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Adventures in International Living: The Imperative of Partnership

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The well-being of spousal and family relationships has been well-documented as having a key role in the success of international assignments. Couples who are able to foster a strong and fulfilling partnership are best able to meet the challenges of living and working abroad with resilience and a sense of optimism. This paper presents six stages of an international assignment and the difficulties and opportunities that are inherent in each stage for an expatriate couple. This paper also offers tools and exercises to enable a couple to powerfully design and fulfill the international life they wish to have as well as to take care of their emotional needs and those of their family members. These tools, drawn from the fields of positive psychology and couples coaching, help couples to have the important conversations necessary for them to create and sustain partnership at each stage of their journey. Such conversations are critical for any couple who embarks on an international adventure.

Introduction

In today's world, many people have the extraordinary opportunity to live interesting and exciting lives in countries other than their own. Many multi-national corporations, non-governmental organizations, foreign-service agencies and educational institutions are increasingly sending their employees to work and live internationally. Additionally, many employees who choose this path do so with their spouses and partners. Of the thousands of expatriates employed at the 118 international organizations surveyed in the most recent Brookfield Relocation Trends 2011 Survey Report, 68%, or just over two-thirds, were married (Brookfield, 2011).

The degree to which an expatriate couple experiences a sense of well-being on assignment in a foreign country impacts not only each person in the family, but also their

friends and colleagues. International organizations have a lot at stake in making sure that their expatriate employees are effective and satisfied and that the company's return on investment is substantial (Corporate Leadership Council, 2002). The importance of a successful adjustment for an expatriate's accompanying spouse and their children cannot be ignored: Spousal and family dissatisfaction is a significant factor in a couple's early return from an international assignment (Brookfield, 2011).

Accepting an international assignment together with one's spouse is not for the faint of heart. To choose an international assignment takes courage and a willingness to risk. Expatriate couples, though, usually consider such a bold choice to be a wonderful adventure that holds the promise of new and exotic experiences. For many couples, it comes as a great surprise when they find out that their adjustment to international living is a lot more difficult than they ever expected. Couples discover very quickly that, to be successful in moving one's family to a new country, one key ingredient must be present: Partnership.

Living in a country where the customs and norms are at first unfamiliar provides an expatriate couple with great learning opportunities not only to achieve a cross-cultural understanding of their host country, but also to develop a deeper appreciation for their humanity, no matter what the cultural differences are. Not only can living abroad foster the couple's increased understanding and acceptance of the people in their new culture, but it also offers them an unparalleled opportunity for personal growth and for building the inner resources necessary to confront the challenges that are unique to being expatriates.

Many expatriate couples are already very skilled and effective people. For them to face the daunting challenges of an international transition with resilience is vital to mastering the complexities of such a move. Sanchez, Spector, & Cooper (2004) suggest that expatriates confront "a double-edged challenge to their mental and physical health. The stressors affecting them are not only new and unfamiliar, but the coping resources that worked at home may not do so abroad." Couples can find it comforting to discover that the difficulties they do experience are a normal and natural part of adjusting to a new culture.

This paper provides an overview of six stages of an international assignment and the subsequent dilemmas that expatriate couples may experience at each stage. These stages include being offered an assignment and making the choice to go or not, preparing to move to a new country if the choice is 'yes,' adjusting to life in the new host country, being 'at home' for a period of time, preparing to leave and then finally making the move to return home or move to a new foreign land. Every couple that takes on an assignment will inherently find themselves moving through these stages of adjustment.

The importance of couples co-creating partnership over the entire life cycle of an international assignment is the focus of this paper. Each of these stages presents couples with its own unique challenges, dilemmas and difficulties. At each stage, there are

different skills and abilities that can enhance a couple's sense of connection and teamwork as they negotiate their path forward. This paper presents a compelling case that when couples have the tools they need to have the important conversations that are required to be successful on an international assignment, they will be able to meet each challenge with resilience and build the life they envision for themselves and their family.

In addition, this paper equips couples with exercises that can help them foster their resilience, build a sense of optimism and utilize their strengths during their time abroad and beyond. The best practices in the fields of positive psychology and couples coaching provide a plethora of information that couples can use to build a life of shared meaning, foster great relationships and fulfill their dreams for an exciting international adventure.

Stage 1: Making the Choice

Every couple who considers an international offer must embark on a process to arrive at their choice together. They must talk about the nature and duration of the assignment, the logistics of such a choice, the impact of moving internationally on the lives of their family members and the long-term ramifications of making such a commitment. The quality of this joint process is vitally important for a positive and successful outcome.

Considering the Choice

Once a couple receives an offer of an international assignment, they must evaluate the many aspects involved in making their choice. The couple must assess their motivation for exploring such an assignment and formulate their concerns. What is drawing the couple to consider an expatriate assignment at this point in their lives? Career advancement, financial gain and enhancing their life experience are all valid motivations for considering such an opportunity.

As they gather information, the couple should examine whether the assignment they are considering is a good match for them. It is important that the potential assignee understands the intention and description of the proposed position and considers whether he or she is qualified and the right candidate for the job. What health, financial or other concerns might place the candidate at risk for success in the assignment?

In addition, the couple must consider the scope of the assignment. They need to talk about the terms of the package that is being offered, including the relocation services, housing, educational programs for their children, tax services and family support. It is vital that they clarify all their questions and concerns before they consider choosing to move internationally.

Lastly, it is advisable that the couple considers their readiness and the readiness of their entire family in accepting an expatriate assignment. Together, they must talk about the needs of each other, their relationship, their children and, to some degree, their extended

family members. It is critical for the success of their international adventure that the couple engages in all of these activities as partners.

Making the Choice Together

The choice to accept or to decline an offer of an expatriate assignment is one of the most important discussions the couple can have. At this stage, the couple needs to be aware of what is important to them. What do they care about and what do they value? What is compelling about the assignment? What is the life they envision for themselves and for their family? Powerfully making the choice together requires a couple to fully consider all the 'pros' and 'cons' both for accepting the potential expatriate assignment and for declining the opportunity. When choosing to accept an assignment after such a deliberate process, the couple is better able to deal with all the logistical, financial and emotional aspects that are involved in the move itself.

When the couple is ready to make the choice, it is important that each person chooses individually. If both individuals choose 'yes' or choose 'no,' the couple will be in alignment. If one person chooses 'yes' and the other person chooses 'no,' the couple will not be in alignment and the couple should continue to discuss the offer until alignment between them is reached. Once a couple accepts an assignment, it is valuable for them to share what they see for their life in the future: Adventure, exploration, learning about other cultures, fun, travel, etc. The couple can share this vision with their children, their family and their friends and include many people in the future they are creating together. This first stage of an international assignment comes to an end when the couple chooses to accept an international move or not.

Making the Choice: What tools are helpful for couples at Stage 1?

1. **Tools for Sharing the Values of One's Partnership.** There are a number of very effective tools that can help couples to have conversations to explore what is important to them and what they envision for their relationship. A couple can approach making the choice together with confidence and honesty when they are anchored in their values and aspirations for the future. They can evaluate clearly how an international commitment both honors what is important to them as a couple and fulfills their vision of their partnership. Three specific tools that couples can use for conversing about the values for their partnership include:
 - a. Sharing a Peak Experience (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 1998). In this exercise, the couple has a conversation with each other about a special experience they have had together in the past. As they share with each other, the couple identifies three important shared values that were honored for them in that experience. They may want to be true to these values as they consider the opportunity of international living.

- b. **Creating a Values Statement (Harrold, 2001).** This exercise is adapted from Harrold (2001) who referred to this activity as creating a vision statement. In this exercise, each person answers four key questions and creates a paragraph that clearly states what is most important to them. This simple and poignant way of remembering one's top values is very practical in helping to make important life choices. This exercise can be completed both individually and with one's partner. Each person shares their most important values with their partner. The couple also shares with each other the values that are important in their relationship. Couples can use this activity to build a sense of shared meaning in their life together.
 - c. **Creating a Vision for your Partnership (Miser, 2007).** Couples can create a collage of pictures, taken from magazines or personal photos, that represents what is important for their relationship, what they are committed to and what they love doing together.
- 2. A Tool for Challenging Assumptions.** Couples who are considering an expatriate assignment may start to become aware of all kinds of assumptions they have about themselves and their relationship. There are tools to help individuals and couples to acknowledge and then challenge any disempowering assumptions they have about what is possible for them. The challenging assumptions exercise (Katie, 2002) is an example of such a tool.
- a. **Challenging Assumptions Exercise (Katie, 2002).** In this exercise, a couple first identifies a specific area of their life that is not working and where they are committed to having a breakthrough (e.g., household tasks, their monthly budget, or spending more time together). The purpose of this exercise is for the couple to identify any disempowering assumptions that are holding their reality in place, to challenge the truth of their assumptions, to imagine their lives without those assumptions and then take a new stand together for that area of their lives.
- 3. Tools for Considering and Making the Choice.** Couples must first consider all the aspects of an international move in the important domains of their life and look how such a move will impact those areas both for themselves and their relationship. After the couple has gathered all the information they need and has considered all the aspects of their potential international move, the process involved in making their choice is very important.
- a. **Using The Wheel of Life (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 1998).** Using this tool, a couple can look into the life domains that are important to them, such as career, health, social life, spiritual practice etc. and ask questions as to how a move would affect their lives in each domain. Considering their life in such a holistic manner helps a couple in making an informed choice.

- b. Making a Banana List (Miser, 2007). This tool is very effective in supporting a couple in having a powerful conversation for making the choice to accept an offer of an international assignment or not. Using this tool, the couple writes down all the pros and cons of both accepting the offer of an international assignment as well as the pros and cons of not accepting the offer. The couple must be aware of the importance of communicating everything that needs to be said – all concerns, considerations, practical issues, hopes, fears, desires, worries, etc. Once all the pros and cons of each scenario are considered and communicated, the couple then makes the choice to accept or not accept the international offer both individually and together.

Stage 2: Preparing to Launch

Once the couple has chosen to accept the opportunity to live and work abroad, their life begins to shift in unpredictable and dramatic ways. Their fateful choice opens up a whole new world of issues to think about, logistical matters to plan and a myriad of actions to take. Preparing to move to a new country involves coordinated planning, focused problem solving, committed action and a great deal of fortitude. The reality of preparing to uproot one's family to travel to a new land is marked with a host of mixed emotions for every person in the family as well as for their friends and other people in their lives.

Taking Care of the Logistics

The period before the couple actually moves internationally is a time that is vital for the couple to work as a team. Activity in this stage requires fact-finding, brainstorming, planning, communicating with other family members and making important decisions. Couples may need to shift roles and responsibilities within their marriage and develop new ways to work together to accomplish all that needs to be done. These logistical aspects might include selling their home, selling their cars, putting some possessions into storage, arranging for moving their belongings and themselves to their new country, finding a place to live and learning about their new host country.

At this time, the new expatriate employee considers his or her preparation for the new job, its scope of responsibilities, its international tax ramifications and its package of benefits. Learning about the cultural climate and the cultural norms at one's new workplace can be an important focus for the new expatriate employee.

One concern during this period of intense planning is that couples may make the mistake of burying their emotions and may avoid talking about the impact their choice is having on all the members of the family. They must remember to take care of their emotional needs before their feelings overwhelm them.

Attending to Emotional Needs

The couple must not only prepare for the life they will be creating together in their new country, but also let go of the life they have enjoyed together. This latter process of grieving and being complete with life as it has been is integral to preparing their whole family for making a successful transition.

During this phase, the couple is dealing with a lot of uncertainties and ‘unknowables.’ This is a time that could be described as an emotional rollercoaster. Everyone in the family is experiencing different emotions associated with completion, letting go, and preparing to launch. Members of the family may have some very unrealistic expectations about how everything will be taken care of, how smoothly everything will go or what this choice to move internationally may mean for their lives.

Couples can stay in communication around their aligned vision of the future to offset the stresses that will accompany such a big transition. They can anchor themselves in their values and their vision while attending to both the logistics of their relocation and the emotional concerns of each family member.

Parents need to include their children as they prepare to be uprooted and transplanted to a new country. Children can be involved in the logistics of the move as much as they are able, given their age and maturity. Allowing children to express their thoughts and feelings concerning the move is very important. A positive attitude generated by the parents will help to ameliorate their children’s fears about the future and their grieving over the loss of their familiar life. A good way to ritualize the change is by having good-bye parties and inviting their friends to participate.

The couple who attends to the emotional needs of the family, listens to and validates their children’s concerns and helps their children to express their feelings will likely have greater success in preparing for their whole family for the international adventure. This second stage comes to an end when the couple and their family leave home, get on an airplane and launch themselves into their new life in a foreign country.

Preparing to Launch: What tools are helpful for couples at Stage 2?

- 1. A Tool for Creating a Vision of the Future.** As a couple is preparing to move, it can be valuable for them to have conversations to envision the life they want to create in their new country. It is beneficial for couples to hold a clear vision of where they are going to live, what they are going to do and what they want to have in their lives once they have moved to their destination. Such a detailed vision can be periodically revisited to boost the couple’s optimism and enthusiasm in taking care of all that needs to be done. This vision helps a couple to jointly hold their view of the future and express their alignment around what they desire and intend to create.

- a. Using The Merlin Principle (Miser, 2007). In this exercise, couples imagine the future irrespective of time. They spend about 20 minutes sharing the images they see in such areas as their home, family, friends, community, work, recreation and health. After envisioning and sharing their future with each other, a couple can align on a timeframe for what they have just envisioned. That timeframe could be two, three or as many as five years. Working from that future (say, 3 years out), the couple then can have a conversation about possible accomplishments and actions they will commit to on the path to their future.
- 2. A Tool for Creating Projects.** Creating projects are distinct from the normal daily routine of life. Couples can design specific projects to bring their desired future into existence. Within the structure of a project, a couple learns to cooperate in planning, in taking coordinated action and in taking stock of what they have accomplished along the way. During the time that a couple is preparing to launch themselves internationally, co-creating projects can be a very effective way of working together in getting things done.
- a. Creating Partnership Projects (Miser, 2007). Partnership projects can be created in any area of life, such as selling one's home, packing up the house, and/or planning a family vacation. Projects are designed to be time-limited and have a specific measurable result. It is important that throughout the life of their project(s), couples meet periodically so they can continually assess the success of their actions, plan the next steps in their project and be in alignment with each other on a regular basis.
- 3. Tools for Using One's Unique Strengths and Talents.** Knowing and using one's character strengths, alone and/or in combination with the strengths of one's partner, can be very helpful in tackling all the practical tasks that need attending to before moving abroad. Divvying up the needed preparatory work to match what one naturally does best makes the move easier and more pleasant for everyone.
- a. Using the Values in Action (VIA) Inventory (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Couples can effectively use their character strengths to foster partnership in planning and executing activities involved in getting ready to move. Couples are able to discover their top strengths by taking the Values in Action (VIA) inventory. This inventory can be found at www.AuthenticHappiness.org. With an awareness of their top five unique strengths, each partner can utilize their talents in dealing with both the logistics of the move and with caring for their family members.
 - b. Creating a Strengths Family Tree (Kaufman, 2006). At home, a couple can involve their whole family by creating a family tree and noting everyone's strengths on the tree. This is a great way for the family to engage in story telling and sharing anecdotes about the family times that have been important to them.

- 4. A Tool for Building Resilience.** The practice of building resilience helps a couple to navigate through all the tasks that need to be done and to relax from the emotional overwhelm that is so common when planning such a move. Dealing with the extensive paperwork that accompanies an international move, de-cluttering one's home, while at the same time buying what is needed for the move can be better accomplished when the couple takes time to meditate and regulate their emotion.
- a. Engaging in Calming and Focusing (Meditation). Through meditative practices, individuals can calm their emotions and gain deeper focus for the tasks at hand when intrusive thoughts clutter their mind. Couples can engage in controlled breathing, progressive muscle relaxation and meditation together. Taking care of one's mental and emotional health is one of the most important commitments that couples can make for their relationship. A couple that meditates together is better able to foster a grounded and profound connection with each other.

Stage 3: Adjusting to a New Country

This stage effectively begins when the couple and their family arrive with all their belongings in their new foreign country. This is a time of novelty, tempered excitement and significant change in daily life. Couples can experience that sense of both awe and bewilderment that Dorothy from the of Wizard Oz experienced when she walked out the door of her home after the tornado struck and exclaimed, "Toto, we are not in Kansas anymore!"

It is in this stage that couples begin to confront the reality of what they have chosen and to deal with the consequences of their choice. During the early months, it is particularly important for couples to stay connected, adjust their roles and responsibilities, focus on short-term goals and work together to solve the problems that come with adjusting to their new life.

This can be a time of wonderment and inquiry on the one hand and doubt and insecurity on the other. At the beginning of this stage, expatriates may feel euphoric, similar to being on a honeymoon or a great vacation. It is also quite common that they may also experience many less positive feelings in response to the overwhelming changes involved with their international move.

Other important life transitions in an expatriate's life may also be occurring at the same time as they are learning to adjust to their new culture. Childbirth, children's difficulties, older children leaving home, aging parents, changes in educational or employment status, and long-standing relationship issues may play a role in experienced stress levels. Everyone has packed up and brought along their 'unfinished business.' Since this new life calls for new ways of interacting with one's self, one's spouse and other people, this 'unfinished business' can call loudly for attention.

Dealing with the Phases of Cultural Adaptation

There is a natural and normal process of cultural adaptation that many people experience when they move to a new country. This process of cultural adaptation can be seen in phases of adjustment over the first year and a half to two years. It is important to note that not all people experience the phases of cultural adjustment the same way or necessarily in the same order. If members within the family are in different stages, this can result in dissonance, bewilderment and a misunderstanding among family members. When both partners develop an understanding that they are in a process of cultural adaptation, they are better able to express compassion for what their spouse may be experiencing.

When couples step onto the soil of their new country, they will begin a transformation of their cultural identity. In the beginning, they can feel as outsiders 'looking in,' observing how other people of another culture live. It can take time before they experience being at home in their new surroundings. Often, new expatriate couples may ask themselves, "Where are we and what have we gotten ourselves into?"

Traditionally, the phases of cultural adaptation have been explained as a cycle in which expatriates first experience a honeymoon period, followed by a period in which they can be critical of their host culture. With time, a new expatriate can eventually have a sense of belonging and greater fulfillment in their new culture.

In the beginning, couples can find themselves enjoying the cultural gifts of their new country. But honeymoons and vacations do not last forever. Eventually, one longs for the comforts of one's past lifestyle. As expatriates adjust to their new home, it is normal for them to compare life in their new country with life back home, forming judgments about both cultures. Expatriates may feel overwhelmed by the cultural differences they experience and develop a disdain for some aspects of the new culture. Family members may also begin to have increased difficulty in coping with the daily stresses of adjusting to their new life and experience a range of emotional and physical symptoms, such as increased feelings of sadness and/or anxiety, boredom, irritability, homesickness or disruptions in sleep patterns. Withdrawal may be a result.

Expatriates can feel at this time that they are missing out on what they had thought their international experience would be. Even as they become comfortable with daily life, they may hold onto prejudice and personal judgments that can result in bitterness and a sour attitude. Letting go of disempowering judgments, cultivating new viewpoints and bringing a sense of curiosity to one's encounters with other people can go a long way toward having the newly transplanted expatriates feel at home.

Coping with Specific Cross-cultural Challenges

As soon as couples arrive, they must begin to deal with the realities of being in a foreign country. The following are some of the specific challenges that couples may face (Copeland, 2009).

- *Loss of a sense of belonging.* Living in another country shifts one's status to that of being a minority member of that host country. This loss of majority status can leave the expatriate with a sense of disconnection, of feeling different, and of being unknown.
- *Loss of the ability to communicate.* Moving to a new country that requires the expatriate and their family to learn a new language can be one of the most challenging dilemmas of international living. In almost every exchange or interaction with another person an expatriate can feel embarrassed, ineffective, and misunderstood.
- *Loss of one's support system.* Leaving family, friends and long-time work associates to take on a new assignment can be a major concern for an expatriate and their family. Feeling alone, disconnected and sad can be a natural part of an international adjustment.
- *Changes in family functioning.* Changes in work and household responsibilities, in parental roles, in daily schedules and in new cultural norms and expectations can all have an impact on the health and well-being of the family. Living with a sense of uncertainty and a loss of security is common for expatriate families.
- *Stress in doing practical tasks.* Another much more practical dilemma for expatriates is waking up each morning to realize that, in almost every situation, there will be things to learn anew. It may take months before a newcomer feels confident in negotiating all the practical tasks that must be mastered in a new country.
- *Stress of being misperceived.* Expatriates may feel they are being perceived in culturally stereotyped ways. This can lead to feelings of being misunderstood and, over time, to feelings of bitterness and resentment.
- *Loss of understanding of social norms.* Social norms give people who live in a given culture clarity around how to behave and what to do in many situations. In the first months of living in a new country, expatriates must cope with not knowing what to do, what to expect or how to behave in such circumstances such as being on time, greeting people, giving gifts and dining with others.

- *Challenges to one's cultural values.* Expatriates confront challenges to important cultural values that are at the foundation of who they consider themselves to be. Dealing with challenges to one's own cultural values can leave an expatriate feeling unsettled, unsupported and judgmental.
- *Loss of Identity.* All the familiar guideposts that give a person their sense of self can undergo a radical change. This dilemma requires the expatriate to stay anchored in those personal values that are important to them.

During this stage of adjusting to a new country, it is important that partners connect with their local community, including other expatriates from their home country. They can explore a range of opportunities such as volunteer work, fitness centers and educational programs. Reaching out to connect with the wider community can be key for expatriate couples to develop a sense of belonging. Also, although they may be a long way from home, staying connected to family, friends and other networks of support is critical to maintaining a sense of balance and connection in this time of emotional turbulence.

Adjusting to a New Country: What tools are helpful for couples at Stage 3?

- 1. Tools for Promoting Completion.** Partners in transition must attend to what they are leaving behind as they arrive in their new country (Bridges, 2004). Because leaving home can be sad and difficult, many people tend to rush to 'just get it over with.' By honoring one's bittersweet feelings, couples can better transition into the next stage of adjustment as they say good-bye to the everyday routines, pleasures and activities that have been a very real part of their lives.
 - a. **Practicing Radical Acceptance.** Acceptance of all emotions without judgment, called radical acceptance, can quickly have expatriates observe themselves from a healthy distance. With this awareness, a person realizes that emotions come and go and that they do not have to be stuck in any emotional state. This recognition leaves a person in a condition of choice where they can deal powerfully with what they are feeling and with what is going on in their lives.
 - b. **Using the One Door Closes, Another Door Opens Exercise** (Kaufman, 2006). This exercise is an excellent tool for increasing optimism and hope. When couples participate in this exercise as a ritual, the completion stage of their transition can be honored. This tool is also a great way for couples to explore together what their 'new beginning' could consist of.
- 2. Tools for Shifting Perspectives.** The ability to recognize a disempowering point of view and be able to create a new and empowering perspective is a skill that is vitally important when adjusting to life in a new country. There are many tools available for couples to use to hone this ability. One such tool has already been mentioned previously, Challenging Assumptions Exercise (Katie, 2002). Two additional tools are offered here.

- a. Learning your ABC's Exercise (Seligman, 2002). This is a powerful exercise that helps couples build resilience and increase self-efficacy, which is the belief that one can effectively solve problems as they arise. This tool can be used both individually and in partnership with one's spouse. In this exercise, couples gain insight by disentangling their beliefs about a difficult situation and by distinguishing what actually happened from the beliefs they have about the circumstances. This process helps to give the couple enough distance to begin to think more clearly about what is going on in the situation. The Learning Your ABC's exercise is built on the simple realization that our emotions and behaviors are triggered not by events themselves but by how we interpret those events. This exercise helps a couple to clarify a problem, reconnect with restored energy and vitality and move forward with increased effectiveness.

- b. Detecting Iceberg Beliefs (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). Exploring deeply held beliefs assists a couple in clarifying their values, seeing fundamental views about oneself and others and understanding confusing personal behaviors where an emotional reaction is mismatched to a particular situation. Iceberg beliefs are beliefs that support a particular fixed mind set or prejudiced view about what one should do in a particular situation. Strongly held iceberg beliefs can create tension and riffs in a couple's relationship. A way that a couple can detect such beliefs is to complete the Learning your ABC's exercise mentioned above and then check whether their beliefs are out of proportion to what is actually happening. Once an underlying iceberg belief is detected, couples can shift their disempowering beliefs to new perspectives that allow them to experience peace in their relationship and greater flexibility in 'how things are done' in their adopted culture.

Stage 4: Being on the Ground in a New Country

By the end of the first year, many couples have begun to settle into life in their new country (Copeland, 2009). The next few years of their expatriate assignment will be a continuous accommodation to and integration of their new culture. By this time, the couple has been able to establish new roles and routines, make new friends and begin to have a practical sense of what life will be like over the course of the next few years. Couples can feel their feet 'on the ground.' This kind of grounding allows them to begin to plan and participate more fully in the gifts that have been presented to them by relocating to their new country. Their horizons broaden as they think about sightseeing, traveling, going on family vacations, completing home projects, volunteering and/or participating in new social communities. This is a time when successful expatriates can feel 'at home' in a foreign country.

Being at Home in One's New Country

When the couple starts to feel at home in their new country, it is time for them to start living the life they envisioned when they first made the choice to move. At the one-year point, an expatriate couple can benefit from stepping back and taking a longer view of the future. What do they see for themselves three to five years down the road? What kind of work or activities will they each be engaged in? What will their children be doing? The couple may find themselves engaged in answering the question: What is the life we are going to create here?

For the couple, it may be advantageous to take a new look at their values and what is important for them. Now is the opportunity to create what they wanted in the first place, as they realize their dream of living in a foreign country. It might be time to return to that vision they created together before they moved.

Participating in One's New Country

After the initial adjustment period, couples are often better able to focus on creating fulfilling and meaningful activities that can include socializing, traveling, sightseeing, learning a new language, creating a business or engaging in a new hobby. At this time, an expatriate couple is able to assess local opportunities and create plans to enjoy the life they have together. All plans can be transformed into partnership projects to fulfill on their intentions for their international adventure.

This is also a time when expatriate couples have more time to reflect and share with each other about their individual and shared experiences. The couple can gain insight and awareness of themselves through inquiry, self-reflection and shared learning. They can begin to take notice of the life lessons they are learning in participating fully in their new host country.

Being on the Ground in a New Country: What tools are helpful for couples at Stage 4?

- 1. A Tool for Creating Purpose and Meaning.** One of the best ways to adapt to a new country is to connect with other expatriates or with host nationals in meaningful ways. Meeting new people can foster a sense of relationship and belonging. Partners can explore common interests and find ways to contribute their time or their unique gifts.
 - a. **Contributing The Gift of Time or Positive Service** (Seligman, 2002). Couples can give the gift of service by contributing their time and energy, such as mentoring a child, volunteering together at a school or engaging in some community project. Serving in a capacity that calls on one's gifts and strengths and contributing in ways that expands the sense of one's self are excellent ways for couples to share a sense of purpose and meaning. Such meaningful activity can help the expatriate

and accompanying spouse get out into the community to foster that important sense of belonging to their new international community.

2. **Tools for Enhancing Positive Emotion.** The ability to engage pleasurable experiences to enhance one's positive feelings is vital to expanding one's enjoyment of life (Kaufman, 2006).
 - a. **Savoring a Beautiful Day** (Kaufman, 2006). Creating a special day with one's partner and then savoring the experience by reminiscing about all that took place is a great way for couples to connect powerfully and intimately. It is a wonderful way that couples on international assignment can get and stay in touch with what is special for them about being together 'right here right now' in their new culture.
 - b. **Sharing Three Daily Blessings** (Kaufman, 2006). The purpose of this practice for individuals and couples is to stop what they are doing during the day and take notice of the goodness that surrounds them (Peterson, 2006). Couples and, for that matter, their whole family can write in their personal journals three good things that happened to each person or that they simply noticed during the day. Each person in the family can explore their part in making that 'good thing' happen. The family can share together their blessings and what they are thankful for.

Stage 5: Completing Expatriation

Most international assignments are time-limited and come to an eventual end. The end of an international assignment requires that couples once again prepare themselves and their family for major changes in their life. While many expatriates come home to their country of origin, others move to a new country. Either way, the couple must prepare once again to uproot their families and move on. This preparation involves coordinated planning, teamwork and committed action. Completing their international experience can again be bittersweet, saying goodbye to international friends, while at the same time, anticipating their return home to their family and friends.

Taking care of the Logistics and Attending to Emotional Needs Once Again

The couple must focus their attention, once again, on creating an aligned vision for their future as they consider all the challenges they will face preparing for their move home or to another country. The couple must plan and create a multitude of projects that involve not only handling the logistics of the repatriation, but also helping their family members cope with all the emotional issues associated with repatriation. Again, the couple is not only preparing for returning home, but also for what they will be leaving behind. The couple has come full circle as they look forward to their journey back home or to their next expatriate destination.

Couples, though, may not know how much they have changed as a result of their experience while on their international assignment. As they reflect on their extraordinary adventure, a couple is able to integrate their expatriate experience into their lives. There may again be a shifting of roles and responsibilities within the family. It is important that the couple is in constant communication with each other around such changes in family functioning, how family members are adjusting to moving again and all the logistics that must be attended to. This stage of completing expatriation comes to an end when the couple with their family gets on that airplane for the final time and flies home to begin a new adventure.

Completing Expatriation: What tools are helpful for couples at Stage 5?

- 1. A Tool for Creating a Vision of the Future.** As the couple is preparing to move back home, they return to having conversations together to envision the life they want to create in their home country. They can use the Merlin Principle Exercise (Miser, 2007) or together create a vision board described in the next section.
 - a. **Creating a Vision Board.** A vision board is a collage of pictures and photos that represent the couples' hopes, goals and dreams for the future. A couple can create a vision board to express concrete images of how they envision their life once they are back in their home country. Tools for creating a vision board can specifically be found on the website: <http://www.visionboardsite.com>.

- 2. Tools for Promoting Completion.** Tools for completion allow expatriates to grieve the loss of their time in their foreign country, to let go of regrets and anything that might be incomplete, to integrate the lessons learned into their lives and to appreciate the extraordinary adventure they have been on. There are specific activities that can be very powerful in this regard. The exercise, One Door Opens, Another Door Closes, that has already been mentioned is an excellent activity at this stage. Other tools are described in the next section.
 - a. **Completing The Bucket List.** In the months before the couple actually leaves their host country to go home, they can make a list of all the sights and places they want to visit, all the people they want to see and all the activities they want to do before they pack up and go home. This activity is adapted from the movie, *The Bucket List* (2007).
 - b. **Engaging in a Completion Exercise.** The purpose of such an exercise is for the couple to have a conversation(s) for being complete with life as it has been in their host country and to recognize the opportunity that is just ahead.

- 3. Tools for Expressing Appreciation.** Last but not least, in this phase of preparation, couples can see how appreciating all the wonderful things in their lives can go a long way toward strengthening and stabilizing their relationship as they prepare to go home. The couple can express appreciation through recognizing and acknowledging

the gifts of each person and the gifts of the relationship. What a couple appreciates in themselves and in each other, appreciates in value (Twist, 2003).

- a. Keeping and Sharing a Gratitude Journal (Kaufman, 2006). At the end of each day, both partners can write or verbalize three good things that happened each day in a gratitude journal. It is important in this exercise that the couple also highlights what role each person played in making these good things happen. The focus of the couple's conversation can be on recognizing and appreciating all the tasks and activities that have been accomplished that day or that week. The emphasis might also be on all the tasks that are getting done that are associated with preparing to move home. Such expressions of gratitude and appreciation build both positive emotion for the couple and a connection that inspires teamwork. There is 'oomph' and a renewed energy to accomplish more. For each person, being appreciated helps to counter feelings of anxiety, sadness and overwhelm that one may be experiencing at this time.
- b. Writing a Gratitude Letter (Kaufman, 2006). Individuals can write a letter of gratitude to each other, expressing appreciation and thanks for shared memories and expatriate experiences, even the difficult ones. A variation of this activity is for an individual, or even the couple together, to write a gratitude letter to someone who has been helpful in their expatriate experience.

Stage 6. Adjusting to Moving on or Coming Home

Arrival home or in a brand new country has its unique challenges. Often an unanticipated impact that returning expatriates may experience is the realization that they have changed in ways their family and friends are not aware of. It can take some time for a couple to integrate their international experience into the lives. Over time, their international adventure can become a vague memory, while at the same time, unexpectedly transformative in the way in which they each view themselves as citizens who now belong to the world. When couples that have repatriated meet other people who have lived and worked internationally, they often report a familiar sense of being known.

Dealing with the Challenges of Repatriation

There are new challenges that expatriates may deal with when they return home (Copeland, 2009; Miser and Sjodin-Bunse, 2010):

- *People are not interested in finding out about expatriate life.* Many friends and family members are unable to fully appreciate what it was like for the expatriate and their family to live in a foreign country. This experience can leave returning expatriates with the sense that their own homeland is foreign to them.

- *Being a stranger in a familiar land.* Expatriates' view of the world and their place in it changes. The journey of integrating their international experience into their new lives can be much more difficult and last much longer than returning expatriates initially expect. Being home again can feel both 'familiar' and 'strange' at the same time.
- *International expertise is not recognized upon returning home.* Many expatriates experience that their new level of international expertise goes completely unrecognized by other people and by colleagues at work. When their international knowledge is not put to good use or appreciated by one's employer and co-workers, a repatriate can feel undervalued and frustrated.

Adjusting to Being at Home Again

The couple who is back from assignment may experience that being back home does not feel like home at all. Much has changed in the years they have been away in ways they have not yet become aware of. Their identities have expanded to include an experience of themselves in another culture. Their experience of culture is now relative; they are multicultural.

Returning expatriates benefit from taking the time to reflect on how they grew and developed emotionally, socially and culturally during their expatriate assignment. They have an opportunity to share with others about key international experiences that has helped shaped their lives.

It is also a time to gain perspective on what has come to a close in their life and what is opening up at the same time and share their insights with others. Couples and their family members have an opportunity to have conversations about the future they are now creating for themselves, to talk about what they need and what they want to do. They can create concrete projects and plans to take action in building their new life after their expatriate assignment has come to a close. Their international adventure is ending, but their experience abroad will shape their lives for years to come.

Adjusting to Moving on or Coming Home: What tools are helpful for couples at Stage 6?

- 1. A Tool for Creating Legacy.** Individuals and couples can use this tool to talk about their life as they would both like it to be and how they would like to be remembered by the people they know abroad. It is also an opportunity for them to share their accomplishments, their experiences, their international travels and their international friends, in short, their legacy with each other.
 - a. Writing One's Own Legacy (Peterson, 2002).** Couples can engage in this activity both individually and in partnership. This exercise is particularly helpful at this time when the couple may be wondering what they want to do with the rest of

their life. It can be invaluable in assisting a returning expatriate couple to reorient themselves to life in their home country.

Conclusion

Couples who choose international living are courageous and bold. This paper has presented the case that couples that are able to create a sense of partnership throughout the lifecycle of their international assignment will meet each challenge they encounter with greater resilience and optimism. Moving themselves and their entire family overseas and back again will test the very metal of their relationship. Those couples who can have the necessary conversations to meet those challenges head-on and with resolve increase the likelihood of success. This paper has offered tools and exercises from the fields of positive psychology and couples coaching that are specifically designed to assist couples in having those important conversations.

A fulfilling international experience for an expatriate couple and their family has important ramifications for the bottom-line of any organization that is investing in their employees internationally (McCaughey and Bruning, 2005). The costs associated with failed international assignments are staggering (McNulty, 2001). What is more, year after year, when the Brookfield Global Relocation Services publishes its annual relocation trends survey, the findings suggest that spousal and family unhappiness is a major factor in such failures (Brookfield, 2011). In the field of international relocation, one can only wonder why more attention has not been given to supporting couples directly. Miser and Miser (2009) have made the argument that international companies could greatly benefit by offering couples coaching as a vital service to all expatriate couples while they are on an international assignment.

Miser and Sjodin-Bunse (2010) discuss the unique role that professional coaching can have in providing expatriates a forum where they can learn to understand the dilemmas unique to international living and deal with them effectively. A professional coach can assist couples, when they are confronted by a challenge in their new culture, to shift from a state of disempowerment, i.e., being disconnected, judgmental and reactive, to a state of empowerment, or being connected, resilient and creative. A coach can help international couples master many of the conversations, tools and exercises presented in this paper.

These tools and exercises are designed to enable couples to be in conversation with each other and to experience the joy of partnership while on their international adventure. Making the choice jointly, honoring one's values, creating a vision for the future, creating projects and using each other's strengths effectively are powerful conversations that a couple can have for manifesting a fulfilling partnership. Shifting disempowering perspectives, learning to calm oneself and regulate emotions, being complete with transitions as they occur, finding purpose and meaning while being thankful and appreciative of each other are important ways a couple can pay attention to the quality of

their partnership as well as to the emotional needs of their family. Such conversations are imperative for any couple who dares to choose an international adventure.

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