

Repatriation Can Be a Grieving Process

By: Robin Pascoe

Grief is an unspoken emotional legacy of repatriation, not unlike re-entry shock itself. The shock of coming home is a silent culture shock which no one wants to talk about before it happens and certainly not until they are well over it.

But the loss and change which occurs at repatriation, according to Elva Mertick, a Calgary-based grief counselor and therapist who specializes in repatriation for employees in Canada's oil patch, run tandem with grief, an overlooked, but profound dimension in the re-entry process.

"Repatriates immediately understand the external losses when they return home. For instance, they feel the loss of financial benefits and the expatriate lifestyle," says Ms. Mertick.

"However, they don't truly understand they are also suffering from internal losses, like the loss of self-worth. Once you no longer feel 'special' or elite, that can trigger grief responses which are part of re-entry shock."

Those responses are similar to the well-known phases of grief. They begin with shock and denial. A pining or yearning for the old life ensues, much as one yearns to see a loved one who has died. Emotional upheaval follows, the 'crash' period of the re-entry shock cycle when the honeymoon ends and reality sets in. It finds its way to anger at the loss of feelings of control over a new life situation.

The process finally ends, according to Ms. Mertick, when one passes through all the phases and arrives at a period of reorganization. You get on with your life, but the grief never goes away, just as one's overseas experience never leaves a person. "We just learn to put it aside and take it out once in a while," she says.

"I did feel a sense of loss when we returned to the UK," reports Marian Weston who repatriated this past summer after 9 years away. "Even though we had not particularly enjoyed our last posting to Sri Lanka, I miss the mixing and exchanges with different nationalities.

The fact is, when you return you are no longer a part of a small community where everyone looks out for everyone else and that can be difficult."

"Isolation is a typical grief response," says Ms. Mertick. "Many people engage in it at re-entry. People can't stand to be in the house but can't stand to leave it either."

Mrs. Weston sees similarities between her repatriation and the time she lost her father. "But when you feel bereaved over the loss of a family member, there is an obvious source of your bereavement. Repatriation is more hypothetical, and not so understandable to the outside world because it is not physically obvious."

Ms. Mertick points out another source of bereavement at re-entry is a loss of innocence. "People realize that life has changed while they were away and that home is not always as perfect and as comfortable as they imagined," she says.

“There is also a loss of values when repatriates no longer feel their personal choices match with those of old friends and family. And there can also be a loss of hope for the future.”

Those hopes for the future are particularly challenging themes for repatriates returning home to the current events of a world thrown into uncertainty on September 11th.

“Anyone going through repatriation right now will definitely have a heightened sense of re-entry shock. They are also feeling the grief and loss of the terrorist attack in the United States,” she says.

“For repatriating Americans, there is a fear and guilt of doing anything that could be seen as getting on with a normal life, when life is anything but normal. They almost feel guilty.”

So what to do? Recognize and put a name to this grief, Ms. Mertick advises, to avoid getting ‘stuck’ in it. And the key is connecting with someone who has come out ‘the other side’ of the repatriation process. “Find role models,” she says.

More importantly, she believes one has to recognize that grief never goes away. “It just changes,” she notes. “People have to avoid allowing grief to be disabling, or colour their lives in a negative way. There actually is room for tremendous growth from the grieving process, whether it’s over the loss of innocent lives or a way of living.

“As expats, we have all been in tricky situations and we all know the show must go on,” says Marian Weston. “We just have to draw on our past strengths and experiences to allow that to happen, to carry on with our lives.”

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