

Expatriate couples: baggage handling

Expatriate life provides many alluring opportunities for a couple: wonderful career-moves, the experience of different cultures, new circles of friends and lifestyles, international education for their children. However, expatriation is challenging, and maintaining healthy relationships requires commitment and patience. Therefore, transplanted marriages require special care.

BY GARY FISHBEIN

Culture shock and isolation

Recently-arrived couples often underestimate the effect of culture-shock. Especially to many from western countries, Dutch culture appears similar to that of home. Yet, in addition to language barriers are subtle, baffling differences in ways things are done here. Workplaces have confounding business practices, ethics, and social cues. Children might acclimate with difficulty to new schools and peer status. Parents often find the ethos of foreign educational systems enigmatic. Interactions of all sorts, handled with ease at home, become contentious. The accumulated effect on relationships can be demoralising and destabilising.

Expats are sometimes surprised to discover how long it takes to develop social support systems. Couples often rely solely upon one another for social interaction, placing undue stress on their relationship. The sense of isolation is compounded by less frequent contact with family and friends from home. One expat couple described their initial social experience here as, “like being stranded on a desert island, and not in the romantic sense.” Struggling to grow their social network, another wondered what was wrong with them. Well-connected in their country-of-origin, they felt like pariahs.

Stress at home and at work

The working partners, unlike their non-working or “trailing” spouses, enjoy collegial interaction, work schedule structure, and a sense of accomplishment. Non-working partners, often well-educated, placing their professional lives second to their spouse’s, suffer identity-loss, relegated to the role of homemaker. This can be especially painful for men, given the expectations placed upon males to be breadwinners. Sometimes “evolved” husbands are blindsided by a sense of failure, suddenly dependent financially on their wives. Non-working spouses, with comparatively little social interaction, structured time, or sense of mastery, “sacrificing” their careers and sense-of-self, become jealous and resentful of their mates.

At the same time working spouses, feeling stressed and vulnerable at more taxing positions in foreign workplaces, are unable to turn to their partners for support. Feeling guilty and responsible for uprooting their family, they hide their anxiety and ambivalence from the very person they previously relied upon in challenging times. »





PHOTO: CLAIRE DROPPERT

“With love and effort... couples can begin enjoying the pleasures and privileges of life abroad.”

As novelties of living abroad fade and responsibilities of everyday life emerge, vulnerabilities of even healthy marriages can crumble under the stress of international moves. If couples have emotional issues before expatriating, the stressors of relocation impact upon them. Psychological baggage, stowed with furniture in shipping containers, finds its way back into couples' living rooms and bedrooms. Tenuous communication breaks down, resentments grow, jealousies intensify, depressions deepen, anxieties rise, addictive behaviors increase, sexual problems worsen.

A couple in my practice (I'll call them Nina and Tom) began working with me after Tom's posting to the Netherlands from Canada. Nina forewent her successful career to follow her husband. As Tom had to “hit the ground running” at his new position, the complicated task of establishing a household fell to Nina. Tom came home with stories of new colleagues and challenges. Nina could only report waiting all day for Internet service to be installed; the technician never arriving. Tom, stimulated by new responsibilities and status at work, was elated by his professional life. Nina, her household contributions undervalued, sought friendship and intellectual stimulation. She felt inconsequential, resentful, and lonely. As the couple's experience of expat life was out-of-sync, arguments ensued. Tom, finding it difficult to approach his wife, worked longer; Nina felt isolated. The couple hardly spoke; sexual interest waned.

Taking time, making memories

Relationships require monitoring and maintenance, especially those removed from familiar, supportive environments. It's important for each partner to note their feelings and communicate them. This may require setting aside time especially for the purpose. It's best to schedule a specific time every week for “couple's meetings.” Thus, each couple-member has the opportunity to voice emotions, and must actively reflect and prepare for it.

Don't forget to share enjoyment! Couples involved with careers and parenting can lose sight of what initially drew them together. Schedule a “date night” each week to share pleasurable experiences. Remove yourselves from responsibilities: hire a babysitter and book a restaurant table, a movie, concert tickets – just the two of you. The evening is for enjoyment; avoid serious business. When possible, take weekend trips. From the Netherlands it's easy to visit romantic destinations throughout Europe. It's important to maintain a deep well of shared happy memories to draw upon during difficult times.

Stay in touch with friends and family at home. Especially if you've arrived recently, don't rely solely upon your partner for emotional support. There are many communication options available: phone, email, Skype, social networking sites. It's helpful to share concerns, frustrations, jokes, and memories with those who know you well and care about you.

Seeking social connections

Reach out to others. Although it initially may be uncomfortable, actively seek out social connection. There's a community of expats who are either going through or have weathered what you're experiencing. We're social creatures. It oughtn't induce shame to tell others you're recently-arrived and seek friendship. Commit to joining a social group, professional networking group, book club, arts organisation, sports club, parenting group, English-speaking religious congregation, or become a volunteer. If an employer has a relocation programme, contact them to learn how they can help. ACCESS help desk volunteers also have a wealth of information about English-speaking groups to join here.

Trailing spouse-hood can be a boon or a bust for self-esteem, but it can provide opportunity for exploration and growth. In their free time, trailing spouses take courses, learn languages, acquire skills, volunteer, increase physical fitness, even obtain scholastic degrees. Such activities add structure to schedules, provide interesting challenges, create opportunities to develop friendships, build confidence, and can be quite enjoyable.

Proactive measures

If there are preexisting issues in a relationship, prepare: learn what support is available before a problem becomes unmanageable. A primary-care physician can refer a couple-member into treatment, if necessary. An employer's human resource department can help direct you. Also available is the ACCESS Counselling Services Network, an organisation of licensed mental health professionals, many of whom are experienced in working with couples. Be proactive with relationship issues. When couples wait too long to seek outside help issues become thornier.



During our work together, Nina and Tom spoke openly about their feelings. Tom learned that Nina felt undervalued and abandoned. Nina learned how guilty Tom felt to see her unhappiness. Tom began spending more time at home, and voicing appreciation for Nina's contributions to their well-being. The couple reserved time each week to discuss their emotions. They commiserated about cultural challenges they shared, and started meeting others who faced similar situations. Nina took an intensive Dutch language course, became the "go-to person" for tasks that required Dutch, and felt more valued in their marriage. She began studies that would facilitate finding employment. They scheduled weekly "date nights," started cycling together, and took weekends visiting nearby cities and resorts. As Nina and Tom rediscovered what initially drew them together, their experience of expat life synchronised.

With love, sensitivity, patience, and effort, relationships under stress can be put to right so couples can begin enjoying the pleasures and privileges of life abroad. «

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