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Leaving, arriving, staying...

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As members of this International school community, all of us have experienced this 'transition cycle' of arriving, staying or leaving. We will be at different stages at different times... either you are the one that is new to the school (having just left your old country/school), or you are preparing to leave (and be new again somewhere else) or you are staying (seeing people come and go).

What sounds like three very different stages, is actually much more similar than you might think. All three 'stages' are closely interlinked and share (at least from an emotional point of view) similar dynamics and emotional responses.

For all of us (leaving, staying or arriving), change is ahead. We are about to embark on a transition from the familiar to the unknown and this needs to be managed. Change will happen and so we need to learn to accept and embrace it. Rather than fight or deny this inevitable change, we can channel our energy in a much more positive way.

In the cycle, there are continual elements of letting go, loss and grieving and at the same time the challenge to stay open to new experiences. However we view it – challenge or adventure – we are called upon to grow and build on the skills, strengths and resources that we already have which have helped us overcome past challenges and enjoy new adventures.

Let's look in more detail at the dynamics at play...

Arriving...

...can bring with it the sadness of a leaving behind a good lifestyle and close friends. There are likely to be feelings of anxiety but hopefully excitement too. This transition takes place in different stages. You may find yourself in what is commonly referred to as the 'honeymoon' stage and at times even in the so-called 'disintegration' stage when things seem particularly difficult¹. You may find yourself at different stages all on the same day. The very able and efficient adult in you will need to lower the expectations you have of yourself and start to acknowledge and feel proud of the 'baby' steps that you make; finding all the ingredients needed to cook your family's favourite dish, for example. You will also have to introduce yourself to numerous people and circles within the community. This can be a physically and emotionally exhausting time and requires you to slow down, treat yourself well and appreciate the small things that you achieve from day to day.

¹ adapted from 'Orientated for Success', edited by M Barker, Australian International Development Assistance Bureau, 1990)

Staying...

...is what most of us are doing, whether that means you are a native of Düsseldorf, here for a number of years or just in your first year. This is the other side of the coin from the experiences of those who are 'leaving'. Those who stay also experience a grieving process when others in their community leave. Even though we know that change is inevitable, we may experience feelings of shock and disbelief. It is also normal to feel anger and sadness that this is happening, possibly not for the first time. It takes a special kind of energy to be able to say those 'goodbyes' and also continue to stay engaged within the constantly fluctuating community. It can be exhausting to have to regroup, make new connections and welcome new people on a regular basis whilst still holding on to relationships with those who have moved away. Similarly to those that arrive in a new country, those who are left behind also have to embark on a new journey. Yet again we must forge relationships with new people knowing that they will possibly only be in our lives for a short time. Remember to enjoy the stability that comes with staying. Use your 'expert' knowledge of the community to help others to manage their transitions. Take every opportunity to meet new families as well as doing your best to maintain those rich and diverse relationships that you have acquired. Take this opportunity to widen and deepen your experience of Germany.

Leaving...

...not only affects those who are leaving but also those who are left behind. Those that are leaving are having to cope with saying goodbye to people, places and things that have been an important part of their life. This is mixed with the feelings of anticipation for the new adventure ahead as well as all the practical and administrative details that are a necessary part of the relocation. Some may detach quickly and focus only on the next place either because they want to leave here or because it makes leaving easier if they detach quickly. This can also happen when you are returning to what you may call 'home' without fully appreciating that you have changed as a result of your experience here at ISD or in Germany. The key to making a good start anywhere is to say a good goodbye. This means taking part in the goodbye rituals, reflecting on what you most appreciated during your time in Düsseldorf and acknowledging those people who were important to you as well as repairing any broken relationships before you go. Putting the 'good' into 'goodbye' is about ending on a good note.

Leaving, arriving or staying behind demands a lot of courage and self-care. Dealing skillfully and open-heartedly with change is part of the global experience, a foundation from which we can fully embrace the true beauty of this world.