

“Accompanying Spouse” Shock

By: Robin Pascoe

There are emotional forms of culture shock which know no boundaries, can occur anywhere in the world, and seem to cut across nationalities, writes Culture Shock! author Robin Pascoe who takes a look at the shock of being an accompanying expatriate spouse.

When I first moved abroad to Bangkok with my diplomat husband, nobody warned me about the culture shock I would experience as an ‘accompanying spouse’. Of course, that was almost twenty years ago and nobody was telling spouses much of anything by way of preparation for an overseas assignment, notably the fact that you would have to give up your career and drink a lot of coffee in organized venues.

Times have changed. With the help of the internet, a spouse can now easily learn well before she leaves home all sorts of information about the country her family is headed for: customs, history, what foods she will feed her family, or what clothes to bring.

What the internet can’t tell her is how she is going to feel about living abroad for the sake of a partner’s job. It can be especially challenging for the spouse when the day arrives that her husband (or wife) disappears into an office or out of the country on a road trip at the same time her children vanish with the school bus. Depending on where in the world she is assigned, she could be left like me on that long ago first posting, blankly staring at my Thai maid blankly staring back at me. As I lamented in Culture Shock! A Wife’s Guide, I couldn’t even crawl back into my bed because she had already made it. I felt my life wasn’t unfolding quite the way I had planned.

I was in the throes of accompanying spouse culture shock though I didn’t know it at the time. Naturally I was experiencing some physical culture shock waves from moving to a very hot climate, with spicy food, and massive traffic jams. I expected to feel discombobulated over those changes. I didn’t anticipate the swell of emotions that were washing over me in what seemed like half hour increments, highlighted primarily by resentment towards my husband because he got to walk out the door and have a working day ahead of him. I certainly didn’t expect to feel so desperately insecure of myself that I wanted to hide under the bed all day.

There were three major precipitating factors behind this form of culture shock, which continue to push many expat spouses well beyond their comfort zones:

- a career had been abandoned and work permits unavailable;
- financial independence (that is, a paycheque) was now replaced by an allowance and total dependence on my working partner;
- self-confidence and self-esteem, typically bolstered by a professional identity and feedback from friends and family, caused a host of symptoms, notably anxiety, depression, fatigue, insomnia, and deep anger and resentment towards my working partner.

It wasn’t enough that my professional foundations had crumbled. I was now without family and friends. The typical ‘honeymoon’ stage associated with ordinary, straight forward, country culture shock, ended very quickly for me as it still does, sadly, for many accompanying spouses.

“Women are particularly vulnerable to a wide range of stresses associated with an international move,” says Dr. Anne Copeland, founder and director of The Interchange Institute, a nonprofit organization based in Boston that studies and supports families and individuals who have moved from one country to another.

In addition to the challenges which threw me into an emotional tailspin, Dr. Copeland’s research also points out other emotional stress points for accompanying spouses: the loss of the ability to communicate, loss of mastery, loss of social support network, and the stress of being misperceived.

“The accompanying spouse has a particular vulnerability to these stresses,” says Dr. Copeland. “Women have many roles—daughter, mother, friend, career woman, sister—and these are all affected by the international move. The employee has the continuity and social connectedness of the job,” she says, adding, in fairness to the employee, that he also has the responsibility for having uprooted his family which “can be very heavy indeed.”

So what’s a spouse to do to combat the shock of being known as Mrs. Husband’s Job and be identified to this day by the none too flattering term ‘trailing spouse’?

The first and most important lesson I pass on to spouses presently in this situation is this: You are absolutely not going crazy. This spousal shock is real and the bad news is that it doesn’t ever go away. The good news is that it does lessen over the first six months to a year, and eventually most women adjust—until the next move! They figure out how to work around it, lead satisfying lives, and most important of all, they learn how to laugh about it.

Not all women verbalize their distress (at least not outside the home; inside, to their partners, is another story altogether but you need to be a fly on the wall to know this). However, when I visit expat communities to speak about it, I find it’s like opening floodgates. Everyone has an experience to share. How could women talk so much about something that doesn’t exist?

Absolutely everyone feels culture shock in some way. For many spouses (not all, it should be noted), this unique sub-shock can be even more challenging than learning a foreign language.

The career issue remains a thorny one. With limited support or understanding from companies or governments who send families abroad, it remains up to the accompanying spouse to sort this one out for herself. That requires tapping inner resources like motivation and self-discipline to figure it out solo. The internet and globalization have opened up a whole new world of opportunity for global entrepreneurship and telecommuting that conveniently by passes work permit issues.

Expectations also need to be managed within reasonable limits. There are still too many expat ‘superwomen’ trying to live up to standards that are not realistic in the expat life of constant visitors, traveling, home leaves, cultural differences, logistics and any number of factors too many spouses conveniently ignore when beating themselves over perceived failures.

Finally, while this form of culture shock is all too real, so is the privilege of living abroad. In the depths of this shock, spouses must try to remind themselves on a daily basis of their good fortune to be leading a life others can only dream about.

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