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### Lost in the move abroad

By Robin Pasco

(Filed: 20/09/2004)

Ask accompanying expatriate spouses anywhere in the world to identify the most overwhelming loss they feel after moving abroad and "identity" will likely be the near-unanimous reply.

Who am I? Too often, they ask themselves this question lying prone on a bed in a new, unfamiliar, and half-unpacked home, overcome by depression and unable to imagine the exotic life which lies beyond the bedroom door.

Fortunately, that initial inertia does eventually lift when culture shock recedes. But the sense that something is missing from their lives - possibly forever - doesn't altogether disappear with their culture shock. Grief may linger in an unhealthy way, especially if it goes unexamined, according to therapists preparing expatriates for overseas assignments.

"When emotions associated with grief or trauma are shoved onto the back burner, they will eventually rear their ugly head in some manner," believes family therapist Lois Bushong who counsels the missionary community from the US. "Some of the common ways are depression, anger, passive aggressiveness, alcoholism, headaches, diarrhoea and many other physical symptoms."

In today's world, where identity is equated with career, the accompanying spouse's loss of a professional life upon expatriation can initiate a profound loss of self, and manifest itself with symptoms remarkably similar to culture shock.

"I was raised and educated to be an independent woman and just cannot figure out how to be a satisfied trailing spouse," wrote one spouse on an internet chat group on the subject. "How much self can I sacrifice to support [my husband] without compromising too much?"

"I also think the fear of the loss of what I have worked and risked so much to attain simply to live overseas with a husband doesn't really seem worth it to me," believes this spouse.

There are many resources (and now so conveniently online) to direct spouses to securing everything they need to search for work abroad: professional networks, companies to help secure work permits, even how-to strategies to discover one's paths to passion. Jo Parfitt's well-known dual volumes of *A Career in Your Suitcase* are among the best guides on the market for spouses looking for both inspiration and practical advice.

#### External Links

- ▶ [career-in-your-suitcase.com](#)
- ▶ [myglobalcoach.com](#)
- ▶ [expatriateconsulting.com](#)
- ▶ [global-networker.com](#)
- ▶ [goinglobal.com](#)
- ▶ [netexpat.com](#)
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Author Parfitt and others like her help expat spouses re-establish their identities in many ways - by adjusting attitudes towards a professional life abroad, by using a heavy dose of positive thinking, and most important of all, by embracing reinvention.

In response to that first message posted on the chat group, another spouse living abroad clearly agrees that reinvention is not only the way to go, but a prime example of turning a loss into a gain.

"I am so glad [expat living] gave me the opportunity to let go of my career and let me learn things that I was always too busy to do when I was working," she writes. "I lost my high flying executive career but I do not regret it. I have learned that a career and independent life would be nothing without my family and my experiences abroad.

"Losing all those years of career you have invested in is very scary, but you don't have to lose it," she writes in response to the disillusioned spouse. "You can reinvent yourself along the way and who knows, you might like the new you a lot better."

Not all accompanying spouses, however, immediately rise to the challenge of reinvention. They often get stuck in any one of the stages of grief, usually at the second (denial) or third (anger). It's easier to lash out at the partner whose job took them abroad or at a less than helpful company than work through unacknowledged loss.

Therapist Lois Bushong believes that some spouses need more than career counselling - especially during the first year abroad when culture shock and grief are at their apex. A spouse not coping well needs a mentor, Bushong believes.

"The mentor needs to be someone to listen, not judge, and to empathise," she says. "I believe this would lessen the build up of grief and in the long run, result in a happier and better adjusted expatriate spouse."

Bushong compares mentoring to Critical Incident Stress Management, a tried and true method of helping people cope who have been thrown into shock. Immediately after a traumatic event, experts in this field feel there is a window of opportunity to "debrief" on shock, cultural or otherwise. Bushong says that studies confirm that those who are debriefed after a painful event as quickly as possible make a faster recovery.

Canadian grief therapist Elva Mertick confirms this: "My adamant position is that expats require regular follow up, preferably by the person who has done the pre-departure preparation, for no less than six months after arriving in the host country."

To be sure, this may all sound way too introspective for people who believe they only face the simple task of adjustment to a new culture. But those who counsel or coach expats through periods of transition feel it may be essential.

"Releasing frustrations and negative emotions is healthy and worthwhile," agrees global expat coach Val Bokyo.

"Doing it in a safe, supportive environment is a must," she adds. "It can allow someone to move forward rather than remaining stuck where they are." Bokyo coaches expats to think positively by focusing on what they want rather than what they no longer have.

"This can act as a beacon that pulls them forward and away from the past, and their sense of loss. It gives them a sense of power and control when the circumstances are out of their hands," she believes.

"It gives expats the momentum to move forward."

*Robin Pascoe is the author of four books on global living and can be contacted on line at [www.expertexpert.com](http://www.expertexpert.com)*

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