign aid workers work worldwide, with over 140,000 being missionaries who go through the psychological distress of re-entry.

80% of missionaries burn out on the field In the first 7 years.

This was my story.

"I am a confusion of cultures. Uniquely me. I think this is good because I can understand the traveler, sojourner, foreigner, the homesickness that comes. I think this is also bad because I cannot be understood by the ordinary, mono-cultured person. They know not the real meaning of homesickness that hits me now and then. Sometimes I despair of understanding them. I am an island and a United Nations. Who can recognize either in me but God?"
– Alex Graham-

7 years ago, I landed awkwardly in the USA with six suitcases and $200 in my bank account and spent 2 months living in a friend's guest room because I didn't have a place to live. That was my "Re-entry" process after 7 years living overseas.

I had no idea how to do this transition well. I didn't know there was such a thing as "de-briefing." **I felt like I left half of myself in Africa, and this other half didn't know how to function in normal society.** I needed an interpreter to untangle my sentences. Large dinner parties gave me cold sweats, and Walmart made me feel I was having a panic attack. Mostly, I had to unlearn living my life in emergency mode. I was unfamiliar with the word balance.
I kept thinking, ***"Where is my home?"***

How to live in this world of concrete when I was used to the wide-open plains, the grassy compound, the sunflowers, the red earth soaked in rainstorms. How to fit into this individualistic society when I was used to women spontaneously coming over for tea, children to hug and kiss through the day, a community I was an integral member of. *I was addicted to being needed, so who was I now on the other side?*

I wish I could go back and hug that lost girl and tell her it's going to be ok, she's going to get through this. She isn't alone. ***And you're not alone either.***

The Process of Re-entry

GRIEF

In our Western society, we don't like to talk about grief, but grief is unavoidable in re-entry. **It is a saying goodbye to the people, places, and culture you've become intricately connected and accustomed to.** There are also the traumas and cumulative grief that have piled high through your missions service. This can range from witnessing suffering, poverty, and death, to disconnection in relationships, to emergency evacuations, to COVID-19 related departures, to burnout, sickness, and family disintegration.

There was also the grief associated with leaving the **only true home we'd known.** Everything from having to sell off our few possessions, to leaving our African dogs behind, felt like one more grief I couldn't bear. In my coaching, many have sought me out due to feeling **isolated and lost** during their re-entry transition. But it is not something to be faced alone. Acknowledging and deeply feeling these griefs is the crucial first step in healing.

The buck stopped with me, so I pushed myself harder to not recognize my own need for self-care, rather I sacrificed myself on the altar of ministry and with it my own physical and mental wellbeing.



IDENTITY LOSS

When I returned to the States, I no longer knew who I was or where my value lay because I thought my value was attributed to my ability to be a helper and to push past my own boundaries for the sake of others. I was used to the accolades and affirmation that came with my missions work, and when I lost that, my self-esteem plummeted.

When I served as non-profit director, I became addicted to the need to be needed. My identity became wrapped up in my performance, how well I was serving, how far I could go, how much I could martyr myself for my calling.

Because life and death emergencies were part of my daily existence, I became attached to the adrenaline rush of helping and problem solving.



CULTURE SHOCK

When we serve for a long time in another culture, we become accustomed to their ways of life. For example, Ugandan culture is a very communal culture, with women and children often stopping by my home to share tea and conversation. Repatriating to America, which is a very individualistic society, I went through the culture shock of realizing **I felt very lonely, like an alien landing on a new planet.**



Everything from a simple shopping trip to Target, to being in large groups of people, felt triggering for me. **I was overwhelmed with the opulence and choices we have in the Western world,** and felt guilt to be partaking in these conveniences. I also felt a small amount of resentment to friends, family, and supporters who would easily spend money on things I deemed frivolous when I knew that $100 on a pair of jeans or drapes, could buy my community a whole month of food. Feeling different also correlated to high amounts of social anxiety. **I no longer felt I had much in common with my peers,** so I retreated into myself, becoming more introverted. This did nothing to lessen the loneliness I felt.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS



Because I had no concept of how re-entry would alter me, I did not seek out proper amounts of support from friends, debriefing agencies, or therapists. This lack of support drove me to **deeper levels of isolation and lack of belonging. As humans, we need to feel we belong somewhere** or to someone and when this is ripped from us, we drown. Some of you were more prepared for re-entry so you may have sought out support in your process, however, once that debriefing session ended and you were thrust into a life you no longer recognized, you may have felt like there wasn't a safe place to land.

Maybe you had to move to a region for a job where you didn't have a tight-knit community or church to rely on, or perhaps the support systems that once held you up, had changed or moved on in your absence.

This lack of a support system is one of the most devastating aspects of re-entry. Letting go of one community to embrace another involved grief.

FINANCIAL HARDSHIP

When I came back to America, my husband and I were in debt, had $200 in our bank account, and very few employment prospects. Because I was a missionary, I didn't have much savings so **my husband was forced to find a job to support us and we moved to a new area in California in order to make ends meet.** The first few months of our return, we crashed on friend's couches and dug through our exploding suitcases, which were all the possessions we owned. This financial hardship placed a lot of stress on our marriage as we sought to claw our way out of poverty. Many of the skillsets I'd built in Africa in the non-profit sector didn't translate in America, so I had to pay for training courses in coaching in order to make a living. **There was also the expense of an international move, flights, and setting up "house."** We had nothing to our name, so even renting a place and buying pots, pans, and pillows, buying a car, and going to medical visits because of my failing health, put a huge financial strain on our dwindling bank account.
You are in control of your space and my belongings.

RELATIONSHIPS

Marital and parental/family relationships often take the biggest hit in missions. Many missionaries are borderline workaholics, and this leaves little time for date nights, counseling, joy, or play. My husband and I struggled to remain connected on the mission field, and our neglect of tending to our marriage was deeply felt upon our return. We had to tend to the damage we had done in years of ministry, through seeking out therapy, going on date nights, and picking up hobbies we could both enjoy together. Slowly, we felt the joy and connection seeping back into our marriage, **but it took months of hard work and tough conversations.** I'm grateful we didn't have to navigate this process with children, but many TCK's (third culture kids) struggle with their departure from the only home they've known. This can lead to resentment, anger, and behavioral and psychological problems. **Sadly, some TCK's and missionaries have also experienced spiritual or sexual abuse on the field, and these traumas have repercussions that last for years**. Many TCK's report dealing with depression, anxiety, and grief even though most do not regret their experience of living overseas. There are also at-home family relationships that suffer including those with your parents, siblings, friends, and churches. **You've changed and evolved in your time overseas, and you may feel like a stranger to those you were once closest to.** Some parents may not have understood your calling, so there can be unforgiveness, gaslighting, and blame when you finally return to America.



Healing & Meaning Making

HEALING

Perhaps the **most pain-staking process of re-entry is the physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological healing you must go through in order to become the resilient, whole person God created you to be.** This is not a quick fix. For me, I had a whole host of issues to work through including adrenal fatigue, high cortisol, shame, guilt, identity, and grief. I also went through serious infertility issues due to my time on the field and illness I suffered and medicines I had to take. **I had to heal my body first before I could begin working on my heart issues.**

I did seek out therapy and coaching, and a naturopath to aid me in my healing journey and I'm so grateful for that support. I learned I was an unhealthy Enneagram 2, and that in order for me to grow, I had to learn to **prioritize my own needs, self-care, and healing in order to be healthy**. This was difficult for me, as I was so used to giving, and got so much of my worth from it, I no longer knew how to set boundaries or even what I enjoyed doing to fill my own cup. This process took years and I am still on that journey, but it has been **so worth it to self-reflect and get to know this new me and learn to love her.**



MEANING MAKING

Many missionaries struggle with making meaning from their missions experience. **Everything from having to leave the field due to burnout, spiritual malaise, physical illness, team or sending org conflict, or moral failure can strip away the reasons why they felt called to missions in the first place.** I know I went through the devastating process and feeling like a failure when I had to leave due to burnout. **I felt guilt that I was somehow failing my Ugandan community and beneficiaries.** And some supporters only amplified this feeling through saying things like: "you need to finish the race." What I've come to learn is that finishing the race looks different for every missionary, and ultimately what is most vital is being obedient to God when He says to go, and listening to your own inner truth.

What I know now is **that grace can In a season can lift, and its our responsibility to know when grace and anointing for a calling has lifted,** so we can honor God. When our capacity is overwhelmed, and we can no longer serve the people we've gone to serve, or perhaps even harm them with our own bitterness and resentment, then it's time to depart. But these choices, can only be made by you who are in that position. **No one else can tell you if and when a season of grace has lifted**—this is something only you can work out with your Father in Heaven who has sent you.

Reintegration & Wholeness



REINTEGRATION

Once you are on the journey of healing, you begin to integrate this new person into your identity. What are your likes and dislikes, what are your gifts, what drains you and what fuels you? **Where can you use parts of your gifting in a new mission, how can you love the person you were and are becoming?** Where can you make meaning from the painful experiences and begin to see threads of redemption, protection, and escape? God hems us in before and behind, and what often feels like limiting buffers can actually be bumpers He's put in place to protect us, not limit us. So as you get to know this new self, **how can you see their worth and value, how can you recognize and appreciate you for all you've been through, how they've helped you survive,** and what you need to let go of in order to rise up to a higher level? Reintegration is the process of reshaping, and reforming your personalities and preferences into new person who is whole.

WHOLENESS

Wholeness is our ultimate goal in the re-entry process. It is when you've taken all the pain, mistakes, trauma, identities, accomplishments, and transformed and reintegrated them into your personhood. You are no longer a broken vessel, but rather you can see the cracks in the pottery, where the golden light slices through the crevices with beauty. **You are resilient, you have been through so much and you have fought your way towards light and wholeness.** You no longer feel there are parts of you strewn around the globe, you no longer blame yourself for leaving, you can now see the incredibly intricate tapestry God was weaving through your story and you are now in a place where your healing can be a key to other's healing. This is the place where you can now begin to give again, not out of deficiency, but out of sustainability.
You have a new paradigm for missions now and you will no longer do it at the cost of your own health, marriage, family, or self, but rather, you will do it out of your own wholeness and the lessons you've learned. Your experience is now what qualifies you to be a helper to others, and your healing, is the guidepost that lights the way for others still trapped in darkness. The old and new you have merged into one complete person who has forgiven themselves, learned to love themselves, and in this way can now love others fully. This is the final chapter **of your re-entry process** and you can see redemption shining through all the cracks.

How to Heal During Re-entry

PHYSICAL HEALING

We are body, mind, soul, and spirit, we are interconnected, so we cannot heal our soul, if we do focus on our bodies first. Most missionaries coming off the field have a litany of physical health issues ranging from **illnesses, to stress, anxiety, depression, adrenal fatigue, malnutrition, worms, thyroid issues, migraines, vertigo, suppressed immune system, low iron, infertility, gut-health issues, to remnants of tropical diseases afflicting your body.** The first step in healing is to address these health concerns. My preference has been first to seek out a qualified tropical disease specialist to inspect to see if there are any leftover illnesses, worms, parasites that need to be eliminated. Then, I recommend seeing a naturopath or holistic doctor who can run complete bloodwork to determine what areas of deficiency you have. Most likely your body is out of whack in some area and needs support.

I have a list of supplements on my website for how I **healed my body of adrenal fatigue and Candida Albicans affecting my gut. Again, this is a long process which requires patience and determination where you must be your own health advocate to seek answers for why you feel so burned out,** exhausted, and have a range of debilitating physical symptoms.

Living in a developing nation or in a war zone, is a trauma, and pain is an indicator, a warning light on the engine of your body, to kindly make you aware of you need help.

MENTAL HEALTH

I recommend a host of supplements, exercise, nutrition, practices, and products on my website and Amazon store to help you heal and come back into alignment with your body. **Your body is not your enemy, but your friend, and whatever you are struggling with, your body is trying to compassionately tell you where there is deficiency.**

Most of the missionaries I know, me included, suffer from a host of mental health issues from their time as missionaries. This is normal, and I cannot emphasize enough **THIS IS NOT YOUR FAULT,** these are simply the hazards of working in the developing world, and in helping professions. These can range from vicarious trauma, to complex trauma, PTSD, cumulative grief, to depression, anxiety, and stress.

The Holmes-Rahe stress scale research shows that most missionaries reach a level of over 900 on the stress scale during their first missions experience, with 200 being the normal response. **Those who have maintained a level of over 600, 50% will be hospitalized within 2 years. This is serious! The effect of stress on our body and psyche is enormous.**

Missionaries undergo high levels of stress on a daily basis, from culture shock to trauma, to witnessing suffering and standing alongside those who suffer. These numbers are equivalent to what doctors and nurses experience in the helping profession and are not to be taken lightly.



I experienced **high amounts of depression and anxiety** both on and off the field which culminated in burnout, exhaustion, and the need to be hospitalized for panic attacks and trauma-related effects. Even if you don't feel "stressed out" you could be numbing out or dissociating from your trauma which has serious side effects resulting in disintegration of self. Those who do not treat their depression can often suffer suicidal ideation. If you or someone you know is experiencing this please seek professional help immediately.

Also, our childhood trauma can have a negative impact on our adult lives, so recovering from those deep hurts, is also essential. Dig deep and do the work with a therapist to see how your desire to save others may be correlated with your childhood trauma and tendency to repeat familiar patterns. I have articles on missionary depression on my site, which I recommend you read, but I am not a doctor, and seeking out a trained therapist or coach is a necessity. I went through years of therapy to integrate my experiences and it **greatly reduced my feelings of depression and PTSD.** I also attend the annual Mental Health and Missions conference which is a wealth of information for missionaries and member care providers.

HEALING OUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

We all have what's called the Vagus nerve, one of the 12 cranial nerves, which helps you regulate your nervous system. **Your nervous system is constantly in flux undulating between your parasympathetic response—green zone(calm, rest, and digest) and your sympathetic response—red zone (fight, flight, fawn.)** When you're triggered your body becomes dysregulated and goes into a fight, flight, or fawn response which disrupts your calm and even your gut axis. Fight can look like anger or yelling, flight can resemble leaving the room, fawn is when you outwardly subvert your needs for the approval of others and to keep the peace. Returning to rest, peace and calm is the goal and to help your body do this you can engage in both physical and self-compassionate exercises.

One of my favorite ways to **calm my nervous system down is to place my hand over my heart and recite out loud a compassionate mantra such as, "You are ok.** You are doing a good job. You are doing the best you can. You're a good mother." You can come up with your own mantra that suits you. Another physical way, is to **use ice or an ice roller** on your forehead which signals to your brain to switch into a parasympathetic response. You can also use tapping where you cross your hands over your chest and tap near your breastbone to get your body out of fight or flight. Other helpful practices are **grounding (going outside barefoot to stand in the sunlight,) four-square breathing (deep breaths in for four counts, hold for four counts, breathe out for four counts,) journaling, listening to meditation, yoga, having a dance party, hitting a pillow, yelling, and praying.** But for me self-compassion exercise are a favorite of mine. Please see my website for more of these practices.

Wellbeing

Social Wellbeing

One of the greatest losses experienced by missionaries is the loss of community which has far-reaching psychological impacts. Some of my depression was a result of feeling isolated and like I had little social support in re-entry, feeling as though few people understood me or could empathize with my experience on the field or my return. People expected me to be happy that I had left the field, but my guilt was looming. **Having societal support in the means of friendships, family, mentors, spiritual directors, can aid greatly in the recovery process.** I recommend seeking out like-minded communities through friends, churches, small groups, or justice-minded Facebook groups. Being in the presence of other missionaries, or those going through the re-entry process can be extremely validating and healing.

One such group is Melissa Chaplin's *Returning Well* cohorts for re-entry or Velvet Ashes retreats, and I would recommend you seek this out or something similar. You could also join or form your own alumni group similar to what World Race, Iris, or Adventures in Missions has. I also provide **one-on-one coaching for returning missionaries who need a more personal touch.**



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– Alex Graham-

Spiritual Wellbeing

I have had many former missionaries reach out to tell me in private that since their return they have **struggled with or abdicated their evangelical faith**. The reasons for this are complex, but missionaries often find they can no longer relate to the **nationalism, white savior complex, colonialist, paternalistic culture of the Western church which puts America or the "white Jesus" at the center of Christianity.** I too felt this, especially during the tensions of political debates, where my faith no longer resembled that of the American church because I didn't support a particular political candidate or agenda.

I did not lose my faith, however, it is an evolving faith, one that is born in love, kindness, and respect for all nationalities, sexual orientations, and persons of faith. My **faith has changed a lot since the early days of missions, and I find that my deconstruction phase, while painful, actually led to a truer version of faith** for me and I'm grateful I went through the process of curiously asking the questions. Some resources that have been helpful to me are the work of Sarah Bessey and the annual *Evolving Faith* conference where I can share authentically about my changing faith in a safe environment with like-minded people who are kindly asking the same questions about **who we should be as the body of Christ.**

The Way Forward

Relational Healing

As previously stated, marriages, and families often suffer greatly in fulfilling the missionary calling and while we may have been lone wolves on the field, we now need communal support to bring healing in our relationships. I wrote about my marital difficulties in an article called *9 Ways I Saved My Marriage* on *A Life Overseas*, and there I vulnerably shared how my husband and I struggled in our marriage, and we sought out professional counselors to help us communicate and heal from past hurts.

The expectations we have on our partner or families can damage them from expecting our partner to be more spiritual, or that we won't become a "trailing spouse," or expecting our children to have the capacity to handle the rigors of the mission field. **But we need margin in our lives to tackle these fragile heart places since relationships are so tied to our deepest selves and rejection is a lonely place, which is why this is the final step in the recovery process.**

My husband and I were able to reattach, and I do believe it is possible for every marriage and family to heal from the distance involved in pursuing a mission. God wants to restore marriages and families, he set you in them to provide, love, connection and support, so know He wants to heal them even more than you long for healing. There may need to be forgiveness, or making amends, but **there is hope for re-connection and for cycle breaking, that your children can be free from repeating your past mistakes and patterns.**

So here we are my loves, at the end of our journey together. I've provided links to the articles and products that have aided me in my journey of wellness. I pray that as you go through re-entry **you know that you are not alone, and you don't have to face it alone.** You are a beautiful, unique, gifted human being, who is worthy and deserving of love. **You are enough just as you are,** even if you feel broken or disconnected right now, there is hope that you can recover yourself.

For more help please check out the Coaching page on my website and my re-entry archives, missionary care resources page with some of my favorite support systems and books.

with love,



You are resilient and re-entry Is a landscape you don't have to lose yourself In. I'm here to help. May you meet this journey with self-compassion.

- Sarita