

The Complexities of Moving a Marriage

By: Robin Pascoe

Any expat couple who has watched their life's treasures being wrapped and double wrapped for protection during a relocation would do well to stop for a moment and wonder: why is their relationship - which is also being transferred - not being equally safeguarded against breakage?

Most couples simply don't consider that their relationship is also being shipped to a new country where the impact of a variety of pressures and shocks can take a heavy toll, often leading to a divorce court.

Anecdotal evidence (because there isn't much else when it comes to moveable marriages) would indicate that many expat marriages simply don't survive a relocation.

In a survey I conducted as research for my latest book, *A Moveable Marriage: Relocate Your Relationship without Breaking It*, almost half of the people contacted admitted they had not given their relationship much thought in the moving process. The reason?

"Before they relocate, couples tend to focus on the externals of the move, such as where they will live, what schools their children will attend, or where they will buy groceries," says Dixie Wilson, who works in the Employee Assistance Program for the Houston-based energy company ConocoPhillips.

"They entirely ignore the internal challenges, so many of which are the keys to the successful relocation of a relationship. They are in complete denial about the changes which lie ahead for their marriage," says Wilson, who believes a renegotiation of the marriage agreement needs to be undertaken if a couple is going to understand each other's needs during relocation.

Among other things, that means understanding the role each partner will play in the relocation in the first instance, and later, in building a new life together abroad. Often, from a working spouse's perspective, the pressure on the non-working spouse in a new city or country can appear minimal because it is often attached to trivial matters.

"Right after a move, feelings of disorientation and isolation are usually brought to light by something such as a woman not being able to find a mop in a new city or even knowing what store would sell one, how to get there or how to ask for it," according to London-based marriage therapist Phyllis Adler.

"The lack of control and power this represents is not easily conveyed. Talking about it can be tedious and boring to a working spouse who is busy trying to reorganise a multimillion-dollar division of a company," says Adler. She adds that the situation can be much worse for a couple who have had no experience of moving and have not done any preparation.

"In that case, the couple may not even be aware of what they are feeling, beyond increased levels of confusion and discomfort. Relationships are not 'manageable' in the way companies are manageable, so a marriage can't operate like a business."

Using the language of business is sometimes not a bad way for couples to communicate about the relocation. An expat wife relocating to Latin America, for instance, told me that the only way she could communicate her own needs to her working partner was by using non-emotional, matter of fact, case-in-point scenarios.

"I did everything short of break out an overhead projector and flowchart!" she confessed.

And how has the idea of a move abroad been raised in the first place? Within the answer to that question lies a possible key to understanding how a moveable marriage can develop tense dynamics in its early days; if a woman feels coerced into a move, or says "yes" when she really means "no".

So here a few quick tips to keep the marriage on track during a relocation:

- Think like a team: A team sticks together through thick and thin. Sit down with your partner to ask one another about individual goals and to set common objectives for yourselves as a couple or perhaps, as a family. Listening to each other's hopes and dreams can be a positive experience if you create a sense that you're both working towards the same end and want to support the other in achieving his or her goals.
- Regularly engage in "end of the day" conversations: these conversations help partners feel connected to each other, but pick a time that's suitable for your family. So often, in the process of moving, couples aren't aware that an "emotional disconnect" is building a wall that will grow higher with each passing day if neither partner attempts to scale it.
- Finally, in order to restore and maintain harmony when a relationship moves, it helps to be knowledgeable about the emotional part of the relocation - all the ups and downs. Otherwise, the moving boxes may be emptied and the household goods put away, but a couple's feelings for each other may be left out in the cold.

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