

Things can only get better!

By Anne Randerson, Ph.D.

"I thought a bomb had detonated in my lap... It took me months to get my head wrapped around the fact that Brussels was to be my new 'home' for who the heck knew how long! I think I stayed in bed for a couple of weeks, depressed as heck, but my inner courage and strength won out. I would make a life in Brussels, I decided."

Are you an expat partner? Did you follow your honey or hubby and uproot yourself? Does Ellie's experience above sound like yours? Hopefully not, but if it does, don't worry. Expat partners go through major stress as our lives radically change overnight. You realize:

- You no longer have a job to define your life.
- You are not prepared for this new culture; you need to learn new survival skills.
- You have lost your support system – you feel lost, lonely and confused.

"Why can't I read my phone bill? What do all these strange traffic signs mean? What's wrong with these people?" you scream. Don't worry – you're not alone with these negative, frustrating feelings. We all go through this.

Take Sayuri, from Japan: "At first, I had no friends. The weather was terrible. I was almost depressed for the first 3 weeks. My shock was enormous and it took time for me to adjust to everything. One day, someone on the street gave me some kind of paper. I thought it was just a free paper like in Japan. The guy forced me to pay for it, so I paid him 5 euros."

Like many expat partners, Sayuri wasn't familiar with Belgian culture at first. She was shocked to realize how different things were from home.

When I myself first relocated to Belgium, I had a rude awakening too. I had flown over from California in a mini-skirt. It was 12 January 1990 and minus twelve degrees outside. I didn't know how cold Belgian winters were. When I got off the plane, I felt like an idiot.

Not only cultural problems, but language problems also create stress. "One day, my son came home from school very sad. The next day, I asked my French teacher to translate the school note I had received. It said 'Dear parents: please send your children with their bathing suits to school on Tuesday. We are going to a swimming pool,'" says Yuki, another expat partner. She had sent her six-year old off with only his lunch box that day. She felt like a terrible mother.

When I relocated to Japan, I was shocked to learn women were the last ones out of the lift. I kept bumping shoulders with Japanese businessmen trying to squeeze out the same time as me. Rather than apologizing, they glared at me and then got out. I was always stuck in the back and even missed my floor twice! I resented the Japanese "lady's last" approach, but eventually I got used to it.

After returning to Belgium six years later, I continued to wait for men to leave the lift first. They would politely wait for me, while I waited for them. I felt so stupid. Also, in Japan, I had learned to avoid eye contact with people. Needless to say, when I returned to Belgium, that polite Japanese habit didn't help me find a job. Interviewers became suspicious, so I readapted my behaviour and began looking people in the eyes again.

Now, after 20 years living as an expat in 4 different countries, I help expat partners learn survival skills to become culturally integrated in Belgium. My company, Cross Cultural Horizons, offers practical assistance to help expat partners ease into their new lifestyle abroad. Often, it's just the little things that get to us. We need some helpful guidance in the right direction.

"I didn't know my clothes size, how to buy vegetables in the supermarket, which detergent I should use... We received our container with our things from Japan 2 months after our arrival, so I didn't have a computer or TV to search for any information," explains Sayuri.

At first, you need to find efficient solutions to help you settle into your new life. Knowing where to find a good doctor, get a haircut, shop for familiar foods, how to read traffic signs, menus or labels, how to tip, find a church, make

friends or simply where to grab a good cup of coffee is essential. These simple things can make a huge difference in adapting to a new culture.

It is also important to add structure to your daily life. Without familiar friends and activities, you could quickly feel lost and get depressed, so try to stay active: take a French or Dutch class, join a health club, take an art class and make new friends. Sharing experiences with other expat partners can be a great source of comfort.

You could also become a volunteer. It feels really good to help others, especially when you feel lonely and have some free time. As Karen Armstrong says in *The Spiral Staircase*: "We are, the great spiritual writers insist, most fully ourselves when we give ourselves away." Go find something useful to do for others in Belgium.

For example, Famisol is a volunteer association that assists handicapped children in Brussels. It welcomes expat partners who already speak French. Jean-Michel Marechal, Famisol spokesperson, says volunteering "offers expatriates a human connection in a country they hardly know and gives them the opportunity to contribute to developing positive solidarity between citizens while they live in Belgium." (www.famisol.be).

Most of all, don't fret about your situation. You will eventually get used to your life as an expat partner and learn to appreciate it. "I grew up leaps and bounds in Brussels. I had the time and the means to focus on my art career and it was a wonderful 13 years. I grew as a woman and as a human being and found new strength I didn't know I had within me," says Ellie – so distraught at first – who regretfully returned to the USA last year.

If all else fails, why not grab a pen and write down a few of your own funny (or horror) stories? It'll make you feel better. Writing has helped many expat partners – including myself – relieve accumulated stress during expatriate adventures around the world. And if you're shy, just use a penname!



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