

A Portable Identity

A Woman's Guide to Maintaining a Sense of Self While Moving Overseas

Debra R. Bryson, MSW Charise M. Hoge, MSW

Chapter 1

The Starting Place: Your Identity Before the Decision to Move Overseas

How You View Moving Overseas

Your perception of moving overseas to support your husband's career probably falls somewhere between enthusiasm and resistance. You may view the move as a positive opportunity: a chance to explore exotic lands, have extra support to maintain the household, take time off from a career, or enjoy not working. You may view the decision to move overseas more negatively: as a necessary nuisance for your husband to advance in his career, as an interruption to your own career path, or as an obstacle taking you away from important roles, places, and people in your life. In this case, when you agree to the move, you do so reluctantly. We both found ourselves at opposite ends of the continuum when we first discovered we'd be moving overseas.

Debra:

I remember the day I learned that my husband, Brad, and I would move to Bangkok, Thailand. Brad came home from work like any other day. We made and ate dinner, then went for a walk, something we often do, especially when we have something important to talk about. As we walked, Brad told me that his assignment with the State Department had come through and we'd be moving to Thailand within the year.

"Finally," I thought. "I'm ready to go."

My mind immediately started to spin off into a fantasy about what my life would be like there. I saw myself confidently walking down unfamiliar streets, meeting local people along the way, and, of course, being readily accepted and liked by them. I saw myself eating exotic foods and learning to speak the language fluently. I saw us exploring and traveling the country together on the weekends. I thought it would be fascinating to be a part of the embassy community. I looked forward to the opportunity to meet and socialize with foreign dignitaries. I wanted to pinch myself. I couldn't believe moving overseas was finally going to happen.

Charise:

When my husband, Charles, told me he had a job offer in Bangkok, I could sense his excitement. The opportunity to live in Asia and develop research projects in tropical medicine thrilled him. Moving overseas would be a boon to his career as a doctor.

As he expressed his desire to go, I thought, “Where am I in this plan? Does he realize what he’s asking me to give up? Does he know that I dread such a move?” I felt hurt and helpless. We had just moved two years earlier to Atlanta, which was a mutual decision. I was just beginning a new career as a social worker and was still in graduate school. I was afraid that by moving overseas, I’d lose everything that I’d already accomplished. When I expressed these concerns to Charles, he promised to help me find a way to work overseas. He knew another American doctor in Bangkok whose wife was working as a counselor. He said he’d make inquiries for me. While he thought he was helping to ease my anxiety, he didn’t know the extent of my fear.

The idea of Asia terrified me. It was “too foreign.” I had lived in Central America as a child, and in Europe during college, but Asia seemed like another planet to me. I felt that I didn’t have the skills to master living there. I viewed the move as a detour, undermining my confidence in my abilities and derailing me from my goals.

✿Exercise: Reflections✿

In this exercise, we’d like you to identify what you thought about the move overseas to support your husband’s career.

How did you view the move? Did you see it as a positive opportunity or as something negative? Or, did your feelings fall somewhere between the two?

What were some of your thoughts and feelings about making the move overseas?

Reality of Moving Overseas

Although every woman has diverse views and images of the move overseas as well as different experiences after arriving abroad, women who move to support their husbands' careers have something in common: loss and change.

Debra:

During the first few months in Bangkok, as the ever-present newness began to wear off, it began to sink in that I was in Thailand. This would be home. I began to miss the familiar life I had in Washington, D.C. It seemed odd to me that just a short time before I was ever so willing to "give it all up" for this adventure. I began to question myself and the decision I had made. I felt sad and lonely; yet I was also glad we made the move. I had been so excited about it.

This wide range of feelings made no sense to me. At times I found myself feeling irritable, or crying over a minor frustration, or for no apparent reason. I told myself that I just needed time to adjust. I missed my family and friends in the U.S. Everyone seemed so far away, so untouchable. The phone calls to my parents were a vivid reminder. The voice delay and echo on the line as we talked made it difficult to maintain a natural flow of conversation. I found it difficult to be honest with them about my feelings. I shared the details of my adventures and my positive feelings, but awkwardly omitted anything painful. I didn't want to worry them, besides, they were never too thrilled about me moving overseas in the first place. They liked their children close by; with the overseas move, I was now farther away from them than ever.

Charise:

I recall the moment I came to understand that Bangkok was my home. We were already there, well into a three-month stay. We had chosen our house after a month in a hotel, and our household belongings had arrived. We had a semblance of order and our daily routines of rising, gathering at the breakfast table, going our different directions to work and school, and coming back to a clean house filled with the enticing smell of dinner in the making.

During this early settling-in period we took a four-day holiday to the beach a few hours' drive south of Bangkok. We stayed at a resort-style hotel where costumed, smiling Thai staff catered to our needs. This offered a reprieve from the scorching sun and the whims of our three-and-a-half-year-old.

After four days, we loaded our car for the drive home, and soon entered the press of Bangkok traffic. We emerged from the main streets into the smaller lanes of our neighborhood and arrived in our driveway. While this was no surprise, it seemed I was in the wrong place. I was anticipating returning home from the beach but it looked like just another shelter from the sun. I wanted my other home in the States, not the prospect of settling in for a long stay. A very long vacation. A very long time away.

☞Exercise: Reflections☞

This exercise will help you identify the thoughts and feelings that you've experienced since moving overseas.

What thoughts and feelings have you experienced since arriving at your new destination?

Have you been confused or surprised by any of your thoughts or by any of the emotions you've felt? If yes, which ones and why?

What reasons have you attributed to thinking or feeling the way you have?

Do the thoughts and feelings you've experienced since arriving at your new destination match the thoughts and feelings you had anticipated before the move? Please explain your answer.

You may have moved into a more comfortable situation by moving overseas. However, your answers to the above questions may reveal that your thoughts and feelings don't match what you expect of a person who is "more comfortable." Your thoughts and feelings may seem strange to

you. You may feel a sense of urgency to find some way to overcome the difference between what you're experiencing internally and the situation you're in with all its perks. You may have been looking forward to the move, and now you may feel that something is wrong with you for feeling the way you do. Or you may not have wanted to make the move, and now you may want to blame yourself, your husband, or your situation for feeling the way you do. You may fear that what you're experiencing right now may stay with you throughout your overseas stay.

Regardless of how you initially viewed the move overseas (whether you viewed the move more positively or more negatively, or somewhere in between), don't deny the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors you've been experiencing. It is important to understand your experience in the context of the multitude of changes and losses you now face. Your thoughts and feelings very likely reflect the degree to which your identity has changed.

In the following section, we'll help you better understand the range of thoughts and feelings you've been experiencing since moving overseas. We'll do this by exploring in-depth the concept of identity, and by helping you construct a picture of your identity before the move.