

Keeping the ro

BY DEBORAH VALENTINE



Anyone who has lived in a community of expatriate couples has witnessed it: the couples who thrive and those who do not in their new location and new lives. There is no “magic formula” for why this is the case, and each couple is as unique as the individuals involved in the relationship. So how can one find the missing key to ensuring the relationship is not undermined or overly tested by the challenges of taking it to a new setting?

According to Angelika Matthias, an EFT (Emotional Focussed Therapy) practitioner, it is about finding a way of communicating which is respectful, loving and allows each individual in the relationship to be “heard.” On the surface, this seems fairly obvious, clear, and even “easy,” yet Angelika points out “accessing each other’s emotional language is in fact much like learning a new language.” It requires a reprogramming of the brain to find words which allow each to express the emotion which is triggered by a certain situation, versus focussing on the actual “thing” that may have happened.

ACCESS CSN

The ACCESS Counselling Services Network (CSN) supports the mental health requirements of the international community in the Netherlands. One member, Gary Fishbein, has also written on this topic: see ‘Expat couples: baggage handling’ in the Autumn 2011 issue of the ACCESS Magazine. The CSN on-call service can be reached, in confidence, via on-call.access-nl.org.

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What lies beneath the surface

Much like the cultural iceberg model, which shows that much of what we need to understand about a culture lies unseen, beneath the surface the bonds of a couples' relationship are also hidden. Buried inside emotions, which in a familiar environment are comforted and supported by social networks, familiar settings and norms and values are known and understood. When one relocates though, much of those comfort settings are challenged, and the time it takes to build a new social network can stress a relationship and trigger different emotions. Each individual in the romantic relationship will go through their own learning and discovery process. And this may or may not be matched, nor in sync with one another. Whether a couple is mono-cultural or bi-cultural, the change in their surroundings is what they share, though how they deal with the change may differ significantly. Supportive networks will take time to build. Social codes, values, norms will be new. Navigating the changes together can be strained. Understanding the emotional impact of the change on oneself is one thing; finding a way to understand and communicate about how it is affecting one another is the challenge.

Angelika is convinced that using EFT helps couples to find a way to communicate how one is affected by or feeling about the changes, which is key to ensuring the romantic relationship can thrive despite the changes. "It is not about blaming one another, but about understanding what is happening inside, emotionally, and appreciating the external changes are the triggers. When a couple has a strong and safe bond, they can overcome the challenges of new environments, for instance. The more they fight, or disagree the less confident they are in the bond."

50 years' experience

EFT "is a structured approach to couples therapy" that has been researched and proven highly effective in assisting couples to reconnect and improve their ability to communicate lovingly and respectfully. Started in Canada, EFT has been enthusiastically received in the Netherlands. In fact, Angelika pointed out that within Europe, the Netherlands has embraced the approach the most. Asked why she believed this to be the case, Angelika suggested it was perhaps related to three aspects. The fact that by nature the Dutch are more experiential; there was already openness to systemic work upon which EFT is based; and, since the Dutch are comfortable following English-language training, it was easy to bring the training sessions to the Netherlands.

Speaking from the heart

EFT therapists are not "problem solvers" according to Angelika: "our goal, and intention, is to help couples understand the dynamics of their relationship, and find the most supportive way of communicating their emotions such that they can rely upon one another, and sustain the romantic relationship, while moving to, or living in a country new to them." «



About the expert

Angelika Matthias is a Psychological Counsellor and certified EFT Therapist, who offers counselling and psychotherapy for individuals and couples in German and English. She has expat experience and practises from The Hague. You can find her at www.balanceforyourlife.nl.