

Couple Issues When You Live Abroad

Living abroad can be a positive and exciting experience for couples. There is the excitement and challenge of living in a new culture, learning different customs and making new friends, as well as expanding how you think about the world. Living abroad can bring you closer as a couple as you share these new experiences together. However, living abroad can also put stresses on a relationship. Knowing what to expect and communicating with one another about the challenges you are facing will help you make the most of your time abroad and help you stay strong as a couple.

Common problems couples face

Moving to a new country involves many changes in your life as a couple. While managing the move may be your primary concern, it also is important to consider some of the ways a move will affect your relationship. Following are some of the common challenges couples face when living abroad:

- *Culture shock.* No matter how much you look forward to the move, your new home is going to be different and culture shock can become a major issue, unsettling any couple -- and any family. Culture shock can also cause new tensions and stresses in a relationship. Language barriers, new foods, fewer friends, different ways of getting things done, and lack of a built-in support system can make life challenging at first. And unfortunately, culture shock may not affect both partners in a relationship equally. The employed spouse has the familiarity of work and work routines, which helps reduce feelings of culture shock. The spouse who isn't working often has to navigate the new culture quickly -- setting up a new home, getting children settled in school -- and may get hit harder or sooner with culture shock.
- *Anger and resentment about the move.* You both may have chosen to move abroad and you may be doing so willingly. But it's also common for couples to move abroad because of one partner's career, and for the other partner to go along, willingly, but with some mixed feelings about the move as well. These mixed feelings can resurface during the settling-in phase, and also during periods of homesickness and loneliness. A spouse who left a job for the move abroad is now a trailing spouse, and may feel disoriented and unsettled.
- *Stress related to helping children adjust.* Helping children feel at home in a new country is a big challenge that is typically left to the trailing spouse. Finding the right schools and services for children is a challenge. Helping children cope with missing their friends, adjusting to a new culture and new school, and finding a social network can be difficult.
- *Loneliness.* Everyone who moves abroad goes through periods of homesickness and loneliness. Just because you're lonely doesn't mean that something is wrong with your relationship. Even when your relationship is at its strongest, you need a support system that includes extended family and friends. And it takes time to build those relationships. In many ways, it is easier for the working spouse, whose job provides built-in relationships with colleagues and others. The stay-at-home spouse not only has to start from scratch, but may also find cultural barriers that can increase the difficulty of making friends.
- *Worries about financial issues.* Couples have financial worries and discussions no matter where they live. You don't put these problems aside when you move abroad. In fact they can be more challenging if one spouse isn't working or if your budget is tighter than you are used to.

- *Fantasies that living abroad will solve old problems.* There is an illusion that you leave your problems behind when you move to a foreign country. Indeed, a move abroad can seem exciting and romantic at first. But these honeymoon feelings typically fade within weeks after your arrival, and then you face the hard work of making a new home together in a foreign culture. A move abroad can put pressure on a relationship. Couples have to depend on each other far more in a foreign environment, so it is important to have a strong relationship before moving abroad. Some say it is like "putting a magnifying glass" on all your problems.

The trailing spouse

More than three-quarters of trailing spouses are women. But this number is changing. A growing number of men are following their spouses to work assignments abroad, altering the makeup of the expatriate community, which is not used to addressing the needs of the trailing male spouse. Whether you are a man or woman, being a trailing spouse presents unique challenges. As a trailing spouse, you may feel

- *Anxious about the assignment and move abroad.* Many companies don't involve the spouse in pre-move or post-move meetings about the new job, the length of assignment, or the compensation package. This lack of involvement and loss of control can increase pre-move feelings of anxiety for the trailing spouse. In addition, partners often cope with their worries about the move abroad in different ways: Women tend to worry more about the long-term consequences of the move, whereas men are more focused on the immediate job opportunity. Communication between partners is critical to help minimize these feelings.
- *Like a second class citizen.* The trailing spouse is usually someone who leaves behind a job or volunteer activities, and a familiar way of life, to support a partner's move abroad. This loss of meaningful work can shift the balance of power in the relationship. One person is out in the exciting world of work, meeting new co-workers and learning new skills, while the other is home managing the everyday tasks of running a household. The trailing spouse may not feel he or she gets recognition for all this hard work. Even a well-meaning employed spouse is not able to supply all that is missing, but should be aware that the trailing spouse's feelings are real.
- *Loss of self-esteem.* The things that define and sustain you at home -- close friendships, feeling capable and competent at work and in the other things that you do -- may be missing at first when you move abroad. Feeling capable and competent and "finding yourself" again in a new culture is hard work.
- *"On a different wavelength" from your partner or spouse.* Communicating as a couple can be extra challenging when one partner is working, one isn't, and you're living in a foreign place. If your partner is deeply involved in a new professional life, with supports and privileges you don't have, you may feel left out. Or if he or she is traveling a lot for work, you may feel abandoned, like a single parent without dating privileges, as author Robin Pascoe puts it in *A Moveable Marriage: Relocate Your Marriage Without Breaking It*. These feelings can lead to communication tensions even in the best relationships. This is a natural reaction to the major changes you are going through as a couple.

Staying strong as a couple

When moving abroad, many couples focus on the details of the move, for example, where to live and

what schools the children will attend. But it's equally important to focus on the emotional issues you will face as a couple abroad. It's important to focus on both aspects of your life together -- the practical matters as well as the emotional issues. Try to do this together. The more involved the trailing spouse is in the decision to move abroad, the more committed you both will be to building a new home and life together in a foreign place.

- *Include your spouse in discussions with your employer about the assignment abroad, if possible.* Try to include your spouse in meetings where matters such as the compensation package and the length of assignment will be discussed. If this is impossible, be sure to have frank discussions with your partner about the implications of the move. Ideally, the trailing spouse should be involved in decisions and discussions about the transfer abroad from the very beginning.
- *Use all of the resources available to you through your employer to prepare for the move and to help with the adjustment period.* Ask if intercultural training or language classes are available. Learn what relocation resources are available to help you get settled upon your arrival. Insist that these training opportunities and resources be made available to your partner as well. The more resources and support you have, the easier your adjustment will be and the less strain there will be on your relationship.
- *Talk as a couple about the financial implications of the move.* The more knowledgeable you both are about your family's finances, the better. If the trailing spouse is not working, being dependent on your partner's earnings might be a source of stress. If your budget is tighter than usual, talk about how to make ends meet. It is helpful if both partners have permission to spend within guidelines based on a family budget discussion. Find a way to budget for the extra, but very important, expenses you will have, such as frequent calls home to family and friends, and regular trips both to see the region where you are living, and trips home to reconnect with people there.
- *Share your feelings, thoughts, plans, and concerns with one another.* Talking and sharing is always important for couples. It is especially important when you are living far from home and don't have familiar support systems and friends. Talk about culture shock, missing your work, missing friends, the new world you are exploring together, the challenges your children are facing, relatives back home, new colleagues, and old friends. Being abroad means that you become one another's primary support group. Be there for each other.
- *Schedule a time to talk about important issues and concerns.* Agree to set aside time for important discussions. Avoid presenting your spouse with a long list of worries or complaints the minute he or she walks in the door. If possible, save important conversations for when you are together instead of spilling out your worries over the phone.
- *Remember why you became a couple in the first place.* Find the friendship in your relationship and remind each other of what you love about the other. Give compliments. Talk about the contributions each person is making to your life abroad. Do little things to express your love, whether it is a special supper or a back rub.
- *Plan date nights.* Find ways to have fun together in your new home abroad. You might go hiking together to explore the countryside, take tennis lessons together, or go out one night a

week or a month to a local restaurant. Try to get away for a vacation together as well, even if it is just for a couple of days.

- *Keep your sense of humor.* During stressful times, remember what makes you and your partner laugh.
- *Find ways to enrich your own life.* You'll feel more satisfied in your relationship if you find something enriching to do with your time. Being in a new place presents lots of new opportunities. Assess your own talents and interests. Then set some attainable goals. You might consider taking a class or joining a volunteer organization. If you would like to work, research the requirements for a work permit, and follow up with both international and local organizations, such as embassies, schools, and multinationals. You'll find interesting ideas on ways to make the most of living abroad in Robert Kohls's *Survival Kit for Overseas Living*, Huw Francis's *Live and Work Abroad: A Guide for Modern Nomads*, or on the Web site *Careers in your Suitcase*, <http://www.career-in-your-suitcase.com>.
- *Find support through other expatriates, expatriate clubs, and online resources.* Other expatriates who have been through it can offer helpful words of advice on the issues you may be facing. There are also networks like the Expat Exchange (<http://www.expatechange.com>) or the Overseas Digest (<http://www.overseasdigest.com>) that provide excellent resources and ways to connect with other trailing spouses. Check out the Newcomers Club, <http://www.newcomersclub.com>. Coaching services, such as <http://www.juliaferguson.com>, also provide support, for a fee, to expatriate spouses.
- *If you are feeling depressed or are having serious couple issues, seek professional help.* Seek support from a professional if you are experiencing symptoms of depression. These include: overwhelming sadness; feelings of hopelessness; an inability to concentrate; fatigue; changes in eating or sleeping habits; loss of interest in activities once enjoyed, including sex; persistent physical ailments such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain; and thoughts of death or suicide. Seek support, too, if you are having serious couple issues. For help finding a marriage or couple counselor abroad, contact your employee assistance program, your employee resource program, or your local health care provider.

If you share your feelings, listen to one other, and work hard to support one another through the highs and lows of living abroad, you'll stay strong as a couple. In fact, the move can open up a whole new world of experiences. Many couples recall their years living abroad as among the most memorable times in their lives. Patience, love, and a sense of humor go a long way in helping you get through this exciting time of change together.

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