

THE EXPAT LIFE

The Marital Strain Of a Life Abroad

By **ALAN PAUL**

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Moving to China was a mutual decision for my wife and me. In fact, it was my enthusiasm for Rebecca's potential opportunity that pushed us to do this. When the moving trucks pulled up -- and on days when Beijing is particularly polluted, befuddling or just plain difficult -- that shared responsibility has kept us from blaming each other. Several people warned us that we should both be fully on board before agreeing to make such a big move and after two and a half years here, I understand the wisdom in that advice.

A move abroad can strengthen a marriage if both partners are on the same page. We are about to celebrate our fifteenth anniversary during our third year in China. I believe that coming here shook us out of our routine, precluding any hint of the boredom that can infect any long-term relationship. Becoming expats has provided us an opportunity to share a long-running, intense, life-changing experience.

TALK WITH ALAN

When moving overseas -- or even across the country -- what's the best way to protect your relationship from strain and stress? Share your thoughts in an online forum.

Of course, the same forces can crack a fragile union, and many marriages hit the rocks on foreign assignments. It can be a time of great stress, major dislocation and morphing marital roles. Couples confront these issues while dealing with new resentments that can surface if both partners aren't equally enthusiastic about their new life. They often must do so while living in cultures that seem

to have a more benign attitude towards adultery than we generally do in America. If there are cracks in a relationship, the foundation can crumble under these new pressures.

"Being abroad shows people their 'naked' marriage without the web of family, long-time

friends and a known place in society around it," says Anouk Turksma, a clinical psychologist who recently relocated to her native Holland after two and a half years practicing in Beijing, where her patients included expats struggling with their marriages. "Back home their marriage was already bad, but now they see it more clearly because everything is shuffled. At the same time, the new situation creates added stress on top of an already not-great relationship."

One friend who has lived in Asia for decades has noticed much the same thing. He is a long-married Brit who has watched many couples founder after moving overseas.

"Some men go wild with prostitutes and girlfriends and things they wouldn't do back home but it's usually more boring -- couples just drift apart when they move overseas because the only things that held the marriage together were family bonds and daily routines," he says.

New stresses of becoming an expat can include extensive travel by one spouse -- frequently the man -- with extended absences forcing even more adjustments in the relationship. Often, one spouse leaves a good job on hold for the sake of their partner's career advancement. In the European Union and some other places it is virtually impossible for a non-sponsored spouse to work. All of this can be a breeding ground for resentment.

"When we lived in America, all of my friends were concerned about our marriage and my well-being because my husband traveled so much -- but here no one even notices, though he's gone considerably more," one friend told me. "It's taken for granted because it is so common."

More broadly, the new jobs tend to be extremely demanding, and the vagaries can have an unusually profound impact on the relationship. People are plucked out of their comfort zone at work and thrown into new, all-consuming positions; the job can take on a newly central role in an expat's psyche. People based here and working for home offices in the U.S. often have to adjust to 24-hour work cycles, as their bosses' work day gears up just as theirs should be winding down.

"I heard from several clients that their husbands were exhausted, which put a big strain on marriages." Ms. Turksma says.

Furthermore, some people move abroad and go a bit haywire, in light of the easy availability of prostitutes, the ability of Western men to draw young, attractive girlfriends and, some would say, a culture more open to infidelity. The same impulses and sense of freedom and adventure that lead some of us to form bands or buy motorcycles, send others reeling into darker corners.

I assumed that all these problems would more widely affect long-married couples, but Ms. Turksma told me that she saw many young, newly married childless couples who also hit the rails shortly after moving abroad.

"It was difficult for them to have lives of their own as they did at home," she says. "In Beijing, the pond was too small, they met the same people and did the same activities. Many of these relations ended rather quickly."

Hard facts and statistics about expat divorce rates are surprisingly hard to come by. This is no coincidence, says Mila Lazarova, a professor of International Business at Canada's Simon Fraser University who specializes in expatriate management.

"The less companies know, the better, so they never ask," says Dr. Lazarova. "I am not aware of anyone, not a company, not an academic, not a consultancy, having published such a statistic."

In an attempt to conduct my own informal survey, I sent out an email blindly addressed to about 25 friends and acquaintances, both men and women, asking if they'd be interested in talking on or off the record, anonymously or with attribution, about how their marriages have fared since they moved abroad. I received exactly one reply, from an American male.

"Are you nuts?" he asked. "I wouldn't touch this with a 10-foot pole."

Robin Pascoe, the author of *A Movable Marriage: Relocate Your Relationship Without Breaking It* and four other books on global living, laughed over the phone when I related this exchange. Ms. Pascoe lives in her native Vancouver Canada after 15 years living in Beijing and other places in Asia with her family. She bills herself as "the expat expert" and travels around the world speaking to expat groups. She says that while people are always happy to discuss "external" issues, like their children's schooling, driving mishaps and cultural clashes or epiphanies, they tend to clam up when it comes to more internal issues, especially marriage.

So, what can a couple preparing to move abroad do to avoid the pitfalls and maintain or even strengthen their relationship? Ms. Turksma suggests that good lines of communication, mutual respect and all the other things that form the bedrock of any strong marriage are even more important when living abroad. More specifically, she thinks it is very helpful to be as well prepared as possible. To that end, she urges couples to make a detailed "look-see" visit to check out housing, schools, health care and other things that will affect day-to-day life. She also says it is helpful for people to undergo a training session to prepare for the culture shock they are about to experience. The problem here, according to Dr. Lazarova, is that too few companies offer such cross-

cultural training and many who are invited to attend such events don't show up.

Ms. Pascoe suggests that each time a couple moves, no matter how much expat experience they have, they renegotiate and reassess their relationship based on five basic principles:

"Consultation -- spouses need to be stakeholders in the move, which means they need to be in the know and not kept in the dark about the process. Respect and support -- they are the basics of a solid relationship anywhere but vital in an expat one. Equality -- which just means you both count and must work as a team. Certainty -- that the spouse won't be left high and dry for someone in the office or a language instructor. And, finally, love -- I always remind women that they must love the guy. Why else would you throw your life upside down for him?"

The reason that people should heed such advice seems simple: "Adultery and fractured marriages are rampant in the expat world," says Ms. Pascoe.

The more I learned about this subject, the deeper my research got, the more creeped out I became. Am I naïve to not see danger lurking around every corner of every relationship? Then I learned that just 52% of couples married in America reach the 15th anniversary we will mark this month. It's a milestone worth marking no matter where you live. So my wife and I will go out and enjoy a fine Chinese feast to celebrate a decade and half of marriage and our mutual embrace of the expat life.

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Write to me and I'll post selected comments in a future column. Please let me know if you want to share your thoughts but don't want your letter published. Read comments by readers on my last column about a close friend I made overseas and the tragedy that followed.

Your last column was particularly touching to me, reminding me of how a single moment spent between two expats in a foreign land is the equivalent of hours spent on home turf.

I met one of my closest friends within a week or two of touching down in Tokyo. Little did I know that my life (and my entire Japanese experience) would be shaped and enhanced ten-fold by that new friendship. It is bond that spans any time zone or lack of proximity, and one I'll never forget.

Thanks for reminding me of the importance of these connections and maintaining them. I wish your friend, Tom, luck and sympathy as he struggles to claim his life back after such an enduring experience. He's lucky to have a friendship that will get him

through it.

-- Donald J. Cunningham

* * *

My family lost my sister two months after I returned from Shanghai in '99. I chose not to return to live closer to my mother. Thank you for the reminder that friendships made abroad while sometimes made out of convenience can also provide the needed strength and comfort to make it through difficult times.

-- Roy Wu

* * *

I guess I read your article through a different lens than most of your readers. I'm currently working on a book about female friendships and was struck by the depth of your friendship with Tom. Unfortunately, it's usually more of a female thing.

-- Irene S. Levine, PhD

Thanks. It is my experience that many, many men have close friendships. True, we may spend a night together discussing only sports and music, but that doesn't mean we aren't there for each other when the chips are down.

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In reference to Michael Dedieu's letter [written in response to a column on expat children missing home, despite all the privileges of being an expat], I teach "Intercultural Management" online seminars for a German school. There is truly no comparison between America and any other country. It is very possible to integrate into American society because there are no hard and fast rules of what "American" is -- foreigners are allowed to retain their foreignness -- that's an obvious part of what makes America "American." There is no America without its mix of cultures. Speaking the English language is only a small part of American culture -- it doesn't mean that one suddenly becomes a Mayflower clone.

Integrating into other countries isn't possible in this sense. I have lived in Germany for six years, have many German friends, speak German fairly fluently, live in a small German village, am subject to the same moral, societal, and legal rules that any true German is. However, I will never be accepted as German by the Germans. I can never lose my foreignness (and don't really care to). Only in America can someone become an American almost upon arrival.

In addition, I don't know anyone who completely immerses for any real length of time in

a foreign culture. To do that requires a complete denial of one's self and one's past. It isn't healthy or normal. Better to show a respect for the culture one is in, but respect also for one's own culture -- integrating the advantages of both, taking what is good from the foreign culture and being generous enough and authentic enough to also share what is good from one's own culture.

-- Rebecca Wber, Nürnberg, Germany

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ABOUT THE EXPAT LIFE

Follow the expat experiences of columnist Alan Paul and his family, who joined the growing ranks of Americans overseas when they moved from New Jersey to China for his wife's job. Alan writes about the challenges and rewards of moving across the globe and taking care of their three children in a different culture. As a senior editor at Guitar World for nearly 15 years, Alan has profiled musicians ranging from B.B. King to Metallica. The Pittsburgh native is also a senior writer at basketball magazine Slam.

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