

Relieving the weight from your shoulders

Many families elect to work and live abroad in order to escape the rat race. But this provides no escape from stress, writes Jo Parfitt

IT IS common knowledge that loss, moving house and changing job are among the top causes of stress and expatriates score an immediate hat-trick each time they take on a new assignment.

While statistics vary slightly, it is accepted that up to 80 per cent of expatriates are married. According to the literature presented by academics, consultants and practitioners in the international human resources arena, the accompanying spouse is of critical importance to the success of an overseas assignment.

In recent years corporate support programs have reflected this and around three quarters of companies now offer a range of services including spouse support clubs, mentoring, career counselling and acculturation assistance. Yet it appears that corporations are still hesitant to offer support services to the executives themselves.

In her book *Breaking Through Culture Shock*, Elisabeth Marx describes the case of an American expatriate

know all the answers," says Cuthell, "but they cannot be expected to know about bereavement counselling, violence and so on, and so they need to have access to the services of trained counsellors."

Carol Whittaker of NEC believes that adopting an employee assistance program is a bit like taking out insurance. "It is a mistake to say that personal issues do not impact on business," she says.

Lorraine Flower, who runs Azzur, and offers corporate counselling services says: "We need to create a culture and environment so that issues that lead to stress can be dealt with early. Dissonance of any type creates stress. An employee needs to feel he can be open about his feelings."

However, such employee assistance programs continue to be rare, and it is often up to us to create our own stress reduction methods.

One of the best antidotes to the negative feelings of stress is knowledge. If you understand what is happening to you and why you feel the way you do, then you have a good chance of getting through it with your sanity and marriage intact. It has been proven that the best adaptation strategy is to both integrate yourself into

the new environment while maintaining bonds with your original culture.

Jutta Kvnig is a German clinical psychologist, based in the Netherlands. Her company Moving Experience, offers coaching, counselling and other services as well as a range of workshops in stress relieving techniques such as Watsu and Chi Gong.

"Moving overseas involves all the psychological stresses of moving, saying goodbye, work issues, dealing with the outbursts of uprooted children, not to mention the possible flashbacks of similar previous experiences," says Kvnig. "This is accompanied by a real sense of adventure, a stomach pit feeling, of dread and anticipation."

The tension of an impending assignment starts to affect us long before we leave. Then, once we arrive in our new home, we are kept busy, and also stressed by practicalities and the excitement of all that is new. And then, one day, for no reason, we may find ourselves staring blankly into space or looking at the fridge wondering what we came for. It is not uncommon for minor stomach upsets and ailments to punctuate the entire first year either. Such stress and a reduced

immune system can then lead to depression.

"The two partners in a marriage are unlikely to adjust at the same speed," continues Kvnig. "While one is enjoying meeting new colleagues, the other may feel dismal and resentful of the days alone at home. This can lead to rows and frustrations at home, which may, in turn, lead to excessive alcohol consumption in an attempt to find peace and relaxation. Infidelity and divorce may be the disastrous results of a cross cultural move."

Tonya Mead is an American expatriate accompanying partner, who, was, until recently, stationed in Rio de Janeiro. Studying for a PhD in psychology, she has chosen to research expatriate stress reduction methods and presented her findings at the European Conference on Research Methodologies for Management and Business Studies at Reading University in April.

Mead conducted a survey of 88 expatriate employees and their partners who had begun their assignments no more than two years previously. Her findings showed that those families with children were more stable and appreciative of company policies than those

without. Families were generally less likely to leave assignment early.

While studying the ran stress reduction techniques adopted by expatriate families she discovered that an active social life, combined with work and family, was the most popular method. Interestingly, most opt for exercise, spirituality and meditation and therapy. She found that those couples took part in joint activities rather than solitary pursuits such as yoga and Tai Chi, best adjusted.

No-one is immune to stress but it is incorrect to assume that such feelings are confined to accompanying partners. Proactive, take advantage of any stress management services provided by your company, and if none exist, create your own methods.

Breaking Through Culture Shock by Elisabeth Marx is published by Nicholas Bre

Web Links

- Tonya Mead's survey can be found at www.expange.com/sharedknowl
- Jutta Kvnig can be found at kes.konig@worldonline.nl