

Losing Loved Ones Abroad

By: Robin Pascoe

Even under the best of circumstances, it's difficult to lose a loved one. But how would you feel if you said goodbye to a friend or close relative before moving abroad, and didn't know it was for the last time? And how would you handle a lonely bereavement and worse, not being able to attend the funeral?

Of all the emotional losses incurred in expat life, it is the physical loss of someone close to you while living overseas which can hurt the most. Facing grief alone is further exacerbated by the fact that no one in your life abroad knew the person who died back home.

"A very dear friend of mine died suddenly while I was away, of an illness which worsened much more quickly than expected," wrote an accompanying expat spouse responding to a query on the subject posted on an Internet chat group.

"It broke my heart because when I was last back home, I didn't manage to see her as she lived in another town. I promised to see her the next time I was home. But it turned out there wasn't going to be a next time."

Her story, sadly, is not uncommon. Many people interviewed for this story had a similar experience to share.

"I think that being far away made my sense of loss even worse because it was increased by a sense of guilt," she wrote. Furthermore, she found it terrible not to be able to attend the funeral—a ritual which allows people to mourn the loss of a person, to get together and remember that loved one, to say goodbye, and experience some sense of closure.

"In order to grieve a death you must acknowledge their life," says Calgary-based grief counselor Elva Mertick who frequently works with expats grieving from afar. "Grief can become complicated or stuck when one is not able to be around family or friends who share in the loss. It can result in one feeling terribly isolated."

Getting to the funeral is indeed critical. "If it's at all possible, a person must try to make it for the burial or service," advises another woman living in Europe who lost a close friend back in the United States sooner after a move abroad. Compounding her grief was that her friend's funeral came just days after the 9/11 tragedy and it was downright impossible for her to return to the United States in time.

Her grief, further muddled by the culture shock of a new country, resulted in a delayed transition to her new home, she believes. It took her years—and she's an experienced expat who has made multiple moves—to settle into her new place. She confesses she never really has settled in nor got over the loss of her close friend.

"I am now just recognizing the impact of the loss I had when we first moved here. It's been four years since we arrived and I still don't have a close friend here. I'm sure the healing would have gone faster had I been around people who knew her," she wrote to me.

The worst scenario of all can be losing someone—a spouse for instance—during the overseas assignment.

That happened to a European-based executive whose wife died of cancer right after a cross-posting from one capital to another. No one in his new posting knew his family yet so he found it difficult to find support from his new community. That executive was lucky that a close friend working for the same company arranged grief counseling and support through a company Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

Colleen LoPresto of MEDEX Assistance, a company which repatriates the bodies of loved ones to homes in the US, UK and Europe says it can often be difficult to return remains of expatriates who have no real ‘home’ anymore.

“It can also be very challenging when the person who died has an unusual home situation such as a wife, significant other or children who may all want something different after the death,” reports LoPresto.

“The best preparation is to have assistance so that experts can help bring the body home instead of the grieving family,” she says. “Believe it or not, it’s a lot harder to get remains home than to evacuate a sick person. Remains are considered to be cargo by airlines and are given neither priority nor special treatment.”

In the meantime, grief counselor Mertick has some good tips for someone grieving from afar.

- “Try to keep in touch with other family members or friends to exchange stories,” she advises in addition to securing something—anything, it doesn’t need to be a valuable item—that will remind you of the loved one who died. “The ‘thing’ should represent what you remember about the relationship you shared,” she says.
- Mertick also suggests making a scrapbook of memories including poems, letters or pictures. ‘This is another form of journaling, but one is left with a book of memories and a testament to their life with the loved one.’
- She also advises that therapy should be sought if possible, or the help of a support group, just to let you know your feelings are normal.
- Finally, she believes that when you return on Home Leave, it’s important to visit the grave. If there isn’t one, go to a place that reminds you of the person lost. “This visiting will trigger grief,” she says, “but it’s also a way of creating a conclusion.”

Repatriating the remains of a loved one

There’s a lot of coordination, much of it across cultures, that needs to be done when someone dies abroad.

“The coordination is between airlines, local funeral services, and the home country’s funeral services,” says Colleen LoPresto of MEDEX Assistance. “A body being repatriated needs to have several copies of the death certificate attached to the container as the lack of that paperwork can cause delays.”

In preparation for a post, there’s much an employee can do to prepare or protect themselves from medical and security concerns, according to LoPresto. “But unfortunately, there is not much that an employee could do to prepare for or facilitate repatriation in case of death,” she says.

However, she advises families to ask their company—or the company’s insurer—a few key questions about their coverage while abroad, beginning with what is not included in their coverage.

"Expats should ask if there is a family or dependent transport benefit in the event of a hospitalization. My experience with businesses sending employees abroad has been positive in that area," she says. "And, when someone has died overseas, most companies we have worked with have paid for a family member to go over and accompany the body home."

No one wants to think about any of this, but this information may just be worth tucking away, just in case.

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