

SEPARATION GUIDE

AUSTRALIAN ANTARCTIC PROGRAM

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The opportunity to participate in the Australian Antarctic Program is an exciting prospect. It is a unique experience with those involved having a direct role in supporting Australia's interests in Antarctica and the subantarctic. It is not, however, without challenges, and one the greatest challenges you will experience is managing an extended period of separation from family and friends. It is important that you, and the significant people in your life, fully consider the impact of the separation prior to accepting a position with the Program and plan accordingly.

This Guide is designed to help you to better understand and manage the demands of an extended period of separation. We would encourage you to take the time to read it through and share the information with your family and friends.

As a participant in the Australian Antarctic Program we wish you every success. It is our priority to keep you safe and healthy, and connected with those at home who are supporting you during your time down south.



Mawson research station © Jenny Wressell

PREPARING FOR AND MANAGING THE SEPARATION

Introduction

Separation due to participation in the Australian Antarctic Program can be challenging for both yourself and those who remain at home. Living away from family and friends and normal, everyday life can be difficult and there are many things you need to carefully consider. Your decision to work in Antarctica is not one that should be taken lightly.

While this Guide is primarily intended for prospective participants in the Australian Antarctic Program, it also contains useful information for family and friends. The intent is to promote awareness of the potential challenges you may face, to help inform your decision to participate in the Program, and offer suggestions and tips to assist you, and those remaining at home, to effectively prepare for and manage the period of separation.

Everybody's experience of separation while participating in the Australian Antarctic Program will be different. The information contained in this Guide is not intended to apply to every expeditioner, nor to address every situation; rather it provides information across a broad range of topics for your consideration. While not all sections of this Guide may be directly relevant to your circumstances, we encourage you to read it in its entirety.



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We would encourage you to read this guide as a companion document to the Expeditioner Handbook. If you have not yet received a copy of the Expeditioner Handbook, you can access it at https://www.antarctica.gov.au/antarctic-operations/expeditioner-hub/expeditioner-handbook/

The Expeditioner Handbook is a great resource for learning more about living and working in Antarctica. You may also like to have a look at the 'Living and working in Antarctica' page on the Australian Antarctic Division's website **www.antarctica.gov.au/living-and-working** and the weekly station updates available at https://www.antarctica.gov.au/news/stations/

For the purposes of this guide, the term 'Antarctica' is inclusive of Macquarie Island and ship-based expeditions.

Sometimes a prospective expeditioner is so excited about the opportunity to live and work in Antarctica that they don't listen to concerns or reservations raised by their partner, family or friends. Perhaps those who care about you don't feel able to express any concerns or reservations because they know how excited you are – even if they don't really want you to go.

Take the opportunity to have a frank and open discussion with your partner, family and friends about how they REALLY feel and listen to what they say.

Before accepting a position

To work in Antarctica is a personal choice, and you should ensure that your decision is well-informed and fully considered. Living away from your family and friends can be challenging and there are some things you should consider before accepting a position. These include:

- Is your partner / immediate family supportive of you accepting a position?
- If you are considering a winter position, are you prepared for a period of isolation spanning at least six months?
- Have you been away from home for lengthy periods before and how did your family cope?
- Is now the best time to be away from your family, friends, job and any other commitments you have?
- Is your partner able to cope with the current family, work or personal situations that they face, and how will any additional burden associated with you being away affect them?
- If you have children in your life, how will they cope with your prolonged absence? Are you prepared to miss significant milestones in their lives (e.g. first steps, first day at school, birthday celebrations or graduation)?
- How will going south impact your job/career?
- What is your motivation for working with the Australian Antarctic Program? If you're looking to escape a difficult relationship or situation, Antarctica is not the answer.
- Will there be sufficient support at home for your family, both day-to-day and also if a crisis arises?
- Are there elderly family members or friends who are ill or likely to die during your absence? Do you, or they, have any concerns about you not being at home should this occur, or not being able to attend a funeral?
- How stable is your relationship? Are there likely to be any long-term impacts if you go south? How will you and your partner cope with an absence of physical intimacy or physical contact?
- Are there any unresolved issues causing concern within your relationship that you need to address?
- Have you done your homework to learn as much as you can about the Australian Antarctic Program, in particular, what it's like to live and work on an Antarctic station? Only then can you make an informed decision as to whether this is the right thing for you.



Casey research station © Chris Crerar



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Preparing for separation

Following advice of your acceptance as a participant with the Australian Antarctic Program, most expeditioners will have at least a 4–6 week period before they start training in Hobart or depart for Antarctica, depending on their role. This period can be quite hectic and stressful as you and your family try to organise your lives in preparation for your departure. While there will be a lot of demands on your time, there are things that you can do to help prepare yourself and your family for the period of separation:

- Have the difficult 'what if' conversations. These are not easy conversations to have, but they are very important. For example, consider what will happen if the parent remaining at home becomes ill, injured or dies – what arrangements are there for your children if this were to occur?
- Discuss any concerns that you and your partner and/or family may have about the pending separation. Talking openly about feelings and expectations can make it easier to adapt to changes and manage the challenges of separation.
- If you are in a relationship, your partner may have some reservations about you living so closely with others in a communal setting – don't just dismiss their concerns, take the opportunity to talk them through.
- Do you have ageing or unwell people in your life (perhaps parents, friends or grandparents)? Give some thought to how you want to spend your time with them before departure. Talk openly with them about any concerns they have about your pending departure, support they may need in your absence and the possibility of their dying while you're away.
- Family members may be concerned about your safety. Take the time to acknowledge and discuss their concerns.
- Ensure that your family and friends understand that once you have departed for Antarctica, they should not expect that you will be able to return home earlier than planned.
- Take some time to discuss the reallocation of roles and responsibilities at home before you leave. If appropriate to your circumstances, consider organising some external support for your family such as having someone mow the lawns or help out with household responsibilities on a regular basis. As the period of separation extends, having some assistance with these routine activities can really make a difference for those remaining at home.
- Discuss how you will keep in contact during the period of separation. How regularly and by what means. This is discussed further in the 'Keeping in touch' section of this guide.

Expeditioners and their families often report a number of emotions or feelings as they prepare for the upcoming separation. Alongside excitement and anticipation, there may also be anxiousness, anger, trepidation, sadness, guilt and frustration.
I
t is not unusual to experience some tension in the household in the lead up to your departure or find that you and your partner are arguing more than normal.

These are normal responses to the situation, but it is important to talk them through so that issues aren't left unresolved.

Things to do

While everyone's situation is different, you need to think about what you have to organise before you leave. Try to organise your personal administration as early as possible so you're not rushing around in the days before departure to the detriment of spending quality time with family and friends.

Suggested tasks:

- **Consider what arrangements you need to put in place to manage your finances and banking while down south**
- Check expiry dates of **licenses**, credit and debit cards etc. If they are going to expire while you are in Antarctica, renew them or organise replacements before you leave.
- Complete any household jobs that you'd like to have done before departure or organise to have them seen to while you're away.
- Create a list of tradespeople that can be called while you're away if the need arises.
- Leave a spare set of house/car keys with a trusted individual should they need to be accessed during your absence.
- Make sure your family know where important documents are kept.
- Write down any Personal Identification Numbers (PINs) and keep them secure. It's easy to forget what your PIN is when you don't have to use it for 12 months.
- Update your resume and store it somewhere accessible (e.g. email it to yourself or save it on a thumb drive) in case you apply for jobs while in Antarctica.
- If you have pets, make sure that your plans for them are known in case of an unforeseen event, e.g. they become ill or die, or the person caring for them is no longer in a position to do so.
- Make sure that your family have contact details for the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and **Family & Friends Liaison Officer (FFLO)**. Contact details are included in the 'Support and further information' section of this guide.



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Separation considerations during the training period

Depending on your role, you may be required to relocate to Hobart to attend training at the Australian Antarctic Division (AAD). Wintering expeditioners will participate in a lengthy training program while the requirement for those spending a shorter time in Antarctica is somewhat less.

For expeditioners coming from interstate, your relocation to Hobart for training will be the start of the separation period from your family and friends. During this initial period of separation, those remaining at home will start to develop new routines, take on additional responsibilities and adjust to your absence; be mindful of this if you return home during the training period. While the 'Returning home' section of this guide is primarily focused on returning home at the end of the season, you may find it to be a useful reference during this period as well.

While you will be focused on your preparation during training, make sure that you continue to take an interest in what's going on at home and talk about how the separation process is going. Now is a great time for the family to 'trial' how things will run while you are away and explore other options if things aren't quite going to plan, e.g. have someone trusted look after the children for a weekend as a trial respite period for your partner to see if that arrangement will work, or ask the gardener to start looking after your gardens now so you can see if they're reliable.

Good communication and sharing information with those at home is as important during the training period as it is during your actual time in Antarctica – it's important to keep family informed about how your preparation is going and any changes to departure details etc.



© Barry Becker

For Hobart-based expeditioners, there are both benefits and drawbacks to completing training from your home location.

While on the one hand you get to go home each night and continue to spend time with your family and friends, you may feel that you don't have the same opportunity to bond with your fellow expeditioners who are accommodated together during the training period.

In the lead up to your departure, it's important that you manage the competing demands of family and home, alongside spending time with the new expeditioner community.

Travel dates for expeditioners can change at short notice due to weather, operational requirements or changes to transport schedules. Delays can be frustrating for everyone and family/friends may feel as though they are placing their life on hold waiting for you to depart. Those who have travelled to Hobart to 'wave you off' may feel as though they should stay with you if your departure is delayed but this could conflict with plans or commitments back home. There may be some concerns with the cost of extending their stay or even difficulty finding accommodation. It can help to discuss what will happen if the departure is delayed in advance. Will your loved ones wait in Hobart until you leave (understanding that there may be further delays) or will they say their goodbye and return home on the date planned?

Accommodation in Hobart can be difficult to secure, particularly over the Christmas / New Year and Easter periods. If family and friends are going to travel to Hobart to see you off or meet you on your return, looking at accommodation options early is recommended.

Farewells

In the lead up to your departure life can get pretty busy organising things at home, doing those 'last minute' jobs around the house, finishing up at work or finalising stores and equipment for your project etc. While there can be a number of demands on you during this period, it's important that you schedule some quality time with family and friends – even if you're only going to be away for a short period. Depending on your circumstances you may prefer one big 'get together' or perhaps a couple of different things to suit the different groups of people in your life – drinks with friends, a BBQ for extended family, a special dinner for immediate family etc. Friends and family will miss you and they will want to say goodbye.

If circumstances permit, and particularly if you are going to be away for an extended period of time, think about organising a short get away with the people that are important to you before you depart for Antarctica. This will allow you to spend some quality time together away from the demands of everyday life – a time to create some good memories and an opportunity to say your goodbyes.

Family and friends may choose to travel to Hobart to spend time with you before you depart and to 'wave you off'. This can provide an opportunity for them to visit the AAD and gain some more understanding of the organisation, and perhaps meet up with other expeditioners and their families. It can be nice for those remaining at home to be able to put a face to a name when you're talking about a fellow expeditioner. If family do make the trip to Hobart, have a think about when is the best time to say goodbye. Although it may seem tempting to wait to say your final goodbyes at the wharf or airport, neither of these locations are private and goodbyes can feel rushed. Some expeditioners and their families prefer to say their goodbyes the morning of, or day before departure.

Tips for making the separation a little easier

- Arrange for some close friends to be in contact with your loved ones while you're away in case some support is required.
- Missing significant milestones (e.g. birthdays, anniversaries and other important events) is often reported as one of the more challenging aspects of separation for both the expeditioner and those remaining at home. Make sure you have a list of important dates so you don't forget to acknowledge and celebrate them while you're away. Maybe create an email alert as a reminder.
- Think about buying some presents for special occasions and leaving them at home to be opened in your absence or leaving gifts with a family member or friend to hand-deliver. Receiving a wrapped gift and a handwritten card on special occasions reminds those at home that you're thinking of them. If you forget, or would just like to send a spontaneous gift to let someone know you're thinking of them, you can always buy gifts online and have them delivered.
- You could also prepare some handwritten notes and leave them in places to be discovered at a later date (e.g. in jacket pockets). Just like pre-organised gifts, it reminds loved ones of how important they are to you and that you are thinking of them.
- Even before you leave it can be useful to start talking about expectations for your return home (e.g. will your family come to Hobart). Having this discussion before you depart doesn't mean that you need to lock in plans but it does help to open the lines of communication on the topic, even though your return may be many months away.



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Tips for family and friends during the separation

- You may find it useful to link up with family and friends of other expeditioners (e.g. via social media). This is something that expeditioners can discuss and assist with during the training period.
- The initial period of separation can be the most challenging, with those remaining at home often experiencing a range of emotions and a degree of uncertainty as to how they will cope. As time passes and new routines are established, you should expect to feel more confident and comfortable with new roles and responsibilities.
- Separation can be more difficult for those remaining at home as the expeditioner is often wrapped up with the excitement of going south or the business of the Antarctic season. If circumstances allow, it can help ease the challenge of separation if the person(s) remaining home can plan and look forward to doing something special themselves, e.g. a holiday or a visit to/from family and friends, a new hobby or perhaps taking up some study. It's good having something positive to look forward to or enjoy rather than just facing the daily grind alone. It's also important that you practise good self-care while your loved one is away.



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- When keeping in touch with someone down south, take the opportunity to keep them informed about life at home. Don't feel as though it's not as important or exciting as what they may be experiencing in Antarctica. Keeping your loved one or friend informed helps them stay connected and feel as though they are still involved with what's happening at home. Keeping informed about day-to-day events while down south can also help their readjustment at the end of the season.
- If shipping or flight schedules allow, think about sending letters or gifts. Gifts can also be passed on to the Station Leader prior to departure for distribution on special occasions (such as birthdays). Personalised e-cards with photos from home are another nice way of keeping in touch.

Things that can help children adjust to the absence of a parent include maintaining routines as much as possible, using 'house rules' rather than rules associated with either mum or dad, and being consistent with discipline.

Be cautious about dismissing concerns raised by your children by using statements such as 'don't be silly' or 'it will be fine'. Take the time to listen, reassure them and talk about the things they raise – don't just brush them off.

For the parent/caregiver at home, ensure you have a strong support network. It's important that you maintain a balance between the demands of caring for children and your personal needs as an individual.

Consider whether your children have the capacity to take on additional responsibilities during your absence. If they are involved in a lot of extracurricular activities or are at a critical point of their schooling, they may not have capacity to take on much more. In this instance you may want to consider some 'outsourcing' options (e.g. gardening, help with household chores).

For expeditioners with children

Some children will manage the period of separation very well, even flourish – for others, the absence of a parent may be a particularly difficult period.

Where appropriate, consider involving your children in discussions around whether you should accept a position and how those remaining at home will manage your absence. Listen to any concerns they voice and consider whether, and how, these concerns can be managed.

Things you can do to help your children adjust to the separation and cope with your absence include:

- Record stories (audio or video) for younger children that can be played to them as a bedtime story or take some of their favourite books with you so you can read to them over the phone.
- Encourage your children to draw pictures and write stories or keep a record about what's happening at home that they can share with you upon your return, or via phone or email while you're away.
- Particularly for younger children, display photos of the absent parent (or grandparent etc.) around the home and have those remaining at home make reference to them in normal daily activities (e.g. keep a photo on a bedside table allowing them to say 'goodnight' each evening).
- It can be helpful to inform teachers about a parent's absence so that any changes in behaviour or performance can be handled appropriately.
- Provide an opportunity for your children to be part of the experience, e.g. putting a map of Antarctica on the wall with a corkboard for pictures, showing them your clothing and equipment, encouraging them to do a project on Antarctica or perhaps organising to do a presentation for their class.
- Talk with your children about how they would like to keep in touch with you. Some children aren't great talking on the phone and would prefer emails or to communicate with you via social media. Some children may like the chance to speak with you one-on-one, while others may prefer to join a family conversation. If your children are old enough and you feel that the circumstances are appropriate, think about setting up separate email / social media accounts to allow you to have individual contact with each of your children. Teachers may like to incorporate Antarctica in their lessons and have your child's class keep in touch with you while you are away. https://www.antarctica.gov.au/about-antarctica/education-resources/ has some useful classroom resources.
- Be careful about any expectations that you may unintentionally place on your children. A simple remark such as 'I need you to be the man of the house while I'm away' may be a source of considerable stress for a child – rather, talk about how family members can support each other. Children may feel that they need to 'step up' in your absence but be concerned about their ability to do so. Talk with your children about your, and their expectations around roles and responsibilities in your absence.
- While the pre-departure period can be busy, look for opportunities to spend quality time with your children. This reinforces that they are important to you and can help create some really positive memories – memories that you can talk about during the period of separation.



Support for children

Children's reactions and how they respond to the absence of a significant person in their life will vary according to things such as their age, their personality, previous experience with separation, available support networks and coping skills.

Changes in your child's behaviour during the separation period can be particularly challenging for the parent at home and a source of concern for the parent who is away. If you have any concerns about how your children are responding to your participation in the Australian Antarctic Program (either during the period of separation or adjusting to your return home), you and/or your partner may like to access the Employee Assistance Program for some advice and support.

Other resources include school psychologists or community services such as Headspace (https://headspace.org.au) or Parentline (https://www.kidshelpline.com.au/parents/issues/how-parentline-can-help-you/)

Painting by numerous children and Alison Lester for the Kids' Antarctic Art Project



Davis research station 360° © Doug Thost

Keeping in touch

Staying in touch with family and friends is important as it allows you to remain involved with life back home and lets those who are important to you know that you are thinking of them. Regular contact with family and friends through the period of separation can also ease the transition home at the end of the season.

To ensure that communication with your family and friends is satisfying for everyone, there are a few things to consider:

- The most common way for expeditioners to maintain contact with family and friends is through instant messaging and calling apps. These include popular apps such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, iMessage and Signal. Messaging, audio calling and sharing images through these apps is reliable. Video calling is possible but the quality will vary depending on station Internet use. If you are in a deep field location or participating in a traverse, communication with family and friends may be restricted.
- Make sure you have an understanding of potential limitations for communication with home and discuss these with family and friends before you leave.
- Conversations go two ways, and both parties to the conversation should be able to share what's been happening in their worlds. The conversation shouldn't just focus on what an amazing time you're having in Antarctica.
- Social media has made keeping in touch so much easier, but there are some downsides – in particular, it can remind you of what you're missing at home and vice versa. Social media (e.g. Facebook) or a blog can be a great way to allow friends and family to share your experience, but be cautious that these don't become an alternative to having direct contact with the people that are important to you.
- Be very mindful of what you post on social media sites. It is very easy to create the wrong impression or for misunderstandings to arise leaving your family and friends feeling uneasy.
- While it might sometimes be harder for you to keep in touch with friends than with family, it is equally important to maintain involvement in your friends' lives through regular contact.
- Many expeditioners comment that communication with their family and friends often improves during the period of separation because they actually take the time to have a conversation and talk/listen to each other.
- Sometimes phone calls may be less than satisfying; perhaps you've called at a bad time or you/your partner have had a bad day; perhaps you're tired. A challenge of phone calls, instant messaging and emails is that it can be hard to pick up on the non-verbal cues that we all rely on for good communication. If a phone call doesn't go well, try not to dwell on it or read too much into it; have a chat about it next time you talk.
- If there's something really important that needs to be discussed, it can help to plan what you want to say when you call.
- If you're particularly upset or angry when you type an email or instant message, save it as a draft and come back to it later to re-read before you hit 'send'.

It's important that you and your family and friends talk about and agree on how you will keep in touch during the period of separation, including:

- Setting expectations around frequency of communication. For example, is there a preference for daily shorter chats or less frequent but longer calls? If either of these options become unsatisfactory, how will you address this?
- Whether you would prefer to communicate via email or phone or a combination.
- The amount of money you are willing to spend on communication. Further information on call costs is detailed in the Expeditioner Handbook.

Remember that there may be time differences between Australia and the stations. Take this into consideration when planning your calls.

Opportunities to extend your season are the exception not the rule and are based on an organisational need, not an individual's preference. If there is an opportunity to extend, your supervisor will approach you directly to discuss.

Extending your season

Depending on operational or project requirements you may be provided with an opportunity to extend your time in Antarctica. Just like when you first applied to participate in the program, there are some considerations worthy of your attention in deciding whether or not to extend your season.

While you might be excited about the option to extend, deciding whether or not to stay should be a joint decision between yourself and significant people in your life. Make sure that you are open to the conversation and really listen to how your family and friends feel about the possibility of an extension. They may be reluctant to say 'no', even though they don't really want you to stay on.

Some things you should give some thought to in deciding whether or not to stay on for longer include:

- You have already been living and working in Antarctica for a significant period of time. Consider how you're feeling, and whether you have enough 'left in the tank' to stay on for a longer period.
- What will be the impact of you extending on your family and other commitments you may have back home.
- Are you prepared to spend the time getting to know a whole new group of people?
- How will you adapt to new station leadership/supervision and different work practices that are associated with the arrival of a new team? Can you let go of how things were done last season and start afresh with the new station community?



© Justin Chambers



Macquarie Island © Richard Youd

Support and further information

Family & Friends Liaison is the main point of contact at the AAD for family members and friends of expeditioners providing information to assist in preparing for and managing the period of separation. Expeditioner Liaison can be contacted on 1800 030 680. Further information on this service and other services designed to support family and friends is available at https://www.antarctica.gov.au/antarctic-operations/family-and-friends/

The AAD recognises and understands that separation associated with participation in the Australian Antarctic Program can be difficult at times. Support is available for expeditioners and their immediate family through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) during both the separation period (including while you are attending training) and for up to six months after you return home. The EAP can be accessed by calling 1800 320 799 (24 hours, 7 days) or +61 2 8295 2292 if overseas.

Further information on this service is available at https://www.antarctica.gov.au/antarctic-operations/expeditioner-hub/liaison-and-support-services/employee-assistance-program-eap/

For information on transport, shipping and aircraft arrival and departure dates, contact the Transport Information Line on 1800 030 744.

Access to webcams on station and the RSV Nuyina can be found on the AAD's public internet page www.antarctica.gov.au



© Kim Kliska

It's important to have a conversation with your family and friends about how you'd like to celebrate your return home and the plans for the first couple of days to ensure that everyone is 'on the same page'. For example, you may want a quiet return, but your partner is planning a big welcome home party or a vacation with extended family. While events such as these will have been planned with the best of intentions, having different expectations or conflicting plans around what will happen upon your return may be a source of conflict or tension.

For those awaiting the return of an expeditioner, remember that while the AAD does its best to adhere to transport schedules, things such as weather or operational requirements may cause a delay (or in some circumstances an earlier arrival). With this in mind, it's important to keep any travel plans flexible just in case things change.

RETURNING HOME

Preparing for the return home

While returning home is exciting and something that you and your loved ones will look forward to, there will be a period of readjustment. It's important that you and your family prepare for your return, just as you did for your departure.

The final weeks of your stay in Antarctica can be a busy time (e.g. getting into the field one last time, preparing end of season reports, resupply, doing those last minute jobs) and you may feel overwhelmed by what you need to do before you leave station. There can be a mix of emotions ranging from excitement to some anxiety about returning home or feelings of sadness as you prepare for the end of the season knowing that you will soon be leaving a familiar environment and the friends you made. These feelings are normal and commonly experienced by expeditioners.

Those at home may also experience a range of feelings and emotions in anticipation of your return. They may be concerned about a disruption to routines established in your absence, uncertain about how you'll fit into new friendship groups or perhaps concerned about letting go of the independence and autonomy they had while you were away.

Take the time to talk with family and friends about how you're feeling about the return home and any concerns you may have, and encourage them to do the same. Just like during the pre-departure period, good communication is really important in preparing to reunite with family and friends.



© Stuart Shaw



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One last get-together

On the first night back in Hobart, it's common for expeditioners to want to have one last get-together – after all, this may be the last opportunity you have to spend time with your fellow expeditioners.

If your family is meeting you in Hobart, it's important to consider how they feel about this. Are they happy with you going out on your first night back? If you do go, are they going to join you?

Often family like to attend because it's an opportunity for them to meet the people you've been living and working with. If they do attend, ensure they are included in the conversation and that they don't feel left out.

What was it like?

Think about how you will respond to this question. It can be a little overwhelming trying to describe the experience in a couple of sentences, but putting a little thought into what you'll say means that you're prepared for the question you're most likely to get.

Sea or air

Whether you return home by ship or air will be determined by the AAD and will depend on things such as your location in Antarctica and operational requirements. Each experience is different and can have advantages and disadvantages. Returning home by ship provides an opportunity for rest and a gradual shift from Antarctica to home, which can help the transition, but the voyage is long. Returning home by air takes much less time but can mean a more difficult transition given the abrupt shift from Antarctica to home. If you do return by air, try to build some 'down time' into your first couple of days home for rest and adjusting to not being on station. Don't schedule too much – you'll be more tired than you think!

There is no template for what the experience is like when you first step off the ship or plane. Some expeditioners talk about taking a little time getting used to driving (or travelling in a vehicle) at speeds greater than 20–30 km/hour. Some may be more acutely aware of smells, or a little uncomfortable in crowds; some are particularly aware of children, having not seen any in person for some time. Others will comment about forgetting to take their keys and wallet, or not locking their door when they go out. Reactions like these are all quite normal – give yourself some time to adjust.

Debrief period in Kingston

You may be required to participate in a technical debrief when you return to Australia – the duration of your debrief period will depend on time on station and your role. Keep this requirement in mind when organising your plans for returning home. More information about the debrief period will be provided as your return date draws near.



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Re-establishing an intimate relationship

Regular contact across the season provides an opportunity to stay connected emotionally with your partner but re-establishing an intimate physical relationship may take some time. Some couples find that sexual desire may not be rekindled immediately or there may be a disconnect between romance and urgency - you and your partner's expectations of re-establishing physical intimacy in your relationship may be quite different. Good communication, understanding and trust are critically important in re-building this important aspect of your relationship following a period of separation.

Adjusting to life back home

Every expeditioner will readjust to life at home differently, and there is no defined time frame for this to occur. It may take a week, a couple of months or more as you move through the reunion period with family and friends and reintegrate back into normal roles and responsibilities. This could be for a number of reasons including the amount of time you were away, what's changed at home in your absence, the experience you had while you were down south and your personal circumstances. It can also be affected by things such as how easy you and your family find it to re-establish a routine and renegotiate roles and responsibilities, how long it takes you to reconnect with friends, find a new job etc., as well as how well you've kept up to date with what's been happening while you were away.

Remember that family and friends who remained at home may have started new hobbies, have new interests or friends and will have grown as individuals. Your partner may have become more independent and children will have grown – for example, you may have left a little girl and come home to a young lady. Life has carried on while you've been away so expect there to be some changes. Give yourself time to adjust to the changes – don't expect it to happen overnight!



© Tony Fleming

You may initially feel like a guest in your own home – not fully familiar with how it functions, what the routines are or where things are located. Remember that a home that has been functioning without you for a prolonged period of time will not necessarily operate the same as it did before you left. Take the time to observe what's changed and discuss with your family what roles and responsibilities you'll be taking back now that you're home. Be cautious about automatically resuming responsibilities that you had before you left or expecting your partner or children to continue to do them even though you're now home – some negotiation may be required.

Returning home to children in your life

There is no textbook answer to how children will respond to your return home – toddlers may become very clingy, concerned that you will leave again; teenagers may barely acknowledge your return, busy with their own lives. You may find your children trying to test the limits or perhaps wanting your undivided attention. Try to be patient and attentive and take your lead from the parent who has remained at home.

Acknowledge your children's achievements and contributions and have a conversation with them about their responsibilities now that you're home. During your absence, they will have grown in confidence and maturity and had new experiences – they may be uncertain about what's expected of them now you're home, or concerned about how your return home will affect established routines. Perhaps they've built new friendship groups, have new hobbies or interests or have a new relationship – they may be nervous about introducing you to new people in their lives or uncertain about the interest you'll take in the things they are now doing. Be present in your children's lives and take the time to talk with them about what's been going on while you've been away, what the experience was like for them and what happens now.

Sometimes the parent returning home may feel guilty for being absent and be more lenient with discipline, or feel as though their children are not behaving to the standard they expect and be overly harsh. This can be confusing for your children and difficult for the parent who has been the primary disciplinarian during your absence - try to maintain the same standard of discipline as your partner has during your absence.



© Christopher R Clarke

Don't be surprised if very young children don't immediately recognise you or are reluctant to come to you when you first arrive home. It can be distressing when your child or a significant child in your life (e.g. grandchild) shies away from you or cries when you approach them, but it's not unusual after an extended period of absence. Give them some time to get to know you again.

Tips for partners

- Provide your loved one with an opportunity to gradually resume their pre-Antarctic roles and responsibilities. Recognise that it may take them a little time to adjust to being home and any changes that may have occurred.
- It's important for your loved one to be able to talk about their experiences in Antarctica and to continue to access social support from fellow expeditioners – this can actually help in their adaptation to life back home. The trick is achieving a balance. If you are concerned that they are too focused on Antarctica and not enough on the family then it's important that you discuss this with them.
- Your partner's return will require a change in your routine, much the same as you experienced when he or she left. Give yourself time to adjust.
- You are the person most likely to see changes in your partner – perhaps even before they recognise them in themselves. Talk with your partner about the changes that you are noticing and in particular any changes that you are concerned about.

Tips for the returning expeditioner

- Be cautious about criticising changes that have happened at home – if you're not comfortable with something that is different, have a conversation about it.
- You may find that people respond to your experiences down south differently – some will be really interested and ask lots of questions, while others may offer nothing more than a passing comment. Appreciate that some people will want to talk lots about what you've been doing, while others may not. Take your lead from the person you're talking to, and don't be offended or concerned if they don't show a high level of interest; that's okay!
- When catching up with friends and family, make sure that you take an interest in and ask questions about what's been going on in their lives.
- Sort your photos – pick your favourites (try for your top 100 or so) that you will share with others. Remember a photo may hold great memories for you but is unlikely to have the same meaning to someone else.
- Think about organising a 'get-together', bringing together friends and extended family at one or two social gatherings where you can tell your story about living/working in Antarctica once, rather than having to repeat it each time you catch up with a different person. Continually retelling your story can become tiresome for you, and a potential source of frustration for those close to you if it's a recurring topic of conversation.
- Take the opportunity when friends and family ask about what it was like in Antarctica to acknowledge the efforts of your partner, children and others who supported you and your loved ones throughout the period of separation.
- If you're in contact with your fellow expeditioners after you return home, particularly in the first couple of weeks, ensure that you maintain a balance between catching up with them and spending time with family and friends.
- Be extremely cautious about making any major life decisions in the first few weeks home. Give yourself some time to settle back into life at home before making any big decisions that could impact on your future.
- Expect it to take a little time to adjust to being home – that's quite normal; give yourself some time and try not to overcommit yourself in the first couple of days/weeks after your return.
- If circumstances permit, think about spending the first couple of days after returning home with just your partner, immediate family or your closest friends – perhaps even having a short holiday together. This will allow you to give each other your undivided attention and spend some quality time together without the demands of day-to-day life. Having had the opportunity to spend quality time with the most significant people in your life, you can then start to reconnect with extended family, broader friendship groups etc.
- It can be difficult for you to make an accurate assessment as to how well you're adjusting to life back home – you may think that you've adjusted well but your family or friends may not necessarily agree. Good communication is as important now as it was during the separation period. Take the opportunity to 'check in' with those around you every now and then to see how the return process is going.



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Single expeditioners

While you may not have the same family commitments as those expeditioners returning to a partner and children, single expeditioners also need some time to adjust to being home.

As a single expeditioner, you may not have a permanent place to live when you first return home – you may have tenants in your property, or perhaps you gave up your accommodation when you went south and your personal effects are in storage. Often this will mean organising temporary accommodation such as staying with family and friends. While these arrangements can well work in the short term, particularly if you are planning to do some travel, sorting out longer term living arrangements as soon as possible can help you feel more settled and re-adjust following your return home.

If you live alone, you may find that this takes a little time to get used to after life on the station where there were always people around. The close communal living in Antarctica meant that there was always someone to talk to or have dinner with, someone up for a game of darts or to head out for a recreational trip etc. When you first get home and you're by yourself, it can be a little lonely – don't be surprised or too concerned if this occurs, it's quite normal. Making an effort to reconnect with your friends, looking for opportunities to socialise and getting a routine established can all help in the transition from life in Antarctica to life at home.

Remember that you will have likely changed as a result of your experiences in Antarctica – perhaps become more confident, open to different experiences, taken on new interests etc. You may feel as though you can't relate to some of your old friends as well any more, particularly if you're missing the friendships that you established on station. You may also find that things have changed in your friendship group, for example friends may be in new relationships, new people may have joined the group, your friends may have started going out to different places or developed new interests in your absence. Just like an expeditioner reconnecting with their family, it's important that you take time to observe and learn about what's changed in your social group and give yourself some time to reconnect.

Staying in contact with Antarctic colleagues provides ongoing social support once you're home, particularly given that you've shared an experience that others may not fully understand. It can be easy continuing to socialise primarily with this group, but be cautious about doing so to the detriment of reconnecting with your other friends.

While you will certainly make new friends on station, make sure that you keep in touch with your friends back home during the season. Share what you're doing in Antarctica and take an interest in what's going on in their lives – social media is a great way to keep in touch, but it's also good to occasionally pick up the phone and say hello.

Maintaining contact with friends keeps you involved in their lives (and vice versa), which helps to reconnect once you're home. Friends back home are also a great source of social support while you're on station.

You may find that your friends are very keen to catch up with you once you're home and very soon your social calendar is full – just be cautious about planning too much in the first couple of days home and over-committing yourself.

For those expeditioners returning home before Christmas and looking for work, keep in mind that many businesses close down over the Christmas/New Year period so finding a job may take a little longer than you anticipated. Have a contingency plan in place – perhaps putting some money away over the year to cover any period you may be out of work or taking on some casual work initially until other opportunities arise.

If you are self-employed, remember that it can take a little time to re-establish contacts and for work to start coming in after a prolonged period away. Consider letting previous clients and contacts know when your business will be starting up again in the weeks leading up to your return home – but be careful not to take on too much work in the first couple of weeks.

It is not uncommon for expeditioners to start applying for jobs while they are still in Antarctica. If you find yourself in this situation and are offered a position, keep in mind the potential for changes to your return date and consider how this may impact on your availability to start work.

Returning to work

Depending on your circumstances, you may return to work soon after returning home or decide to take an extended break. You may be returning to your previous job or you may need to find new employment.

When it is time for you to return to the workforce, remember that your employer and colleagues may not fully understand your role or experiences in Antarctica – think about how you can best translate your Antarctic experience to help your current (or prospective) employer and workmates better understand what you've been doing.

If you're returning to a role you held before you went south, think about what may have changed in the workplace (e.g. will you be working with a new team or supervisor, or new equipment/different procedures). You may feel that the job you're returning to isn't as diverse or perhaps you don't have the same level of autonomy you had down south. Give yourself time to adjust to these changes and settle back into the workplace. Don't be offended if you are asked to re-do inductions or refresher training. You will have been away from the organisation for a while and it's quite appropriate for your employer to want to 're-introduce' you to the workplace.

Speak with your employer about any concerns you may have about returning to work so they can assist you transitioning back into workplace. Also let them know about any new skills you have gained as there may be an opportunity for you to use these in your job



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Leaving Antarctica early

On occasion, you might find yourself coming home from Antarctica earlier than expected. This could occur for a number of reasons – there may no longer be a requirement for your particular skills; the season's program may change; you may request to come home early due to personal circumstances; or you may have a health issue that needs to be addressed. There may also be circumstances where the AAD will decide that you are no longer suited to the program. Whatever the reason, it's normal to experience a range of feelings that could include disappointment, anger and/or sadness if your season is terminated early. Early termination may also leave you feeling that you haven't accomplished all that you wanted to and leave you with a sense of uncertainty about the future of your project and future employment options etc. For some, there may also be a sense of relief.

Because the return home may be quite sudden and not something that you've had the chance to put a lot of thought into, there may be an initial period of uncertainty and disorientation. Getting into a routine as soon as possible, reconnecting with your social networks and turning your focus to 'what's next' can help with your adjustment back into life at home. While early termination of your season may not have allowed you to achieve all that you wanted, try to focus on the positives and what you were able to achieve rather than dwelling on the negatives.

Your family and friends may not be prepared for your early return home – they may have planned a holiday or organised a different work roster thinking that you'd be away a while longer, or have some social events organised that don't include you. They may be uncertain about what to do now that you're coming home early. Talk openly with your family and friends about what the early return means and how it can be accommodated into existing plans.


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