

# Predeparture Counseling of the Expatriate

## Traveler Summary

### Introduction

Expatriation can be a stressful process that can adversely affect the entire family. Failure rates due to psychiatric evacuations and early curtailments of tours can be expensive for employers and stressful for the employee and family.

In the family's decision-making process, it is important to focus on expatriation well ahead of time. The decision to take an overseas tour should be a mutual one and, in some instances, not going may be the wiser choice. An unaccompanied tour, in which the employee lives overseas and the partner stays at home, is one option. Some couples can carry out this solution successfully. However, it is a solution that can strain or even break a relationship and should be undertaken only with considerable caution and discussion.

Predeparture counseling sessions are extremely helpful and should be undertaken before there is a firm commitment to travel and 2-4 months before the departure date.

Potential expatriates should be aware that serious problems do occur while overseas; not every country has the facilities or providers to handle health problems; and expatriation can be stressful and may not be in every traveler's or family's best interests.

### Culture Shock

The considerable stress of an international relocation is most notable in the first 6-12 months after arrival. During this time, virtually all expatriates will go through the adjustment reaction to the overseas move commonly called culture shock. As with every life transition, culture shock combines elements of the grief reaction as people react to the loss of what was left behind, the stress of dealing with the new situation, and the loss of one's sense of active mastery of his or her environment.

Symptoms of culture shock include variations in sleep, appetite, weight, mood, energy (generally decreased), ability to concentrate, libido, and self-esteem (generally decreased).

Some expatriates will experience a stage of hostility to host country nationals and their culture. This aspect can involve frustration over driving habits, personal hygiene, sense of time, or work ethic.

Adapting to the inherent dangers and threats (e.g., crime and driving) in a new environment may initially seem quite threatening.

Culture shock should be over within a year's time. If it is not, some other difficulty may be present.

Children may experience different symptoms depending upon their age. An important factor with children of any age is the emotional stability of the parents. Significant reactions to the overseas move by the parents will be unsettling to the entire family.

Preschool children can exhibit regressive behaviors, such as clinging or bed wetting or soiling in a previously toilet-trained child. Parents should remember that such behavior is the child's way of expressing distress, not a willful attempt to be difficult. Patience is paramount, if sometimes difficult to maintain, but the condition will usually pass fairly quickly. Re-establishing familiar routines, such as naps, meal schedules, bedtime routines (reading stories, etc.), and maintaining access to favorite toys will help.

School-aged children may have transient academic difficulty, experience separation anxiety or "school phobia," or become disruptive at home and in school. They can also have an increase in physical complaints and express desires to return to their old home. Again, it is important to remember that these behaviors are expressions of distress that a child may not have the capacity to express verbally. Re-establishing routines is helpful and reassuring. Steps to help the child adapt include encouraging the child to talk about the changes he or she is experiencing and how he or she feels about it, not being punitive while setting necessary limits, and being patient.

Adolescents may exhibit acting-out behaviors including abuse of drugs or alcohol, increased sexual activity, or problems with academic performance, in addition to the signs and symptoms experienced by adults. Because adolescents have greater verbal abilities, encouraging them to talk about the changes and their feelings is a particularly important tool to speed

adaptation without serious problems. Patience is important, although a parent should never avoid setting appropriate limits to behavior or being frank about the consequences of acting out.

Families should foster an atmosphere at home that allows all members to express their feelings about the move. Doing so puts the distress and symptoms into a more benign light and allows further positive steps. These include regular exercise, stress-relief exercises, and avoidance of self-medication with alcohol, nicotine, or caffeine. Making positive efforts to learn about the culture and language of the host country and the practical details of how to travel and purchase needed goods and services will ease the adaptation process.

Some sponsoring entities may offer telephone counseling services for expatriate families, staffed by providers experienced in expatriation matters.

## Psychosocial Factors

Psychosocial factors likely to increase the difficulty of adjustment include 2-career families in which one partner cannot pursue his or her career while overseas. The transition from career pursuit to the pursuit of hobbies or management of children and household can result in considerable anger and resentment. In some cultures, there are also profound role changes for women that can add to the difficulty of adjustment.

Family life-cycle factors likely to cause trouble include moving teenagers during their last few years of high school and dealing with the emotional stress of leaving aging or ill parents in the home country. Another life-cycle factor is the "empty nest" syndrome if an overseas move leaves the last child behind on his or her own for the first time.

The best way to deal with these issues is to recognize well ahead of time which ones will pose problems. Family members should explore their feelings about the changes that will occur, anticipate their likely reactions, and take steps to mitigate them. In some instances, a family may decide that the timing is simply not right for an overseas move. In any event, the decision to go or not is best made a family concern for all to consider and discuss.

## Schooling

Another area sometimes overlooked is schooling of children overseas. International schools vary widely in their ability and willingness to handle children with special educational needs. Children with emotional or learning disorders may arrive only to find that the language-appropriate school in the host country will not accept them. One procedure is to have parents send relevant school reports and descriptions of special needs well ahead of time to the school they anticipate using. The objective is to secure a written commitment to accept on the school's part.

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