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When you think of furlough, what comes to mind? For some it is eager anticipation with many “positive” feelings and thoughts. For others it may be a dread or fear of what might lie ahead for them. And for most of us it is some combination of the two, anticipation and dread.

## I. Types of Furlough

1. The **well-planned furlough** has many details already in place before a person or family arrives in their sending country, including: housing, transportation, schooling, some speaking engagements and possibly an assignment with the mission organization.
2. The **generally planned furlough** may have some details in place, but many will be decided after arrival in the sending country. The initial time schedule may be in place, along with a place to stay and possibly a car, but the rest will be worked out later.
3. The **furlough with little planning** will have very few details in place before arriving in the sending country. The destination is known and little more.
4. The **unplanned furlough** usually happens because of extenuating circumstances, such as health problems for a member of the immediate family or parents at home, or political/safety issues in the host country of assignment.

Furloughs are stressful times for each individual or member of a family, but generally speaking, the more that is planned and in place before the start of furlough, the less stress each person will experience. But no matter how much planning is done, furlough often brings some pressure, tension, hassle and strain.

## II. Personal Feelings Associated with Furlough

A variety of thoughts and feelings will be experienced as a missionary faces furlough, some positive and some negative.

### *Some Positive Feelings*

All missionaries have certain expectations about furlough. Some of these expectations might be: paved roads without potholes; family, friends and churches who are interested in them and their “story”; freedom from cultural stresses of the field, and the wide range of available products that were unavailable or too expensive on the field.

Furloughs are often a time of hope and desire for the missionary. These include: rest and recuperation, good contact with partners and even an increase in financial support

Often there is an eagerness to be with family on special occasions, to have the kids be with grandparents, to share all of God’s work during the past term, and to experience worship in their

home churches. There may be an eagerness to drive and see familiar or new sights, speak only in their mother tongue, or just watch TV. Kids may be eager to play video or computer games.

Some can't wait to have a Big Mac or Whopper, a deep-dish pizza, a variety of ice cream or other special foods they have not had for a few years. Of course, some can't wait to get out from under the various stresses experienced on the field.

The home country is also a place of help and assistance. There is health care from doctors, hospitals and pharmacies, spiritual and emotional care from pastors, counselors and friends, training for new skills or upgrading skills, and technical and practical help in a wide range of areas.

For many missionaries it is a time to be built up, affirmed and just loved. Having given of themselves to others, it is restorative to be on the receiving end.

### ***Some Negative Feelings***

Just as there are positive feelings, missionaries have various feelings that might be termed negative as they approach furlough.

Some terms that can be used to describe these feelings are: uneasiness, concern, apprehension, worry, fear and anxiety. Some areas where missionaries experience varying degrees of these feelings are: transportation, travel, housing, schooling for children, fitting in, making new relationships or reestablishing old ones, and relating to family, friends and churches. Others might be: being put on the spot, being in the spotlight, not being seen as "real missionaries" because they didn't do church planting, evangelism or even Bible translation, support dropping off, and the unknown in general.

There may be a dread about having to speak in front of groups, traveling, staying in many different homes, trying to tell your story over and over, or relating to some difficult people. For some there is dread of packing up on the field, unpacking possibly many times in their home country only to repack for the field. Many missionaries dread all the goodbyes they will have to say.

Because missionaries seem safe or neutral, some folks will want to share their own struggles, problems or prayer requests. This may happen more when the missionary is in a place for a short time.

There are often feelings of awkwardness as the missionary faces new or changed situations, new and different cultural cues and styles, and rapidly changing technology.

Many are uncomfortable with the opulence they encounter in home countries where the standard of living is so different. A missionary will have to resist the temptation to judge those who have so much.

Missionaries often experience feelings of inadequacy, not fitting in, loneliness, and that their story isn't worth telling or that no one really cares to hear their story.

### ***A Combination of Positive & Negative Feelings***

In anticipating furlough, missionaries have a combination of enthusiasm and some measure of anxiety or apprehension.

### ***Furlough is a Transition***

It is important to realize that furlough is a time of major transition and carries with it a considerable amount of stress, no matter how much one may look forward to it. At the heart of transition is upheaval and disruption, and that describes furlough very well. In furlough transition there is the leaving or saying goodbye to friends and ministry, entering or saying hello to old and new friends, and a changed ministry. This is done in the midst of chaos and change that often lasts the whole furlough. And just when the missionary starts to feel “at home”, it is time to transition again back to the field of assignment. Is it any wonder that many missionaries look forward to returning to the field for rest and recuperation after a tiring, stressful furlough?

### **III. Feelings of Family, Friends and Supporters Associated with the Missionary’s Furlough**

Just as the missionary has feelings related to furlough, so do their families and friends.

#### ***Some Positive Feelings***

Family members can’t wait to be united with their loved ones. They want to show them love, hear their story, have them for special occasions, take care of their needs and make them feel very special. Extended family members may be eager for a visit and reconnection as the missionary travels during furlough.

Friends and churches look forward to renewing or building relationships, providing for the missionaries’ needs and hearing about them and their work. Those who have been praying may especially want to hear how their prayers have been answered and how the Lord is using the missionary.

#### ***Some Negative Feelings***

Even though family, friends and churches may really want to see the furloughing missionary, they may also have some apprehension. How will the missionary impact family life, friendships or the church program? The missionary’s coming may mean a disruption of schedule, time, money, etc. Will the missionary make demands on them? They may not want a deep relationship because in a short time the missionary will leave again and goodbyes are painful.

Some may see missionaries as more spiritual and that can be intimidating. Will they try to convince them or their kids to be missionaries, to give money (or increase their giving) or will they lay some other guilt trip on them about missions? Unsaved loved ones may be fearful of being buttonholed about salvation or going to church, etc.

They may fear that previously strained relations between them and the missionary will not change or will get worse. Because of past history, some may want to avoid the missionary altogether.

### **IV. Children and Furlough**

When planning a furlough, parents can overlook or minimize the needs of their children as they are often occupied with a myriad of details surrounding furlough. Children can experience the same feelings as their parents and others as well.

**It is important to remember that *parents are going home, but many children are leaving home.***

Furlough can be hard for children as they are on display and being watched. Some children don't mind being in front of people to talk or sing, but others dread this phase of furlough. They may look and feel like misfits because of speech, dress, mannerisms and values. Their cultural knowledge and cues are usually different. They are not up on the latest fads, music or slang. Having lived in another culture has given them a much broader worldview, which may make it difficult to accept the values of those in their parents home culture. It is hard for missionary kids (MK's) after having made new friends to say goodbye, not knowing if they will ever see them again.

Parents need to realize and accept that MKs reactions may be quite different from theirs and that is okay.

## **V. Some Things That Can Be Done to Prepare for Furlough**

- Engage in prayer early and often and enlist others to join with you. Parents pray with your children about specific needs they may face.
- Let go of expectations and preconceived ideas of what it will be like.
- Plan ahead, as much as possible and at the same time anticipate change, upheaval and even chaos.
- Ask for specific help from those in your home country before your arrival, as well as during your time there.
- Talk to other missionaries about their furloughs to get helpful ideas.
- Take advantage of your organization's furlough planning help.
- Plan fun times and down times for rest and recuperation.
- Prepare yourself and your children by talking and reading about your home country, fads, customs, etc. Don't have unreasonable expectations for them. Listen to their concerns and strategize solutions together.
- Be ready to set appropriate boundaries on the demands of your energy, time, ability and other resources.

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