



Why Is This So Hard?

Understanding the Underside of Expat Life and How to Flip it Around

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“Aren’t you lucky!” Maybe you’ve heard some variation of this well-meaning comment from your friends and family at home. And maybe your experience has, in fact, been all wonderful and you feel lucky all the time. But we know that it is often – maybe usually – a journey to get to that point, and the trip can be frightening and sad if you feel alone and confused by the gap between what others and you expected and reality. Here are ten road signs – markers for what you might be feeling along the way.

#1 - Pandemic-Specific Challenges.

Your travel home and within your new location is restricted. You’re suddenly a homeschool teacher. Career options are suddenly even more complicated than usual. You’re worried about getting covid or how to get vaccinated. It’s hard to meet people. Every aspect of daily life is constrained. We don’t know how long it will go on... and more.

Flip it: Wear a mask. Wash your hands. Get a vaccine when you can.

#3 - Loss of Knowledge of Social Norms

Not knowing what to do in situations with other people is tricky. What kind of relationship should you expect with your boss or teacher? How does friendship develop? Sometimes you know you don’t know, but it’s even more troublesome when you aren’t aware that you are breaking a norm.

Flip it: Find a cultural informant.

#5- Challenge to Cultural Values

What appears ‘true’ from one perspective can look quite ‘untrue’ from another. Learning to understand the values that shape your new culture’s perspectives will help you adjust, especially if you simultaneously reflect on how your own values have shaped you.

Flip it: Try on a new perspective.

#7 - Stress of Being Misperceived

Your new neighbors may make assumptions about you based on what they know - or believe - about your home culture. This can be tedious, especially if they have limited or false information, but can be trying even if they have a positive halo around your culture.

Flip it: Find a good-natured way to educate your hosts.

#9 - Change in Family Structure, Functioning and Dynamics

Who is now in your family? Did anyone important not move with you? Or has a housekeeper become part of your family? Have members’ roles - practical and emotional - changed? These are all natural consequences of moving, but all demand great flexibility.

Flip it: Name the changes and talk about them with your family.

#2 - Stress of Doing Practical Tasks and Loss of Sense of Mastery

Newcomers to a country have to figure out thousands of small, practical tasks like how to order new phone service or work the ATM bank machine. All this while jet lagged, in a new language, without friends, while starting a new job and/or settling a family. This is both exhausting and a challenge to one’s sense of mastery.

Flip it: Acknowledge the toll this takes.

#4 - Loss of Social Support

Your network of people who cheer you up, are wise on your behalf, support you through difficult decisions, help you in a pinch, give you advice, and tell you where to buy what you need are, in many ways, gone. Technology surely helps maintain connections, but in-person relationships, even for superficial needs, are crucial.

Flip it: Find a friend in your new location.

#6 - Loss of Ability to Communicate

Communicating in a new language - with new vocabulary, grammar and syntax - is hard. But even if you are fluent, non-verbal aspects of communication - gestures, eye contact, directness, levels of emotion -- are even harder to master. It is common to blame communication difficulties on character flaws.

Flip it: Learn the local language and its nuances.

#8 - Loss of Majority Status and Sense of Belonging

By definition, most people who move to a new country are experiencing being a minority member for the first time - in nationality at least, plus maybe in race, religion, and/or language. It can be dis-settling to suddenly be in a minority without preparation.

Flip it: Find your tribe of people like you, as a touchstone.

#10 - Loss of Identity

Everyone who moves to a new country loses being known in some ways - as a good son or daughter, for example, or as a community leader. Accompanying spouses, additionally, may lose identity that comes from career loss.

Flip it: Find ways to amplify and expand your identity.