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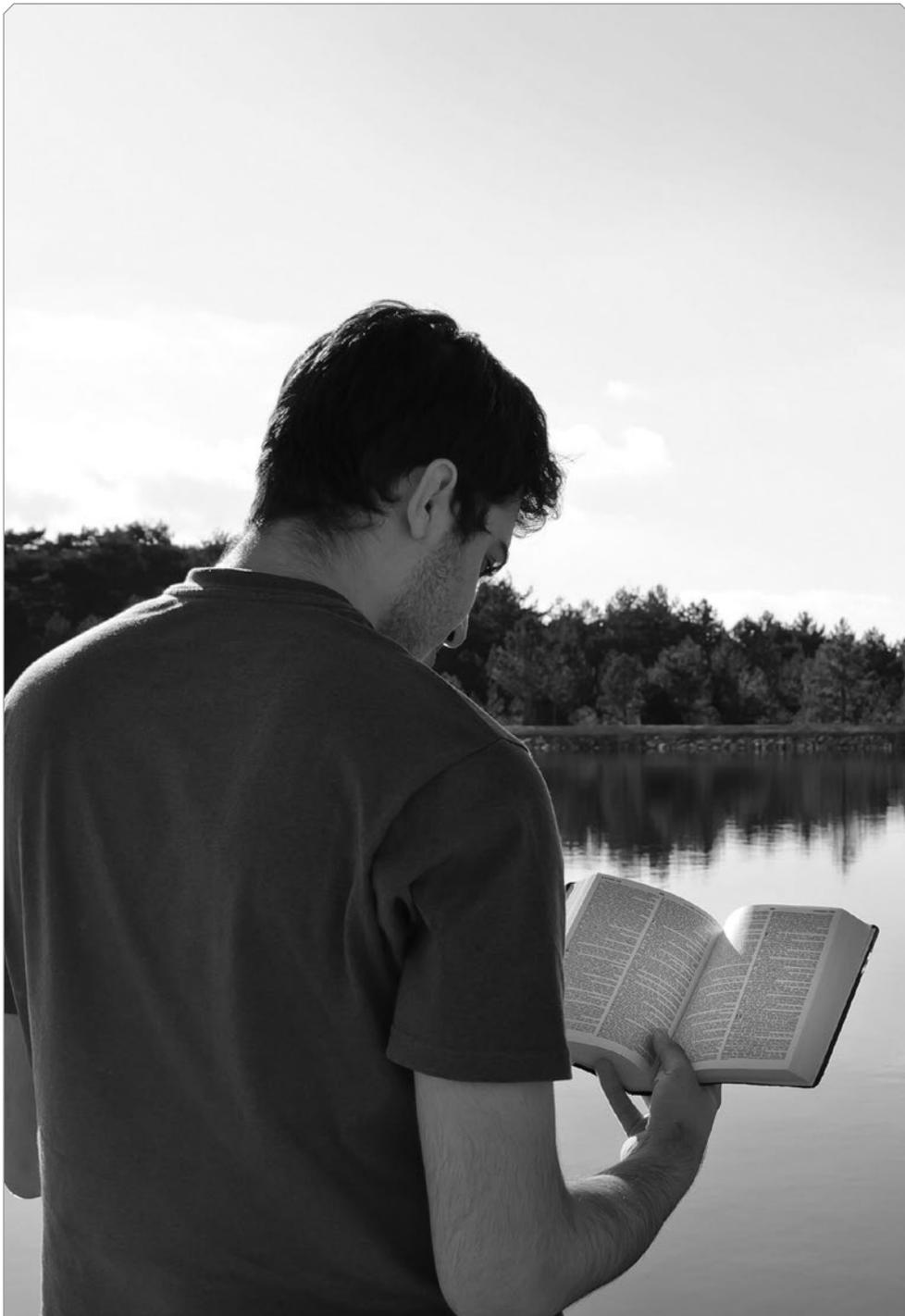


Photo by Balazs Toth, 123rf.com.

Most of the young men stated they would not change the outcome of their missions. Returning early helped them grow, and by enduring the challenges they faced they chose to be refined by their experience rather than defined by it.

Stopping the Stigma: Lessons from Early Returned Missionaries

KRISTINE J. DOTY-YELLS

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In 2002, my world changed when my oldest son returned home from his mission after only a few months. I was stunned and bewildered, and I had no idea what I should do. This is not something I knew how to prepare for. The idea of an early return never occurred to me. My son seemed to do just fine in his adjustment; I was the one who struggled with grief and loss. I mourned the spiritual experiences he would not have and the growth he would not gain. What made it worse was that I knew only one other young man who had returned early, and his parents moved away shortly afterwards, so I felt alone. Few friends talked with me about it. My ward family said little. Some of those who ventured to say anything at all said hurtful things in the awkwardness of the situation. In the absence of knowing how to handle such a tender topic and trying to avoid aggravating the pain, most said nothing at all.

I struggled for years with what it meant. Meanwhile, after a brief period of inactivity, my son married in the temple, began a family, and moved away to accept a new job. In time the memories took a back seat, and I seldom even thought about it. Two more children, both daughters, completed full-time

missions, and that seemed to resolve the challenges of the first. Time indeed healed the wounds.

Then in 2010 it happened a second time. My youngest son returned home from his mission after four months due to depression and anxiety. He was sad, humiliated, and subsequently fell into inactivity. Reeling from the shock, I found that this time it hurt on a much deeper level. Memories from the first experience returned with a vengeance, and suddenly I felt as though my competence as a mother, and in-home missionary trainer, was called into question.

In both cases my sons returned early, went back out into the field, and returned early again. After four of these experiences of my sons' returning home early, I was beginning to feel like an expert, an expert in pain, embarrassment, shock, and even shame. Why did this happen to my sons? What did it mean to them? What was our family meant to learn from it?

Sometime later, a student came to meet with me in my university office. In the course of the conversation, he brought up his experience returning early from his mission. As he spoke, familiar memories returned, only this time I was seeing patterns in this phenomenon. As I shared with my student some of my impressions of my sons' experiences, we identified some common processes and stages of adjusting to the early return. As I set the parental feelings aside in favor of the instincts of a social scientist, my student and I wondered if returning early from a mission had meaning that we could, and should, explore.

Diving into the literature was short lived. There were some studies on returned missionaries who served the full term, but no published studies existed on early returned missionaries (ERMs). As my student and I discussed it further, we wondered if there were no prior studies because the problem was so rare it did not require examination. But as time went on, we heard anecdotal experiences more frequently, so we decided to test the waters. If nothing else, we felt that studying the issue might provide understanding and healing for both my student as an ERM and me as a parent. We decided that outcome alone was worth the effort, so we launched an exploratory study to ask, what is the experience of early returned missionaries?

Methods

To carry out this study, we used mixed methodology, specifically a sequential exploratory strategy.¹ This method entailed gathering and analyzing

qualitative data through intensive interviewing² and using that data to subsequently develop a quantitative instrument to survey a larger sample. The interviews were performed using a constructivist approach with the intent of building a narrative that represented a shared understanding of the ERM experience.³ There is some bias in this method because it is difficult to ignore personal feelings and experiences when filtering qualitative data through a personal lens. However, the key to making this project work for my team was to "successfully manage the personal dimension."⁴ To do this we used peer debriefing and cross-checking to gently question our reactions to the data before beginning the coding process.⁵

This paper will report the findings of the qualitative portion of the larger mixed-methods study. A comprehensive report of the quantitative methods and results were published previously (see Doty et al., "Return with Trauma").⁶

To recruit participants, we used purposeful sampling, specifically the snowball sampling method.⁷ My student and I each knew a couple of ERMs, so we invited them to be interviewed. Those participants knew of other ERMs who were willing to participate as well. The study seemed to gain momentum through word of mouth and social media, and we were able to reach our saturation point, the point in which we were hearing similar stories,⁸ in just a few months. We were surprised at the willingness of the men to discuss this sensitive issue; it made us believe the phenomenon was more common than we previously thought.

The criteria to participate were fairly broad. First, a participant had to be a male early returned missionary. We specifically recruited men because of the social pressure and religious expectation to serve a mission, which is not the same for women.⁹ They had to be between the ages of 19 and 65 and willing to grant an interview that would be digitally recorded.

The interviewees included eleven Caucasian men and one Pacific Islander. Their ages ranged from 20 to 29. All were Utah residents, although one relocated to Utah from an East Coast state just a few weeks after his release. The participants' primary reason for their early return differed. Two came home for medical reasons, four for mental health concerns, two for unresolved transgression prior to missionary service, two for disobedience to mission rules during their service, and two for reasons of personal choice.

We conducted the interviews in locations of the participants' choice, using a semistructured interview schedule. Interviewers asked the same questions to all participants,¹⁰ but the direction the interview took was controlled

by the participant. The purpose in asking this set of questions was to capture each participant's narrative chronologically, allowing each story to unfold naturally.

As the lead researcher and a licensed clinical social worker, I attended every interview, accompanied by a student. One of us conducted the interview, and the other took field notes.¹¹ The interviews lasted between thirty-five minutes and two hours. The longer interviews were with men who had not previously talked about their mission experience with anyone, including immediate family, and they admitted that speaking with a nonjudgmental third party was a cathartic experience for them. All participants were offered counseling resources to assist them in dealing with unexpected emotional responses, which occurred in more than half of the interviews.

The digital voice recordings were transcribed by a contracted employee, and the transcripts were read and checked for accuracy by a student researcher. Each transcript was coded by at least two researchers in order to identify and describe broad themes in the interviews.¹² Once completed, the team met together to conduct axial coding, or develop the themes in greater detail, as delineated by Strauss and Corbin.¹³ We found several common themes, which became the basis for this paper. These themes also formed the foundation for the questions developed for the survey instrument that was later administered.¹⁴

The themes logically fell into what seemed to be the narrative of the entire mission experience: the decision to serve, the mission experience, the circumstances that led to the early release, what it was like coming home, the adjustment to postmission life, and what they would change about their mission. This is the story that evolved from the interviews, supported by quotations from the interviewees (whose names have been changed).

Results

The Decision to Serve

Most young men begin the process of serving a mission in the same way: making the decision to go. And for most young men, this is no small decision, regardless of how faithful they are. There are still pros and cons to be weighed, sacrifices to be considered, and future plans to take into account. When asked how they made the choice to serve, the young men shared processes that are

probably similar to those who served the full term. They had a variety of reasons for going.

For some, like Brad, the decision was easy and seemed the natural course to take:

I was just going through the motions, I guess. When it was time to go I thought, "Okay, this is what you do. This is how it needs to go down." So I signed up and went. There wasn't a whole lot of thought to it.

—Brad (returned due to physical health issue)

Others went because they believed it was expected of them to serve; there was little choice for them to make. They wrestled with the decision between expectation and desire. The choice seemed not to be a choice at all, and they felt guilty for not having the desire, which compounded the difficulty of the decision.

Ever since I was born, I felt that it wasn't my decision. I felt it was something that you had to do. It was a burden, honestly, all growing up, thinking about it. I can't remember anyone ever asking me if I wanted to serve. It was just expected of me in my certain ward and in my family. There was no question around it. It's just that when the time comes, you serve, and you do so honorably. It was a burden on me. I honestly stressed a lot. And I think there's a lot to that stress. . . . Most of the worry came with "How am I going to explain that I don't think I want to be a missionary?" And that was hard.

—Clark (returned due to depression)

I was dating a girl at the time. I was engaged to her. . . . I talked to her parents, and they said, "No. Our daughter has to marry somebody who has been on a mission." And then the week after that, I was [feeling] kind of down, and my mom sent me an email, "Hey, here's how you do your papers." I don't really feel like I decided to go on a mission. I just did it to appease my parents and her parents.

—Conner (returned due to unresolved transgression)

And still others chose to go because they had a testimony and truly wanted to serve.

I was born and raised in the Church. I grew up always wanting to go on a mission. When I came to be that age, all my friends were going. You say that's what you're expected to do, but I always had a desire to serve a mission, so I was looking forward to it when the time came.

—Ethan (returned due to disobedience to rules)

Regardless of their motivation, none of the participants said they were forced or bribed to go. Some felt they had little choice. But in retrospect they all acknowledged the decision was theirs to make.

The Mission Experience

Missions officially begin in the Missionary Training Center (MTC). Many of the missionaries interviewed admitted to struggling in the MTC but ended up having a good experience there.

I really actually loved the MTC. It started off pretty bad. The first couple of days were really rough. My companion was a struggle. He had some mental health issues, so it was really hard kind of babysitting him. And then I was still close enough to home, and I was homesick, and it was really, really hard. But a week into it I went to my branch president and said, "I'm struggling with my companion," and he just said, "Look, you're not having any problem with the lessons. You're learning it easy; that part's coming easy. Your job is to make sure your companion makes it to California. Right now he's not going to make it. A week from now he'll be sent to a service mission somewhere. You need to make sure that you find a way to get him to California." And that gave me purpose and just totally changed my experience.

—Brad (returned due to physical health issue)

That was a scary experience. In the MTC, when I got there I was in a panic. The instant I saw that schedule, it was completely packed full with what was expected of me and the things that I thought everyone else knew that I didn't know!

—Sam (returned by choice)

We surmised that all missionaries wrestle, to some degree, with making the decision to serve and getting through the MTC. So far, the experiences shared by these early returning missionaries seemed fairly typical. The exceptions were those who admitted to struggling with anxiety. For missionaries with no prior history of anxiety, the onset of those symptoms seemed to appear in the MTC and were a battle from the start.

I was kind of anxious, and it was pretty difficult because my house was ten minutes away. I think it was a pretty big struggle for me. But it was positive too. I did have a little trouble eating sometimes, just because I was so nervous. But again, I think that just comes back to my anxiety that I didn't really know I had. Anyway, throughout the six weeks I'd have great spiritual experiences and revelation . . . and then I kind of just felt alone, like I'd feel like I'm the only person that's struggling this bad mentally . . . or feeling these anxiety feelings. It just felt like a roller coaster, just up and down.

—Rob (returned due to anxiety)

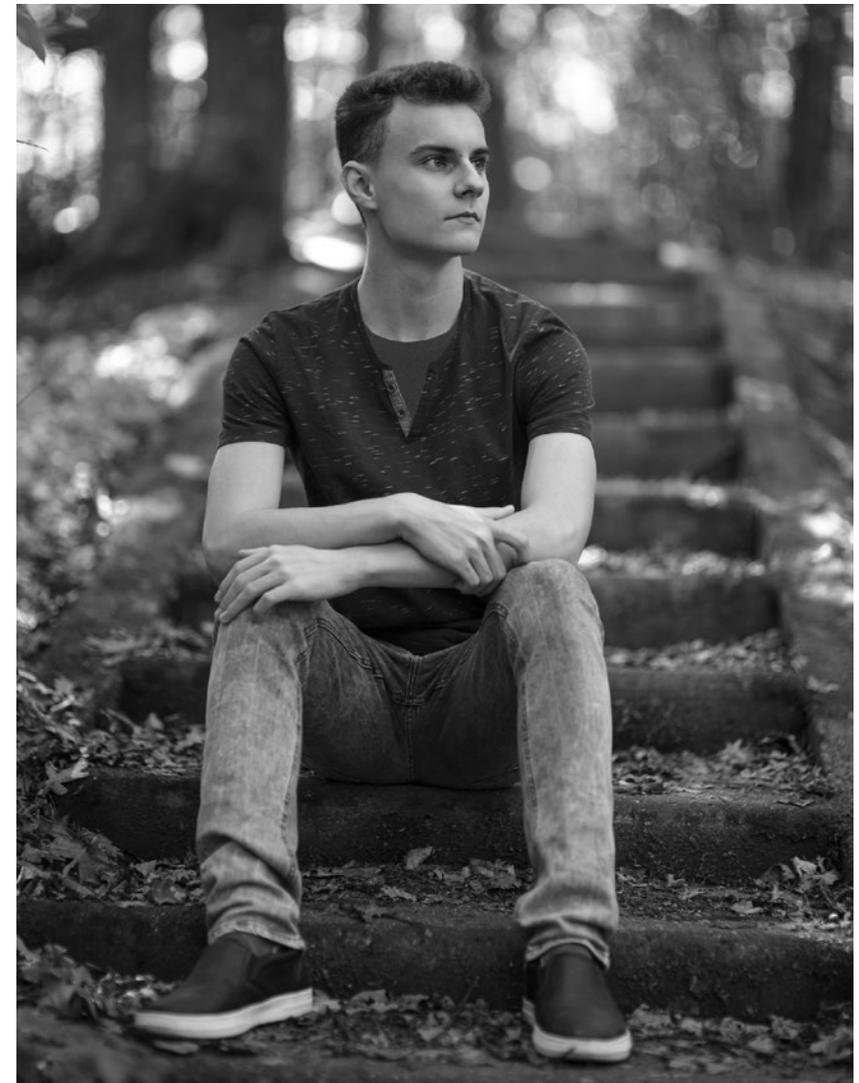


Photo by xalanx.

We can help our youth better prepare for missions by teaching them the power of the Atonement in their own lives. And when they do return home early, we can remind them of that same power and of the unconditional love Jesus Christ has for them.

When the ERMs completed their training and entered the field, the transition to actual missionary work seemed to begin on a positive note for most of them. They acclimated to the schedule and approached the work with enthusiasm and dedication.

I had companions that were great; they taught me the language. I was learning Spanish. And my mission president was just amazing, and he was really, really good with helping out missionaries in the field. . . . And I feel like I got to teach a whole lot as well while I was out there. My third transfer out I was called to be a district leader, and that was a really good experience.

—Nathan (returned due to depression)

I enjoyed talking with people, being out . . . [with] the less-active people that we were working with. . . . I just loved talking to people and helping and serving; that was all good. I just struggled with my trainer. Then after that it got a lot better. With my second companion, maybe two weeks into it, I just kind of settled in and quit worrying about home. I really felt like things were going well.

—Brad (returned due to physical health issue)

Even those who felt pressured to serve or were hesitant eventually caught the vision of missionary work and worked hard to make the most of their time in the field.

I got out there and met my companion. Instantly, I just clicked with him. Everything just went awesome. I loved it. And I kind of got involved in the work. . . . And I just thought, “I’ll do what I can. I’ll do six months; I can do that much.” And then I started slowly falling more and more in love with everything that was happening.

—Conner (returned due to unresolved transgression)

Circumstances That Led to the Early Release

At a certain point the circumstances changed. Even though the missionaries were working hard and exercising faith, the situation for each of them took a turn for the worse. Although they gave their best effort and most wanted to stay in the mission field, it was not to be. Some resigned themselves to the decision that they had to return home.

[I was diabetic], and after about a year out I was having a lot [of] trouble controlling my blood sugars. The [mission president] made it so I wasn’t in any areas riding a bike, just a car, because it was just too taxing for me. . . . I was hospitalized once. . . . And after a while, they asked me if I wanted to go home. The first time I said, “No, I think I’ll continue [serving],” and after a few months, when they asked the second time, they said it would probably [be] for the best, and I agreed with them. I needed to get my sugar down.

—Kevin (returned due to physical health issue)

And then, while I was out on my mission, my depression hit. Not because I felt inadequate or anything. . . . I don’t know why; it just hit. My companions noticed that there was something different about me. I wasn’t as energetic as I usually was.

And so I spoke with a therapist on the phone. I went to a local psychiatrist as well to get some medication, but it wasn’t looking like it was getting any better; it was just getting worse. So in August we decided that it was time for me to go home, that I had done what I needed to do and I needed to take care of myself. It took about four months for my mission president to convince me that it was time for me to go home.

—Nathan (returned due to depression)

Those who came home early for unresolved transgression or for disobedience to mission rules seemed to have mixed emotions about accepting the early release.

We were at this kid’s house. He was 19 and a member, but he’d fallen away. And his mom had asked us to talk to him and his sister, so we’d just go over there twice a week and we’d have question-and-answer time. They’d ask questions, and we’d answer them. And then one day the boy asked me, “Hey, I was making out with my girlfriend the other day, and [we engaged in petting]. Is that a bad thing?” And I was like, “Yeah, you probably shouldn’t do that.” And then I got home that night, and I was just thinking about that, and I thought, “I did that! I haven’t repented for that. I should repent of that to just clear things up so that when I teach him, I’m not being hypocritical.” I set up a meeting with my mission president. I went and talked to him and was like, “Hey, this is what I did. We never had sex or anything like that. That was all.” And he was like, “Okay, I’m going to have you go out and sit on the couch with your companion and I’ll call you back in a minute.” He called me back in, and he told me he’d received inspiration that because of what I’d done, I needed to go home, and I couldn’t come back for three years. And that blew my mind!

—Conner (returned due to unresolved transgression)

Unresolved issues before my mission finally caught up to me, and I was like, “Okay, I need to take care of this,” because I realized I’m teaching these people to use the Atonement in their lives and to become better. I was not necessarily living a *full* lie, but to an extent though I realized I need to first use the Atonement in my own life before I can expect other people to use it in theirs.

—Garrett (returned due to unresolved transgression)

Once the difficult decision was made, it took little time for the missionaries to make the trip home. Most of the men showed emotion when sharing this part of their stories, especially when they told how they felt about coming home early.

Oh, it was hard. It was an internal conflict. I felt bad that I was leaving early. Even though I know it’s not really true, it kind of felt a little bit of a failure personally, because I wasn’t able to keep as good of control [of my health] as I felt like I should have. But I knew it was the right choice.

—Kevin (returned due to physical health issue)

When my mission president and I had our final talk, he said that if I didn't [repent and] go back out on my mission, I would never be deserving of a worthy daughter of God. That's what he told me. And that was the worst thing I've ever heard, because it's like he threw out the Atonement for the whole rest of my life. It's just disconcerting or disheartening that someone that is supposed to be so highly respected would say something so demeaning, and I feel very uninspired, because that really just shuts up the Atonement for the rest of my life in his eyes. And that's one of the reasons I didn't go back.

—Garrett (returned due to unresolved transgression)

What It Was Like Coming Home

There were a variety of reactions from family to the missionaries' early return. For those missionaries whose families chose to be supportive and celebrate their return, the reunion was a positive and healthy one.

I got on the plane to go home. It was lonely trip, just me, the only missionary flying back. When I got to the airport my family was waiting there like I was a returned missionary with honor. They were there with their signs, and they were supporting me and cheering for me. Then, from behind me, someone hugged me. My mission president was there! He had flown in from somewhere, and he was catching a transfer flight headed back to the mission, and he walked up behind me and gave me a hug and said, "Elder, it is so good to see you! I am glad I could make it." Wow! It was the perfect arrangement. Then we went home. I talked to the stake president; he was the only one that seemed to be regretting any of it. But it was probably the best coming-home experience. I don't think that it could have been better if I had stayed my entire twenty-four months.

—Sam (returned home by choice)

Some missionaries had family members who were less sensitive to the difficulty of the situation. This seemed to cause the most pain for the ERMs.

My companion and district leader dropped me off and gave me a hug, and I just started walking through the airport, and several people said, "Congratulations, Elder!" "Well done! Two years!" So I flew home and got off the plane in Salt Lake and came walking down the stairs. I was the only elder getting off the plane. Family wasn't there. No one was there. All these other people started clapping and gave me hugs and stuff, and I was just like, "Hey, thanks everybody!" I didn't want to be like, "Oh, I suck. I came home early." I got my luggage, and I sat there for a while before my family even came and got me. I had to use some stranger's cell phone to call them and say, "Hey, are you coming?" And they were like, "Oh yeah, I guess we'll come." (Long pause) So there it was . . . , my own family . . . , people who are supposed to love me no matter what.

—Conner (returned due to unresolved transgression)

Once the missionaries arrived home, they had to face the reactions of Church leaders, ward members, and peers. While some people were supportive, others did not know what to say. Some chose to say nothing at all, and others who were well meaning made unintentionally hurtful comments. This caused shame and embarrassment to many of the ERMs.

I went to church that Sunday. One of my young men leaders came up to me and asked what I did wrong. I was like, "I didn't do anything wrong! It just wasn't for me. I just couldn't do it, I guess." And then everyone was looking at me. It was just so off. I think they were glad to see me, but no one came up and shook my hand. I just don't think they knew what to do. I really don't think they knew how to handle that.

—Clark (returned due to depression)

It was hard, really hard, especially being in Utah. It destroyed my mom for a while. She was really upset. Not mad-upset. She was just sad because in the LDS community it's looked down upon to come home early, and especially because I was *sent* home. But coming home just six weeks early . . . it made it kind of hard for some people to do the math. But when you come home early, you don't get to do a homecoming talk in sacrament meeting, so then everybody knew. "Oh, he didn't come home honorably." I don't know if they thought I was a bad person or what, but it seems when people don't know the reason why I was sent home, they come up with a lot of pretty crazy things, almost like the worst-case scenario. I could tell that I was being treated differently for that.

—Ethan (returned due to disobedience to rules)

The data supports these feelings. Fifty-eight percent of the respondents to our survey indicated that they felt their ward members received them poorly or indifferently, almost half felt uncared for or treated poorly by their Priesthood leaders, and one-third of the respondents indicated that their friends and family were indifferent or unkind as well.¹⁵ These opinions may be real or perceived, but everyone's perception represents their reality.

The Adjustment to Postmission Life

Once the initial shock of their early return passed, the ERMs tried to settle into a routine. Some were faced with the decision of whether to make the personal adjustments needed to return to the mission field. Others had to figure out how to move forward with school or work. For those who chose to move on, the perceived stigma of the early release seemed to follow them, and they would find themselves in situations that brought painful reminders of their early returned missionary status.



Photo by Mika Martin.

Some of the ERMs found their early return so uncomfortable that their usual coping responses were ineffective. They turned to alternate coping strategies to escape the pain.

A few months after my surgery, when I decided to stay home, I had a job and I needed to get a car. My dad had cosigned on a car with me before I left, and he'd cosigned with my sisters to get their first car, but this time he told me, "No. You decided to stay. You're man enough to deal with your own problems, so I don't need to do that for you." And that hurt. So apparently what I did now is bad enough that . . . I'm not entitled to him helping me, right? But he had done it for me before; he had done it for my sisters. And so I was feeling like, "Why is this different now?"

—Brad (returned due to physical health issue)

I did feel a slight stigma when it came to dating, because with the girls it was kind of like, "Oh, you didn't serve a full mission. Why not?" I don't know why but there definitely was. I didn't feel at all [like I stood out] from everyone else when I was at home, but when I came out to Utah I did. I felt like people were like, "Oh, he didn't serve the whole time."

—Nathan (returned due to depression)

Some of the ERMs found the frequent reminders of their early return so uncomfortable that their usual coping responses were ineffective. They turned to alternate coping strategies to escape the pain.

I made new friends. I wanted to be included with them in everything they did, so I started doing drugs and drinking. I stopped going to church, moved in with them. I finally took all that frustration out, and I felt awesome. I wasn't frustrated anymore. I didn't have somebody looking down on me all of the time. It was great. I was free. I didn't go to church other than when my brother went on his mission. I went to his farewell. I think that was the only time I went to church in like two years.

—Conner (returned due to unresolved transgression)

For two and a half years I turned my back on [attending] church, and I never looked back. And when my friends came home, I was inactive. I just needed a way to escape. So I took a job on Sundays, and that way I didn't have to explain to people anymore. The pain just kind of resolved itself. But my bishop knew that I was a good person, and he kept accepting my tithing. He didn't [consider] me inactive at all. He was just so great, just an amazing guy. He was just like, "Clark is taking a break. He just needs some time to himself."

—Clark (returned due to depression)

Other ERMs chose to endure the discomfort. They held steadfast to their faith, leaned on family for support, and made it through by holding on to the memories of the positive experiences of their missions. They stayed active in the Church, even when it was hard to do so.

I've gone to church every week since I've been home. I feel like I've always had a very strong testimony. I guess what I want to say is I have a testimony of the gospel, but I don't have a testimony of the people in the church. I feel like I've been active in the church, but I'll admit that I've had a hard time dealing with the people in it.

—Scott (returned due to physical health issues)

I'm going to a singles ward, and everyone is looking at me, saying, "When are you going on your mission?" "Actually, I already returned from my mission." And then there's that whole awkward look, "Oh, medical reasons?" Well . . . there was no label for what I came home for. I suppose I could have said medical reasons; it kind of fits along those lines, but I didn't feel comfortable saying it that way because that's not what I see as the entirety of the situation. I see it more as a choice. It started with

that choice; it started with that thought. I mean I *chose* to come home; they didn't send me home. Even to this day it's confusing, but I choose not to let that affect me. I just move on and say, "I'm not going to understand this. In fact the more I think about it, the more it's going to consume my life, and it's not a good thing to consume my life and thoughts about." So you've just got to move on and try and fill your life with better things.

—Jason (returned by choice)

Disturbingly, 73 percent of our survey respondents indicated they had feelings of failure regarding their missions. Forty percent of ERMs felt pressured to return to the mission field. One-third of the respondents had a period of inactivity, and one-third of that third have not come back to church. Half of the ERMs said they were not as active as before their missions.¹⁶

What They Would Change About Their Mission

Most of the young men stated they would not change the outcome of their missions. They indicated the process of returning early helped them grow and taught them important lessons they would use throughout their lives. By enduring the challenges they faced, they chose to be *refined* by their experience rather than *defined* by it.

I wouldn't change a lot of things . . . because of the things that I learned about myself. Maybe, I think if I could have tried to figure out my anxiety on the mission and get through which medications would have helped, maybe tried harder with the counselors. That's probably what I would have changed. And I probably would have, could have, stayed out longer or finished the mission.

—Rob (returned due to anxiety)

Even some of the ERMs who chose the path of inactivity and rebellion eventually returned to full fellowship. Clark's bishop helped him to come back to church and resume activity. He married a woman in the temple and has three children now. He and his wife are active and are raising their children in the Church. He looks back at his mission experience and recognizes he had lessons to learn.

It's like the worst things that happen to me are the greatest things to ever happen to me. I can't explain it. But I wouldn't change anything [about my mission]. I really am thankful. Heavenly Father knew this experience was what it took to humble and teach me.

—Clark (returned due to depression)

As for Conner, he also returned to the Church when he found himself facing consequences for his choices.

Yeah, something happened in my life that made me think back to my roots and what I wanted. My girlfriend's pregnant. I'm going to be a dad! And it made me [think hard about my life]. "What do I do? What do I want?" It took about a month, just thinking about it all the time. I want to raise my child [in the Church]. There's so much in the Church that made me have the values and the morals I did—even though I was so hard hearted to not think about them. Hearing that I'm going to be a dad . . . that hard heart just shattered and everything came flooding back to what I wanted for my family. I wanted that eternal family, and I knew drugs and alcohol wasn't going to do it for me. So I went back, and I ended up going to the bishop. When I told my girlfriend, she was like, "Oh my gosh! I didn't know how to bring it up! That's what I want too!" So it was awesome.

—Conner (returned due to unresolved transgression)

Discussion

As for my oldest son, he recently shared his testimony about the lessons he learned from returning early. I admit I gained a new understanding of his perspective about his return thirteen years after the event. He continues to remember much of his mission with fondness. My younger son is still struggling. However, I have faith that when the time and conditions are right, the "tentacles of Divine Providence" will reach out for him, as beautifully explained by Elder David A. Bednar in his message regarding wayward children.¹⁷ I am not at all worried because I have a deep testimony of the all-encompassing power of the Atonement.

An early return from a mission does not have to be a tragedy; it can be a teaching tool, regardless of the circumstances. We can help our youth better prepare for missions by teaching them the power of the Atonement in their own lives. And when they do return home early, we can remind them and reassure them of that same power and of the unconditional love Jesus Christ has for them.

But the stigma early returned missionaries face is still very real. Even those who came home honorably admitted they felt the stigma was difficult to move past. What can we do to reduce it? We can give them unconditional love and support. Here are five ways we can demonstrate that support which will help these young people readjust to an unexpected and often painful early return.

1. Welcome them home. Shake their hand, give them a hug, and thank them for serving. Regardless of how long they served, all service should be celebrated and appreciated.

2. Encourage them to share stories from their mission. The survey data indicated 62 percent of ERMs had strong spiritual experiences on their missions.¹⁸ They should have the chance to share the positive stories. Unless there are significant worthiness issues, ERMs should be given the opportunity to report to the high council and speak in sacrament meeting.
3. Help them recognize that things may be awkward at first. Many ward members don't know what to say to ERMs, and they may say things that unintentionally cause hurt, or they may say nothing at all. Taking offense is a choice; ERMs can choose not to be offended. Encourage them to be patient, and the initial discomfort will soon subside.
4. Regardless of why missionaries came home, help them to ask, "What am I meant to learn from this experience?" and "What does the Lord want me to do now?" Counseling can be an important part of processing the developmental trauma of missionaries' early return, even if they did not suffer any mental health problems.
5. Avoid pressuring them to go back out in the field. Support them in figuring out for themselves what their path forward looks like and then cheer them on their way.

As members and leaders, stopping the stigma of an early return begins with us. We can make a challenging experience less so by providing support and strength to these young people. They are vulnerable and struggle with a culture that tends to be judgmental. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland stated, "The vessel is in the hands of the divine potter. . . . While God is at work making those repairs, the rest of us can help by being merciful, nonjudgmental, and kind."¹⁹ Although this counsel was given relative to mental health issues, it applies to all early returning missionaries. In reality, we are all vessels, broken in one way or another. May we rally around and support these young people, offering unconditional love and encouragement, while they work through these difficult experiences that can be for their good (D&C 122:7). **RE**

Notes

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7. John W. Creswell, *30 Essential Skills for the Qualitative Researcher* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2016).
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10. These were the questions asked to every participant:
 1. What does it mean to be a missionary?
 2. Please tell me about how you came to the decision to serve a mission.
 3. What did you do specifically to prepare to serve?
 4. Tell me about your experience in the MTC.
 5. Tell me about your experience in the mission field.
 6. What were the circumstances that led to you coming home?
 7. What was it like coming home?
 8. Tell me about your experience adjusting once you returned.
 9. Did you have a period of inactivity following your return?
 10. Please describe your relationship to the Church now.
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