

## Lost in the Move: Identity

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**By: Robin Pascoe**

Family therapists who counsel expatriates agree that grief is an overlooked dimension of the culture shock cycle. In the second in a series about the losses—and gains—of global living, Robin Pascoe examines the loss of identity felt directly after a move by many non-working partners. The way spouses cope with the loss of their careers, she reports, may also have a direct impact on their child's adjustment.

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? They ask themselves this question too often lying prone on a bed in a new, unfamiliar, and half-unpacked home, overcome by depression and unable to imagine the exotic life which lay 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, diarrhea 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 on line) 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.

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. 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 counseling--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 empathize,” 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 who have been thrown into shock, cope. 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, safe supportive environment is a must. 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 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.”

What happens when a spouse moves but can’t move on?

Since children take their cues from the adults around them, the behavior of a spouse struggling to recover from the losses associated with an international relocation will, not surprisingly, directly impact on a child.

“If a parent is struggling with issues of loss—for example the mother who has to suspend her career for the next three years—she cannot expect that her eight-year-old daughter’s continual moping around the house has nothing to do with her own state of mind,” believes Charles West, a Boston-based Employee Assistance Program (EAP) therapist.

“The parent has to be self-aware enough to know that it is his/her issue that has to be addressed first, through counseling if necessary,” he says.

Teenagers are addressing losses of their own-peers and friends left behind, recognition for athletic abilities, even the local hangout—and usually retreat into their bedrooms and shut the door tight until they are ready to re-join the living. But it’s different for younger children, according to West, who have a limited capacity to articulate their feelings.

So what can a parent do? Establish routines, he says, and the sooner the better to speed up a youngster’s adaptation.

“With international assignments and the host of simultaneous changes and losses associated with them, parents can help their children manage their feelings by quickly establishing a household that has familiar structure in such areas as mealtimes, play, and bedtime,” advises West.

**Other tips:**

Understand that regressed behavior is common with children who have undergone relocation, especially the stress of international relocation.

Ease family expectations for a while about behavior in some areas—for example that a younger child be able to play at times by herself—while recognizing that holding firm in most areas will enhance the child’s sense of security.

Recognize that activities that the family does together - for example, board games -- will likely be the springboard for the spontaneous expression of feelings about the relocation, not direct conversation on the topic of feelings.

Working through feelings of loss may help a family avoid the worst pitfall of all, according to West.

“Families who deny or are otherwise unable to deal with feelings of grief and loss get emotionally ‘stuck’, and they find it hard to embrace new experience. This really is a circumstance that, with the proper support and assistance, could be avoided,” he says.

“When a family repatriates and looks back on their international assignment, the last thing they want to feel is another loss: the recognition that much of the time in the host country was a lost opportunity for new experience.”

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