

ADJUSTMENT TO LIFE ABROAD

by Ilze Skuja Wright, M.S.W.

(Ilze is the wife of an officer in the Department of External Affairs and has worked as a researcher in Criminology in Rome and as a family counsellor in New York, Ottawa and most recently, Tokyo)

A fully rotational member of the Department of External Affairs will spend half or more of his or her foreign service career abroad. This constant relocation takes its toll on an individual and his family, often creating considerable stress, hardship and medical and other problems.

However, with increased experience in moving, one usually learns the skills necessary to adapt to new situations more quickly and efficiently and to anticipate possible problems.

In this article, I shall mention a few of the problems seen in counselling expatriates, and explore some of the factors which influence the success of a foreign assignment.

EXPATRIATE'S PROBLEMS

The kinds of problems expatriates seem to have most frequently include anxiety, depression, withdrawal, low self-esteem, an inability to cope, psychosomatic symptoms, interpersonal relationship and marital problems, unresolved emotional issues from the past and alcoholism.

Minor irritations or personal shortcomings which can readily be ignored or diffused in the home country become aggravated or magnified when the extended family and community network disappear, and the nuclear family becomes more dependent on itself, thereby straining emotional resources and coping abilities. Also, children and adults undergoing normal developmental maturational stages might be vulnerable to stress in a foreign environment, e.g. adolescence, "mid-life crises", "empty-nest syndrome" etc.

Children also face a unique set of problems in overseas living. Sensitive to emotional changes around them, they often are barometers of family stress. They also need sympathy and understanding for they too have suffered losses and lack the coping skills to deal with them.

The foreign locale itself is usually not the root of the problem an expatriate has, but it acts as a catalyst, increasing vulnerabilities or exacerbating an existing predisposition to particular types of emotional difficulties.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS ARE IMPORTANT

Studies have shown that expatriates in more tightly knit groups e.g. embassies, use community mental health services less frequently than those without built in supports. Community, company and personal support systems are seen as crucial elements in ensuring a successful foreign assignment. Expatriates without resources or a supportive network are more at risk and more vulnerable to the stresses and strains of life abroad. Problems concerning children are the only exception.

A support system is made up of a variety of individuals and groups in the community. (In fact, almost everyone a person meets may provide support of some kind.) It may include friends, other embassy personnel, local staff, neighbours, professional associations, business contacts, schools, interest groups, clubs, recreational and other facilities. A support system helps to provide companionship, intellectual stimulation, comfort in time of need, assistance in an emergency, emotional stability and fun and recreation. It increases one's feelings of self-worth, and, very importantly, it diffuses emotional intensity and dependence on the family unit.

In the case of embassies, group cohesiveness and the availability of services such as predeparture orientation programs, language lessons, assisted leave, health professionals, etc. seem to ease adjustment and to provide ongoing support.

FACTORS AFFECTING SUCCESS ABROAD

In considering what factors influence the success of a foreign assignment, one must take a detailed look at the characteristics of the individual and at the particular features of the post. In addition to an individual's personality and behavioral characteristics, one must also evaluate other factors such as age and the ages of children, the quality of the marital relationship, whether this is a first posting, and whether the spouse wishes to seek gainful employment etc.

The type of person who adjusts easily and well in a different environment is a mature, self-reliant, optimistic individual who sees his posting as a learning experience and is motivated to make the most of it. He is flexible and open to new ideas, and is prepared to take some risks. An emotionally stable and secure individual, he is capable of making and sustaining meaningful

interpersonal relationships. He can function independently, but at the same time is informed about resources available to him for almost any eventuality.

The characteristics of each post vary considerably in terms of housing; climate, linguistics, social and cultural barriers, etc. and are usually described quite fully in the post report. Of course there are specific problems particular to every post and often these are the ones which are more likely to impede an easy transition e.g. the difficulty of the Japanese language, the restrictions on women in Saudi Arabia.

THE ADJUSTMENT PROCESS

The adjustment process begins right from the moment one learns about a transfer. It is important to make this predeparture phase a preparative, educational one and to include one's family in it as much as possible. In order to ease future adjustment, to lessen culture shock, and to begin to form a support system, one should utilize the information and facilities provided by the Department e.g. the post report and related readings, security briefings, language lessons, etc. and seek out those individuals with recent first-hand experience in the designated country and perhaps those who are also being transferred there. It is wise to explore in advance the educational and extracurricular facilities as well as the remedial and other services available for one's children in order to maximize the potential and to facilitate overall adjustment.

It must be stressed that the first three or so months at a post often determine whether or not an assignment will be a success. This is a time of settling in, of high energy levels, of trial and error, and of meeting the individuals who eventually will become one's closest friends at that post. At the beginning of a posting, one is most open to new ideas and experiences, but also most vulnerable to adverse circumstances. How one copes and whom one meets at this time contribute greatly to one's personal satisfaction for the duration of the posting.

Similarly, when one is abroad and informed about an imminent cross-posting or a return to Ottawa, the predeparture phase is again a period for advance preparation. The formation or renewal of contacts will aid in the relocation process – and in the case of a transfer back to Canada, may help lessen the effects of a possible re-entry crisis.