

# **The Expatriate Spouse: A need for coaching during the transition to a new country, a new culture and a new life.**

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## **Introduction**

It sounds glamorous, living abroad in exotic countries, traveling regularly, meeting new friends, and exploring a new culture. However the reality can be vastly different. The life of an expatriate (expat) means packing up all your worldly belongings, moving to a house that you may or may not have seen, in a country that you may or may not have visited before. You leave behind everything you know and are familiar with, including family, friends, and a support network. While everyone at home continues with their “normal” life, you are starting a new life, in a whole new, often unfamiliar world.

If you have children you need to find appropriate schooling, which isn't always an easy task as International Schools quite often have long waiting lists. Then there is the arduous task of sourcing a new doctor, new dentist, hairdresser and finding the local supermarket. There are so many little luxuries in your day today life

that you take for granted; yet when you become an expat, they can be huge challenges. As a general rule, many expatriates seem to underestimate the challenges of moving abroad. Often the spouse has left behind a career of their own to follow their partner. While their partner starts an exciting new job in a new office surrounded by like-minded people, the expat spouse can struggle to find their identity. The partner can be consumed with trying to settle in him or herself and make a positive impact in a foreign environment, which leaves little time to provide support for the spouse at home. It is quite common for partners to travel regularly with their job, which means the expat spouse is left alone to fend for him or herself. The research in this paper also sought to light the toll that the expat lifestyle can have on relationships and families as each person struggles to deal with the new experience in their own way.

In this paper I will examine how to use a coaching model to help spouses of expatriates cope with the enormous challenge of facing life in a new country, and making that experience a richly rewarding one. We will explore how, with the right support, the expatriate experience opens your eyes to a whole new and exciting world. I have been a “trailing” spouse for the past 6 years and have moved countries three times, from Vietnam to Malaysia and then Hong Kong. I have had some wonderful adventures, and some very dark days when I just wanted to go home. In this paper I will draw on my own personal experience, internet research, interviews with expat spouses and reference books to underline the importance of support in an expatriate situation and how that support can make the

difference between sinking and swimming. I will explore how a Life Coach can step in and create a safe space for the expatriate to share his/her concerns. We will discover how partnering with a Life Coach can help share the burden of the uncertain months ahead, allowing the spouse to find a positive way to move forward to a fulfilling life in the new country.

### **What is Expatriation?**

*An **expatriate** (in abbreviated form, **expat**) is a person temporarily or permanently **residing** in a country and culture other than that of the person's upbringing. The word comes from the **Latin** terms **ex** ("out of") and **patria** ("country, fatherland")*

In its broadest sense, an expatriate is any person living in a different country from where he is a citizen. In common usage the term is often used in the context of professionals sent abroad by their companies, as opposed to locally hired staff. The differentiation found in common usage usually comes down to socio-economic factors; so skilled professionals working in another country are described as expats, whereas a manual laborer who has moved to another country to earn money might be classed as an "Immigrant". The continuing shift in expatriates has often been difficult to measure. According to UN Statistics, more than 200 million people would be living outside their home countries in 2010. However, this number also includes immigrants.

## **Culture shock**

In her book “The Culture Shock tool Kit”, Margarita Gokun Silver describes culture shock as;

*“A roller coaster of emotions we feel when we enter and have to adjust to a culture/environment that’s not our own. These emotions can bring on symptoms that range from those experienced by our body (aches, pains, allergies) and those experienced by our minds (sadness, anger, loss of identity etc).*

In 2007 my husband, our three daughters and myself moved to Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The girls 15, 14 and 11 had never left Australia before. We lived on six acres in a rural town complete with horse, dog and vegetable patch. We couldn’t have moved to a more culturally diverse location. The horror on their faces when we landed in HCMC, is now comical, but at the time, was almost enough to make me want to herd them back onto the safety of the plane and head for home. In the first few months the guilt of what we had done hung like a noose around my neck. The children were miserable, missing home, their friends and were too scared to venture far from our serviced apartment for fear of getting run over by the crazy motorbikes that seemed to be everywhere, even on the pavements! I spent the first week walking around the block as I couldn’t work up the courage to cross the road.

I knew nothing about Culture Shock, and had very little support from my husbands company about what to expect in our new city.

As the Mother at home, I was the punching bag for all the pent up emotions my poor children struggled to deal with. Not only did they have to settle into a new school and make friends, they had to adjust to the British schooling system, which was markedly different from the Australian one, and much more academic. I was one of the lucky ones, while my husband had thrown himself into a challenging new role and was working long hours, he was also aware of the struggles I was facing, and was a great source of support for me. Many partners aren't as empathetic and become absorbed in their new role, not realising the toll the new life is taking on the spouse at home. We lived in a very small serviced apartment for 3 months (which felt like forever), while I tried to find a house for us to live in, and supermarkets that had the sort of food we were used to...a challenge in itself!

To have someone I could call on to support me during this difficult transition would undoubtedly have made a difference. If someone had explained that the guilt (loads of it), anger, frustration, and feelings of being completely overwhelmed were normal, I would have had some peace of mind. It also would have been great to talk to someone about how to deal with the children and make their life easier.

### **Challenges faced**

*"We are all faced with a series of great opportunities brilliantly disguised as impossible situations"* - Charles R Swindol

According to the HSBC Expat Explorer survey, 2008, the most common problems faced by expats are;

1. Learning the local language
2. Finding a new place to live
3. Making new friends
4. Sorting out finances and healthcare
5. Finding a school for the children

I interviewed 7 expat spouses, whose time overseas varied from their first posting to an expat veteran of twenty years. I posed a similar question to them;

“What are the biggest challenges you face when you move to a new country?”

The responses varied slightly, but the general feel was the same. The most common challenges being; understanding a new culture, finding good schools, competent medical facilities, finding a house and making friends. Often doing all this in a country where you can't speak the language. A first time expat commented:

*“After the first three months I was exhausted as every moment was spent finding a place to live, home schooling, settling the children in, dealing with a helper, finding friends, setting up a house, unpacking and the buying furniture we needed to live...I don't think I had time to think about anything!.*”

The job of settling the family falls on the expat spouses shoulders, and he/she usually has to manage without a lot of support. The general feeling from my interview subjects was that becoming familiar with a new city, and being able to provide a standard of living that the family is used to, is tough. There is no doubt having someone to lean on at this time, would be a huge relief.

*“Finding your way around a new city trying not to get lost. In fact in the first few weeks, just finding food was a huge achievement”.*

### **Personal Challenges**

*“If we are growing, we are always going to be out of our comfort zone”*  
- John Maxwell

As mentioned earlier, one of the expat spouse’s biggest challenges is feeling unrecognized and losing their own identity. In many countries it is difficult for an expat spouse to work, so they may have gone from a valued job, to all of a sudden being unemployed. Field data was collected in the Asia-Pacific region in 2007-2008. The research was funded by the Society for Human Resource Management. All 238 participants completed an online questionnaire regarding spousal assistance. The research findings indicate that spouses who had experienced an interruption or cessation of their employment had significantly lower adjustment to interacting with local people (a key component of cross cultural adjustment) than the spouses whose employment situation remained substantially the

same. According to Nina Cole, Associate Professor of Human Resources Management, Ryerson University in Toronto,

*“every time an expatriate returns home before completing his or her assignment, their employer loses on average \$1 million. The number one reason for expats to make a premature return home is “spouse and family adjustment issues”.*

Nina goes on to say that although employers are aware of this problem, they have been reluctant to establish spousal assistance programs. As a result of her interviews, Nina Cole found the most frequent recommendation related to the need for practical support immediately upon arrival and over the first few weeks of settling-in. Spouses overwhelmingly found this experience to be very difficult and many expressed a strong belief that the best source of support and assistance would be another expatriate spouse who had already settled into the location. Most wanted access to a “go-to” person for all their questions and quandaries based on their individual family circumstances.

In her conclusion Cole found that the two major areas where spouses need assistance are:

- Information to assist in employment networking, and
- Practical support from another expatriate spouse during the settling in period.
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As I did more research into this topic, it became clear that the employers were taking responsibility for the physical move, but the



needs of the expat spouses were being overlooked. When one of my friends moved to Hong Kong, the company had available a welcome pack and contact details of other expat spouses especially for new arrivals. However, it took a school parent to chase this and let her know it was available, not the company.

On their website “Global Coach Center” has the following facts about expat spouses:

***“A fact:*** *A large percentage of expatriate assignments fail because of family adjustment issues.*

***A fact:*** *Expatriate spouses play an important role in family adjustment.*

***A sad fact:*** *Very few companies are doing anything to help expat spouses adjust and overcome challenges of an expatriate lifestyle.*

A common feeling from the interviews I conducted was the need to reinvent yourself when you have no career/job to define who you are:

*“ Re-inventing myself again. The kids and husband settle fast with school and work routines, friends and colleagues. Both times I have moved I gave up a job and a career to move and support the family”.*

Another response was very similar,

*“for me as a dependent (trailing spouse) it is all about..uh...what? There is no security in friends or surroundings, no one waiting for you, no job to go to. You have to reinvent yourself, time and again.”*

Once a spouse does manage to settle in to their new country (which according to my interviews can vary from 6months to 2 years), it is often the case that the husbands “Professional clock” rings, and he is moved to another country, where the whole situation will happen again.

## **Relationships**

*“Behind that friendly façade of competence and sociability there often lurks one very scared, emotionally exhausted, and in many cases angry resentful “accompanying” wife.” – Robin Pascoe*

One of the issues not mentioned in Company briefings, is the toll that moving to a new country can have on relationships. If a relationship is shaky before a move, it is less likely to survive on assignment. Even the most solid of relationships can take a battering overseas. Expat spouses usually have very few options to deal with their partner’s assignment abroad. They can either stay behind to continue life, as they know it or they can “trail” along. Both scenarios have their pros and cons.

In each case, expat assignments can make or break a relationship or marriage. As I mentioned earlier, in many cases, traveling spouses cannot pursue their own career while abroad and

experience some restrictions on their personal freedom. Thus, spouses often face an identity crisis when they realize that they are losing their independence and status. Culture shock as well as the language barrier can make it hard for them to manage their lives the way they used to and even accomplish simple tasks.

As most spouses of assignees statistically still tend to be women, local and cultural traditions may have a strong effect on their personal lives as well. All this pressure on expats and their spouses is like a magnifying glass on a marriage. Underlying issues and disagreements will come to the forefront, and one will soon find out if the relationship can pass this crucial test.

Being an accompanying partner can also be an isolating experience, particularly in the early days of a move. You are unable to rely on your friends and family at home because they are distant, they don't understand what you are going through or you don't want to confide in them because you feel guilty about complaining about your new "glamorous and charmed life" overseas. Making it worse, you haven't formed any meaningful friendships in your new locations yet. The only person you feel comfortable confiding in is your partner. But it's early days for him too – he's under significant stress as he acclimatizes to his new job and may be so consumed with his own issues that he doesn't have the capacity to handle yours too. You may resent that he's not emotionally available but he may be feeling responsible and even a bit guilty for putting you in a situation where you may not be happy. Simmering resentment and guilt – not a good combination.

## Case study

Six months into our Vietnam posting, life had improved dramatically. We were living in a wonderful house, the children had all made new friends and I had a great network of like-minded people to support me. I felt I had learnt a lot from my first six months in HCMC and was very conscious of keeping an eye out for newcomers. They were easily recognizable by the glazed look in their eyes and the sagging shoulders. One such lady I met, Carla, became a good friend and a trial “coaching” client. Without either of us becoming aware of it, my role became one of support person, and confidant. Carla hated Vietnam with a passion. Her husband had relocated their successful business to Vietnam to help cut down on productivity costs and take advantage of the booming Vietnam economy. He had picked the house before Carla arrived (which she hated on sight), he picked the furniture (a disaster), and traveled constantly so Carla was left on her own, with two daughters, for long periods of a time. When we first met, she was miserable. Over the course of our friendship I tried to include her in outings, get her involved in charity work and do something about her uncared for home. In an expat world, your home is your salvation; it is an escape from the crazy world outside that sometimes you want to hide from. I learnt early on that it is important to surround yourself with your favorite furnishings, pictures and comforts from home. As one expat spouse commented:

*“Make your house your home...feeling like it is a rental property you are in temporarily will stop you feeling settled.”*

Slowly Carla involved herself more in the community and made her house comfortable. With support and guidance she found the confidence to not only survive, but thrive in a difficult environment. The effect of Carla being happy and positive was that the children also began to enjoy the experience and stopped being negative and anti social, traits that Carla had unknowingly transferred to them.

Robin Pascoe is a well-known traveling spouse who is internationally recognized for her books, articles and presentations on the challenges of global living and adjustment. In an interview on the Expat Women website, Robin noted that in over 20 year of working on behalf of expats, despite thousands of words, policies, research and surveys, expat spouses are no further ahead in having their needs and challenges really understood and taken seriously by the powers that be (including often, their own spouses).

Robin says;

*“I still hear the same conversations I did 20 years ago”.*

However Robin admits that the advent of the technology age has made the expats life easier.

*“I think what has changed dramatically for spouses have been the technologies. Phones, computers, etc make them feel less isolated from their families, cultures, pop culture, books, resources etc”.*

## **On the positive side**

There is no doubt that being an expat spouse can be challenging. However, there is also a very exciting side to the lifestyle. If managed with proper support, then it can lead to a great opportunities and personal growth. When asked what would make the transition to a new country easier, the unanimous verdict from all my interview subjects was, having someone to talk to, to lean on and to give you guidance. It also helps to have a positive attitude and be open to new possibilities. One of the ladies commented;

*“The main factor that will influence the ease of your transition is you, and your attitude to your move.”*

Another said;

*“A local coach in the country who could give guidance would be a great support.”*

The general feel I got from both the expat spouses and the various online websites is that it is imperative to get out and involve yourself in the local community. Join groups, sporting associations, and school activities and be prepared to accept any invitations that come your way. Building up a social network for the expat spouse is important for mental wellbeing and emotional stability.

*“You must be willing to step out of your comfort zone, join a women’s group, find out about coffee mornings. Accept any invitations you*

*receive, as you never know who you might meet, and sitting home alone won't get you anywhere!"*

The general rule is; "Happy wife (spouse), happy life".

### **Implications for life Coaching**

From the research I have conducted there are several implications for Coaching. Fundamentally Life Coaching is about support. It is a safe place to share concerns, discuss problems and find actions steps to move forward. From personal experience, a life Coach would have been invaluable for me in the first few months in Vietnam. My life was in turmoil, my children hated me, I had no friends and no support whatsoever. As soon as my husband and children walked out the door for the day, I was alone, and lonely. I would have loved nothing better than to talk to a Coach about the emotions I was feeling, and how to manage them.

A Coach can work with a client to focus on the positives of the expat Lifestyle. They can help build a bridge between your "old" life and your 'new' life. With a coach you can discover ways to re-build your identity and self-esteem, re-build your feeling of security and plan ways to use your time effectively. While most spouses get there eventually, it can take time and impact on the relationships close to you.

One area that the spouses I interviewed all struggled with was the feeling of loss that came with leaving old friends and a familiar

environment behind. To combat these feelings, a coach can use tools to re-direct their client's energy and focus on positive feelings and help them to identify a sense of meaning and purpose. Recently a friend of mine from Kuala Lumpur was really struggling with finding her "purpose" in her new country, and wasn't feeling settled, even though she had been there over a year. She decided to consult with a Life Coach and find a way out of her unhappiness. Through the coaching process she re-discovered her love of craft and organizing. Within a few months had managed to single handedly pull together a Market to cater to expat woman who had various craft skills, but nowhere to showcase them. The Market has been running for nearly 12months now and has grown so big, that it is impossible to get a stall. My friend is feeling complete, satisfied and energized. Her life now has a focus and a purpose. It took Coaching for her to look deeply inside herself and find a way forward.

In her book "The Culture Shock tool Kit", Margarita Gokun Silver summarizes the three strategies that she believe can help an expat survive the culture shock of a move.

*"Strategy 1 – change your perspective*

*Stragegy 2 – Increase positivity in your relationship with another culture*

*Strategy 3 – Decrease your negativity"*

As Coaches we can use powerful questions to reframe the expat spouses perspective from one of fear and negativity to one of wonder and enjoyment. By working with an expat spouse and allowing



him/her to embrace life in a new country, the dynamics within the entire family can change. As demonstrated in the case study with “Carla”, once the spouse was happy, the children became more confident and accepting of their situation.

## **Conclusion**

The expat lifestyle is fraught with challenges. It is a leap of faith for families who are prepared to throw themselves into a new country, new culture and new experience. While the whole family undergoes change, it is the expat spouse who carries the burden of setting up the new life and supporting the family as they adapt. This is a huge role, and one that carries enormous responsibility. However, with the right support network to help the spouse, the transition can be made easier.

With help of a Life Coach an expat spouse can discover that not only can a move to a new country be rewarding, it can be a learning experience, and a time for Personal growth. New skills are learnt along the way that many spouses don't even realize they are acquiring. To walk into a room full of strangers and have to start talking to people and making friends can be incredibly daunting, but it can also help build self-confidence. Learning to negotiate your way around a foreign city can be frustrating, but it also takes courage and determination. Not being able to work can open the door to exciting opportunities to do further study or indulge a hobby that had been put aside due to lack of time.

From my research and the interviews I have conducted, I have no doubt that a Life Coach can add enormous value. If a coach can help the client to keep a positive attitude, to embrace change and view the challenges ahead as life learning experiences, then the expat move becomes one of opportunity, instead of loss. I have also come to the conclusion that the Companies responsible for the move would benefit by offering Coaching sessions to their employees spouse. Not only would it be beneficial for the spouse, it will help the whole family to settle in and allow the partner to focus on his/her job.

From my own personal experience, Coaching would have been a valuable resource in the early days of each move (particularly in KL when the children started telling people I talked to our bunny rabbits as I had no friends!). The past six years of living in Asia has been life changing for me. I now see the world as a relatively small place, I embrace new friends and experiences, I am more confident and self-aware. I have learnt that being independent gives you freedom to make choices and I have been lucky enough to have the time to devote to the career path that inspires me, which is coaching. All this I have discovered in my journey as an expat, and I wouldn't change a minute of this amazing lifestyle I lead. However, with a Life Coach to support and guide me, the transition in each country would have been so much easier. I would have settled sooner with each move, and been able to put strategies in place to build a network. Doing the research on this paper has been an invaluable experience for me as a person and a Coach. I believe that with the right help, expat spouses can focus on seeking meaning and purpose in a positive way with a

sense of excitement and wonder, so that each move is more like a wonderful adventure instead of a trial to be endured.

As one expat spouse said:

*“Regardless of the reasons behind your relocation, a positive attitude is essential”.*

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### Personal Interviews:

Ella – 7 countries, 20 years abroad

Christine – 2 countries, 4.5 years abroad

Susan – 1 country, 4 years abroad

Gerardine – 4 countries (about to start 5<sup>th</sup>), 16 years abroad

Helen – 1 country, 4 years abroad

Joannie – 1 country, 6 years

Catriona – 8 countries, 21 years abroad.