



Expatriate life might affect your mental health

When people hear about Expatriate life, most of them are associating it with pictures of a nice and exciting life in a foreign country, like a good paid holiday. Of course it is true that you have the chance of discovering another country in more detail, which might bring a lot of excitement and fun. However living an expatriate life demands a lot of flexibility and challenges from the individual. Independent from whether you are the one who provokes the move or are the accompanying partner, or you had to prevent unemployment. Changing the environment, losing the familiar social network, has apart from a lot of positive exciting effects also a huge impact on your daily life and on your mental health. Therefore it is important how you deal with these challenges. Doing this whole process with a family is even more challenging, but this is not the focus of this article.

Meanwhile it is acknowledged that expatriate life is not just easy and being on holiday for the next 2-4 years, if the location sounds great. However the article does not mean to be pessimistic and just looking at the bad sides of an expatriate life. Moreover it should help you to acknowledge the difficulties and to find your own way to deal better with the challenges that are involved. It should help you to be more satisfied with your situation.

As mentioned in my article about self-esteem, "...a healthy self esteem means to accept your weaknesses, see your strength and try to live your own life..." (you can read more on my website). However changing the location might make you feel that you are not in control of your own life any more. Again the motivation is still important, but even with a good preparation and a lot of positive spirit it might sometimes be hard to adjust to the new environment/culture and not getting stuck in frustration is sometimes not so easy. Moreover you might feel that you give your best and that you are trying harder and harder without feeling any better.

Due to the fact that our self-esteem develops through the experiences we make over our lifetime, trying to settle down in a different country involves a lot of new experiences that might affect our self-esteem. Sometimes you have to speak a different language or the language is too difficult to learn or because of your work environment you don't need to learn the language, which means you will never get full access to the new culture and the new environment and you will always have the role of an outsider.

Additionally you have to find out the new rules of the new home culture. This part is the most underestimated one. Based on the preparation you get in the beginning you might think that you know already everything about the new place and community. Though you can't be told everything and many rules have to be discovered locally. Therefore it seems to be



unpreventable to make negative experiences. It might happen that you get surprised or irritated from time to time by your new environment. Moreover it depends on how you get in contact with these other people and how they react towards your presence. This way might cause insecurity or even stress in different situations. Getting stuck, because of not knowing how to behave in a specific moment might lead to insecurity and frustration. Furthermore it might develop into anger towards the others or towards yourself and your whole situation. This unexpected behaviour and feelings might be irritating. You might not understand why the “obvious” behaviour is not shown. Depending on your psychological situation this might lead to stress, anger and thoughts like: “...oh, how stupid they are ...!” or “...help, I’m wrong, I’m stupid, I don’t understand the easiest way of behaviour, I’m not good enough! ...” or “... that’s interesting! Why do people come to these conclusions?”

Therefore the conclusions you make have a high impact on your psychological well being, as well. Your self-esteem develops through a combination of your inherent characters combined with experiences you make over your life span which lead to your core beliefs and value system.

The fact that your value system and core beliefs are created through your daily experiences might be very challenging when you have to change the environment and most of your experiences are not applicable any more. Each community/culture has a different value system, body language, and different rules, how things work out, without any explanations. Growing up in one culture leads you to understand people and their behaviour without any explanations. These rules and values developed over decades because of the natural and cultural environment and its circumstances.

Therefore when you move into another country you have to find out their new and different rules. Moreover this might be sometimes exhausting. As already mentioned some companies give a preparation course for their employees and partners/families. But this can’t cover everything. Moreover it just covers the most obvious differences and this just from an angle vision of one culture. During the daily life the more challenges things are the not so obvious differences.

For example you think you are on the right path and act completely appropriate because of your experiences and the information they gave you, but all of a sudden someone tells you, that you are completely wrong. It feels a bit like as if someone has changed the rules of a game without telling you. This kind of experience might affect your psychological wellbeing and therefore your self-esteem. Hence it is important to keep your personal discoverer alive and motivate it, even when it gets stuck. There might be the danger, when you don’t succeed to build a bridge between your own core beliefs and value system and the new culture environment than you start blaming the others because of their differences. Furthermore you might think that this is the only way of how you could protect yourself against all the difficulties, which are involved in the game. It is not a question of abandoning your identity and all your beliefs and values. Moreover getting totally adapted to the new culture is not an



option when you don't feel like doing it. The goal could be more to develop an understanding that things could be different and be still okay.

One of the main factors is how open and relaxed you can deal with the situation when everything around you is different all of a sudden. It might be helpful to build up social contacts with people from your cultural background who share the same difficulties or with people from other cultures to see how different their experiences are. Additionally it might be enriching if you find someone from the new home culture who might give you better access to the new environment. Another way might be to look for professional help to get back your mental balance after the experience of a culture shock. Moreover be patient with yourself and your new environment on your way of growing together. Try to be open and see if and what you can learn from them, and when you get stuck somehow, it is not because of you; it is just because of the circumstance.

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