

# Road Warrior Wisdom

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For frequent travelers and their relationships, travel means separation and stress. Some travelers arrive home to find chaos; others discover that life went on just fine in their absence. Here are some tips for lessening the strain.

The popular film “Up in the Air” makes business travel look as stressful and isolating as it can be. George Clooney’s character, Ryan Bingham, offers many witticisms about how to travel wisely:

Ryan Bingham: You know how much time you lose by checking in?”

Natalie Keener: “I don’t know. Five, 10 minutes?”

Ryan Bingham: “35 minutes a flight. I travel 270 days a year. That’s 157 hours. That makes seven days. You’re willing to throw away an entire week on that?”

Thinking about travel in terms of time lost and money spent is only one side of the story. The other side is the emotional and physical toll of chronic travel.

Busy travel schedules can take a heavy emotional, physical, and mental toll on people. In turn, traveling can present an escape from the routine of everyday life. Keeping a household and a relationship going smoothly with all the coming and going requires work.

## How Much is Too Much Travel?

Chronic travel can seriously affect relationships and quality of life. What stress does travel put on daily life? What can the traveler do to cope with the stress? How often can a traveler be gone and still be part of a relationship or a family? How much is too much travel?

Andrea, a very competent executive who flew 90,000 miles last year, exemplifies problems associated with a busy traveling schedule.

“You start losing touch with things,” she says. “My work to be a leader is at its best reflective. When I get into this mode of running around, I don’t have time to reflect.”



Andrea complains about being chronically tired. The quality of her life outside of work has suffered. Many once-important friendships have died of neglect. The things she used to like to do around the house no longer get done or no longer give her the satisfaction she once knew. She is not sure what to do, but she is sure that she needs to “push the pause button” and figure things out.

Andrea has “hurry sickness.” Earlier in her career, she says, there was a certain magic in telling someone, “I’ve been asked to speak in San Francisco next month.” As she hit her mid-forties, however, she has found herself struggling with the constant busyness. She says, “I feel as though I’m always going somewhere, never being anywhere!” That feeling is “hurry sickness” – always “on”, rarely present.

Some people justify the traveling process with rationalizations like “It’s not the quantity of time I spend at home; it’s the quality of time that counts”, or “After all, I’m really doing this for you!”

### **Travel Burnout**

The trade-offs of busy travel schedules are clear. Busy travelers know all too well the day-to-day effects of the stresses and strains they endure to keep on top of things. Travel burnout is a common malady. For many, finding symptoms in their lives is easier than they would like.

Peter, a successful executive, is an example of “travel burnout.”

He says, “My wife and kids love me; there is no question about that. But we have so little time together that it’s like starting over when I come home from a trip. There is no continuity in our schedules. It’s like building a house and constantly starting over on the foundation.”

Some people travel more than they have to because they want an escape from pressures at home as well as at the office. Few stop to analyze or even recognize that they travel for personal as well as for business reasons. In the long run, the investment of energy, the opportunity for intense human connections, and the seductiveness of travel as a way to escape office and family pressures actually kills real quality of life. Chronic traveling is exhausting and numbing. It’s not an escape, after all. Travelers often work harder and longer than they would in a usual day in the office.

Peter says, “I feel as though I’m ‘on’ all the time and am expected to be ‘on’ all the time! I get so busy that I become numb. I shut down. When I get home I want to be left alone. I clam up. My family can’t really get what I am going through.”

Even partners, spouses, and families who do get it, claim to often have suppressed feelings that lie just beneath the surface. They are often angry or envious in the face of intrusive travel schedules that steal their loved ones away. The traveling process can create unspoken pent-up stress in relationships.

Peter laments, “During frequent in-and-out trips, I’m seen as only a visitor to the house and family. They are polite to me but with little emotion or involvement. Only after I’ve been home for several days do the

bonds begin to mend.”“It has reached the point where there is little or no effort to bring me up to date on what has happened while I was gone.”

‘Since I travel so much—three or more days per week, every week—I think it has reached the point at which it is too much effort on all our parts to get me back in the loop. I’m constantly in and out, never quite ‘in’ and never quite ‘out.’ I’m in a constant limbo state and I don’t feel part of what’s going on.”

## **Travel Stress Points**

The traveling process consists of three stress points—the letting go, separation, and the reentry of each trip. The longer the trip, the more intense the stress at each point.

### **Stress Point 1: Letting Go**

The period just before departure is a time of stress for both traveler and loved ones as they anticipate the upcoming separation with mixed agendas. The traveler’s partner, spouse, or family often keeps busy themselves as a way to reduce the discomfort of their anticipated loss.

Andrea’s spouse says, “Friends ask me, ‘Is she going again?’ I say yes and they ask, ‘where to now?’ Often I’m not clear about where she is going now, almost as if not paying too much attention will soften the blow.”

Travelers express “letting go anxiety” in many ways, mostly unconscious. They simply don’t listen well. They’re not emotionally or mentally present because they’re preoccupied with pre-departure details.

Peter says, “I tend to feel resentment about why I am doing this and anger because I am not appreciated for all my hard work and sacrifice. I want my children to know me as something besides their meal ticket.”

“Letting go” tension increases dramatically if a traveler leaves town on a weekend. Many buried feelings can erupt prior to leaving for the airport on a Saturday or Sunday. Families often feel terribly inconvenienced by work needs that impinge on their precious weekend time.

Leaving for a business trip doesn’t mean you get to leave home completely behind you. The issues traveling families must work through range from dealing with household repairs to managing personal feelings of anxiety and worry.

### ***Tips for Letting Go***

- Provide your loved ones with a detailed itinerary.
- Don’t pack at the last minute.
- Set aside time well before leaving to talk things through.

### **Stress Point 2: Separation**

Immediately after “letting go,” the traveler and his or her family may find their morale elevated because pre-trip tensions have subsided.

Travel separation, however, can bring out deeply held feelings of isolation. It's a painful, yet inevitable trade-off of the traveling life. Isolation can be fatal to marriages, family life, and to friendships.

There are no instant replays on lost relationship experiences. Busy travel schedules have a significant impact on children of any age. Being away, travelers are in no position to deal with their children's ups and downs. Children learn to live, do their homework, and play without depending on support from frequent travelers.

### **Isolation Blues**

As the stressful realities of travel become apparent, the isolation blues can set in. Feeling alone, the traveler uses the cell phone to "reach out and touch someone." Cell phone contact assures people that they are still connected. Isolation blues can vary depending on the length of trips and of the intervals between them.

Peter's spouse comments, "The shorter trips (fewer than 5 days), when spaced decently, are actually nice breaks and a chance for some personal space. The crunch comes when the trips are closely spaced, or are longer, in which case the cumulative effect of single parenting really wears me down."

She recalls, "When Ann was a baby and Peter was gone a lot, I remember holding Ann close and singing, in my mind, the song 'You and Me Against the World.' That song epitomized for me the isolation I was feeling as well as the determination to make it on my own."

Getting from place to place fills up much of a traveler's day. Good hotels, good food, interesting new people, and the non-routine comforts that travel often provides can offer some consolations that aren't part of life at home. But basic travel logistics make travel separation a stressful and, often, isolating reality.

### ***Tips for Separation***

- Use time in airports, in flight, and in hotel rooms productively.
- Be present where you are—but keep two watch times!
- Stay in close contact while traveling filling your loved ones in on details of your day as reality that, NO, it's not all glamour and fun.

### **Stress Point 3: Re-entry**

The third point—re-entry—is triggered by the inevitable stresses of coming home. The implications of being gone become clear. For some, home life went on fine in their absence. For others, home upsets await their re- entry.

A traveler can't come home and expect everyone to drop what they're doing, although homecoming rituals can help people stay connected. A family or partner's normal defense against separation is to become self- contained and independent.

Some travelers develop unrealistic fantasies of what homecoming will be like—the "hero's journey." In reality, they often find that each family member has been living out his or her own hero's journey in their

absence. Peter admits, "Things don't stop just because I'm home. The hero's re-entry lasts about five minutes. In fact, with my teenagers, they are likely to be busy just when I'm free."

### *Tips for Re-entry*

- Listen! Listen! Listen...alternate telling "my story," "your story."
- Treat the first 24 hours home as a special time to get reacquainted.
- Don't book yourself on the last flight; avoid red-eye flights.

For many busy travelers, the traveling process of letting go, separating, and re-entering never seems to stop. The traveler feels as though he or she is in a revolving door, coming home from one trip or leaving on another one. Their bags are always packed!

Few organizations publicly acknowledge the impact of travel on quality of life. They see it simply as the price of doing business in a global environment. Travel seminars rarely show up on the agendas of leadership development programs.

Yet, improving on the situation is possible. But it requires a commitment to drawing personal boundaries and "securing your own mask before assisting others" (Delta Airlines pre-flight instruction):

- Do I truly "unpack my bags" when I'm home so that I'm fully present?
- Do I carefully analyze the real purpose of each trip?
- Do I schedule regular "relationship time" to discuss calendar priorities?
- Do I draw travel boundaries together with my family, partners, spouse; deciding how much travel is too much?
- Do I avoid travel on weekends?
- Do I keep a "master calendar" of important "not to miss" dates and commitments to my family?
- Do I let my boss know well ahead of time the dates on which I am unavailable for travel; avoiding travel on special occasions (birthdays and anniversaries)?

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