

A Portable Identity

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

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Excerpt from *Chapter 15*

Tool #3: Communication with Others

How the Overseas Move Affects Your Communication with Others

Moving overseas affects your communication with other people. When you move overseas, your relationships with others are in transition. You leave behind your acquaintances. You no longer see or make small talk with all those people you encountered as you went through your daily routine.

When you move overseas you also leave behind many of the people that you feel close to, for example, extended family, friends, neighbors, and work colleagues. You can no longer talk to them in the same way as before you moved. Although you want to maintain the closeness of these relationships with these people, the relationships often change significantly because of the geographic distance.

While you may feel close to your spouse and your children when you move overseas with them, your relationships with them are also in transition. They are experiencing the process of adjusting to new surroundings and the foreign culture just as you are. Each of you may feel differently about the move and you may have difficulty talking about the effect of the move with each other. As a result, you may feel detached from one another.

When you move, you're hit simultaneously with losses, changes, and additions to your life. Your losses may include friendships, roles, support systems, a house, a job, and living in a familiar culture and country. Changes in your life may include geographic location, relationships, job, and roles. Additions to your life may include a new job, residence, people, roles, relationships, and culture and country.

The combination of these factors can leave you feeling vulnerable and overwhelmed by your situation. This in turn affects your communication with others. Expatriate women in this overwhelmed and vulnerable state are actually in the most need of communicating with others, but are often hesitant to do so. Why?

Reasons Expatriate Women Hesitate to Communicate with Others after Moving Abroad

You don't want others' first impression of you to be negative.

You fear others won't understand you.

You don't want to reflect badly on your husband or his career.

You don't want to appear needy or unhappy.

You fear rejection.

You don't know whom you can trust with your thoughts and feelings.

Nobody likes a whiner.

The above reasons expatriate women hesitate to communicate with others are very real and valid concerns. However, we have found it vital to reach out to others even in a vulnerable and overwhelmed state.

Why Communication with Others is an Important Tool for the Expatriate Woman

Communication with others is an important tool for the expatriate woman because it can help reduce the stress associated with an overseas move. Moving is very stressful for the whole family, especially for women who primarily move in support of their husband's careers. When you move, once you reach your new destination, you're busy right away getting the boxes unpacked, perhaps enrolling the children in school and getting them adjusted to their new surroundings, and talking to your husband about his new job.

Your husband may not be available to support you emotionally when you first move. He's busy re-establishing himself in his job and may choose to spend more time at work to accomplish that goal, or he may be required to do so by his new boss. He may also feel guilty for moving you and the rest of the family abroad. He may respond defensively when you attempt to share with him your concerns, thoughts, and feelings about the move (ones he interprets as negative). He may cut you off when you attempt to tell him what you're feeling. He may not even ask how you're doing because he may not want to know the answer or fears your response. Unfortunately, this is when you probably need him the most.

It's important to give voice to your feelings, thoughts, and concerns, and for them to be validated by another person. If you find that your spouse is unable to hear you during this time or is unavailable, it's important to reach out to someone else who *can* listen to you. It's important for you to feel supported. During this time, talking with others can lessen the stress you feel as a result of the move. Talking about your feelings, problems, or situation can actually decrease the intensity of it.

Communication with others is also an important tool for the expatriate woman because it can help reduce the feelings of loneliness and isolation. When we talk about using communication with others as a tool, we are talking about taking a risk to talk to others about what you're going through, what you feel about the move, and what you expected vs. the reality. When you share with others how you feel about your situation or yourself, you'll feel less

isolated and less lonely. The people you seek out can include your spouse or partner, friends, family, a minister, or counselor.

Communication with others is also an important tool because it can facilitate a support network. Women are experts at supporting others. Just look at the energy you spend (or have spent) getting yourself and your family settled into your new environment.

Communication with others provides the foundation to building a support network for *you*. Yes, a support network for you. It's important for you to have others you can talk to and provide you with support. By talking with others about what you're going through, you're increasing the number of people available to support you.

Communication with others can lead to additional friendships as well. Interacting with others, especially in a foreign land, presents you with a unique opportunity to get to know other women from all over the world. When you take the risk of sharing your true feelings, thoughts, and ideas with another person, you may develop a friendship that will last a long time. You may also gain a perspective on an issue that you may never have previously thought about or considered.

Communication with others is a vital tool for the expatriate woman because it can make the move overseas a more positive experience. When you think back to places that you've lived or jobs that you've had in the past, the people you knew there and were involved with probably determined whether it was a positive or negative experience for you.

The same holds true when you move overseas. People caring for people on a one-to-one basis makes the most difference. Having someone who listens and can understand is much more helpful than someone who just tells you what to do or offers advice.