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An unexpected shock to the system

(Filed: 16/09/2004)

In the coming months, Robin Pascoe will be examining the connection between loss and the culture shock cycle of adaptation to a new life abroad. There are multiple losses associated with moving overseas, she reports, but with the right attitude and understanding, they can-and should-be balanced with the numerous gains of expat living.

Few people are willing to shout this news out loud, but culture shock and grief are closely connected. In fact, it's rare to find themes which focus on the many losses inherent in a move included in culture shock workshops. Would families really want to leave home if they thought they were headed for a period of mourning instead of an exciting adventure?

For most people, the eventual outcome of a move abroad is a positive, enriching, and often life-altering experience. But any skeptic who thinks relocation - and the losses associated with it which prompt grief and mourning - is not related to grief should take a quick stroll around a bookstore or library. Most books examining the subject place relocation high on the list of life stages which can trigger grief, along with more obvious major events such as death and divorce.



Robin Pascoe

Culture shock - an overwhelming physical and emotional reaction to a new environment in a foreign country - is driven at the outset by multiple losses. These losses can be numerous depending on life stage and family configuration but include leaving behind nearby family, friends, familiar surroundings, and for many accompanying spouses, careers.

Unlike the death of a loved one, however, there are no rituals for the grief experienced by expats when they lose all of those important life props. In fact, 'mourning' the loss of home - acting out homesickness by walking around a new city (or school playground) looking dazed, confused and unhappy - is still considered by many expats to be somehow 'letting the side down'. Everyone is supposed to just get on with it, the sooner the better.

But grief does not just magically disappear, according to grief experts.

"Time does not heal," says Elva Mertick, a Calgary-based grief counselor and family therapist who prepares expats both going abroad and coming home. She firmly believes it's what you do with this time that heals the wounds.

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"Loss creates an emotional wound. In order for a person to recover from that loss, people need to actively work at their grief," says Mertick who does include grief in the many culture shock workshops she delivers to the oil community in Alberta.

Discussing the subject is often difficult, particularly for accompanying spouses who are usually responsible for the emotional well-being of the entire family at the same time they are trying to sort out their own feelings about the move. So often, when spouses try to articulate their feelings to their partners in the early months after an arrival a post, they get unsatisfactory and less than sympathetic responses, which only makes them feel even more isolated and lonely.

An Australian expat spouse recalls the intense anger expressed by her British husband when she tried to share her feelings soon after they relocated to the US.

"His response was that I was being too negative by treating my feelings like a death. "He couldn't understand why I didn't see the expat life as an exciting adventure full of positives," she says.

He did agree with her that it was healthy to acknowledge the losses and negatives, but then challenged her for going so far as to call it 'grief'. "He wanted me to focus only on the positives so I could get positive things from the experience," she says.

"And I admit there's some truth in that for sure. But I reasoned with him that there was no way I could ever get to focusing on the positives until the negatives got dealt with. They were simply overwhelming me."

Many people are overwhelmed or even paralyzed with inertia from the grief associated with their culture shock. Like that Australian expat spouse, they are unable to move on to building a new, exciting expatriate life until they work through all the stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

Coincidentally, these common stages of grief are similar to the well-charted stages of culture shock. One big difference is that culture shock includes a honeymoon period where everything is marvelous. Inevitably in the culture shock cycle, though, there comes a crash.

Many new expats -even seasoned ones making multiple moves - are simply not prepared when it happens.

"Most people are so starry-eyed about the opportunity of going overseas that they don't really want to hear about the grief they may go through," reports Lois Bushong, an American family therapist who helps expats understand what they will face in terms of cross-cultural adjustments.

As the child of missionaries, Bushong grew up in Latin America and is no stranger to the losses associated with growing up mobile as a third culture kid (TCK). Like many adult TCKs, she only realized her losses and layers of unresolved grief when she became an adult well into her fifties (a not uncommon theme which will be explored in the next article on this subject).

"They may want to maintain an idealistic view of the relocation," she believes, "but I think they may also be afraid that if they face those feelings or even fears of loss, they may back out of moving altogether."

"Many people may also be fearful of what might happen if they saw reality. There needs to be a balance between looking at the negative as well as the positive," says Bushong.

Like grief expert Elva Mertick, Bushong believes that a person just doesn't get over grief like a bad case of flu. "It changes you and continues to impact on you for the rest of your life."

And that's probably one good reason among many to give these ideas some thought and effort both before and after making a move abroad.

How to deal with culture shock

In her culture shock workshops, Canadian family therapist Elva Mertick stresses that grief is not only a reaction to the present loss, but may be coloured by the echoes of previous unresolved losses.

So her first tip to begin taking action towards working through the loss and grief associated with a move is to examine previous losses, to ensure that you have completed other grieving tasks.

Other suggestions include:

- find and maintain a consistent resource of supportive relationships, especially those who have had similar experiences
- create a plan for further education, skill development and methods of crisis management
- commit a part of each day to dealing with the pain of your grief and reflect on your hope for the future.

And what is hope? It's simply the view that there is a purpose and a way to reach what is meaningful to you. Grief work itself, believes Mertick, has a purpose which is to return a sense of yourself and a recovery of balance and equilibrium.

Not surprisingly, grief work and completing the stages of culture shock share similar goals. Once completed, the exciting adventure of expat life can begin.

- Robin Pascoe is the author of four books on global living and can be found on line at www.expertexpert.com