

# Relocating Relationships

By Katrina Waller & Lopa Vibhakar

Moving as a couple or family to live in a new country can bring many challenges and rewards. The experience of actually packing up your life both materially and emotionally followed by rearranging your life as a couple or family in a new town and culture can cause relationship tensions and stresses once the initial 'honeymoon' period is over. I have worked with many expatriate couples and families in the UK and found that although a lot of support, time and resource is spent on the practical logistics of moving, accommodation, schools etc., support for the impact of the move on spouse and family relationships is often not accounted for. If you think of a move abroad as akin to a key life transition such as co-habiting/marriage, or the birth of a child, it is likely that there is going to be some readjustment within relationships to take account of and embrace the changes of the transition. Add to this trying to manage the transition in a new town and culture and it is not surprising that alongside the richness and opportunities for growth, vulnerabilities in couple and family relationships can surface.

One of the key issues that I have come across in my work with expatriate couples is



the spouse who is not working feeling lonely, isolated and resentful of the social contact their partner has with work colleagues. This can heighten any previous relationship vulnerabilities and without their established family or friends network from home in close proximity, to talk to or offer support, these vulnerabilities can become a crisis of communication and disappointment with the expatriate experience. One couple I worked with were experiencing frustrations with the hours of work and corporate social duties that the working partner was expected to commit to in their UK organisation. Whilst the non-working partner had been able to accommodate this at home via a good network of family and friends it became a vulnerability and source of frustration within their relationship and hence with the expatriate experience.

My advice to any couple or family considering expatriation or living as expatriates is alongside all the other logistical arrangements of where to live, travel, schooling etc., make it a priority to discuss and get support for a relocation of your relationship/s. For example:

- Discuss the impact of the move on how you experience your relationship e.g. do you have more or less time for each other, what do you find yourselves disagreeing most about, what support do you need from each other?
- Make each other aware of your expectations from the expatriate experience and how to support each other in this.
- Think about how the move may impact on current vulnerabilities in your relationship/s.
- Make sure you have a plan of how to achieve social integration for all members of the family

In my experience of working with expatriate couples and families these issues are

unfortunately usually only brought to a head once frustrations and problems have been around for a while. In my opinion support for your key personal support network i.e. spouse/family should be a priority as a breakdown in this can lead at worst to a return home. If the house you are living in isn't great it's only bricks and mortar that can be replaced, if the phone doesn't work you can get an engineer to fix it. However, if your key relationships suffer the consequences can have a far greater impact. I also have a sense that whilst most expatriates will willingly share their good and bad experiences of travel, accommodation, schools etc., talking about the impact of relocation on their relationship isn't something they will share, perhaps because there is not enough acknowledgement of this problem.

Some organisations do, but I have often found that either expatriates are not aware of it, or the expatriate employee is reluctant to ask for this resource. However, the cost of a disappointing expatriate experience, or at worst a premature return home, is far greater than the cost of couple or family coaching sessions.

I hope in writing this article I can offer some acknowledgement and support to expatriate couples and families who have faced challenges in the relocation of their relationships. In my experience it is often part and parcel of the expatriate experience, but with the right support can offer a springboard for growth and strength in key relationships if the right support is offered. ■

Katrina Waller and Lopa Vibhakar are co-founders of Coachingfusion which offers integration and adjustment coaching for expatriate couples and families. [www.coachingfusion.com](http://www.coachingfusion.com)