

# Three columns of challenge

Why living abroad can be struggling

By Jan Kaspers, 08.11.2015

At the beginning, the overwhelming power of new sensations might give the false impression, that living abroad is simply always an easy step to take. Only when we try to settle in, we slowly understand the struggles that come after. Modern research provides evidence for the idea that mental disorders and emotional disturbances usually break out when our abilities to cope with a particular life situation are not sufficient anymore. This is called the *vulnerability-stress-model* and currently the most widely accepted explanation for the development of mental diseases. The model describes that, depending on different environmental and genetic factors, we have a certain vulnerability for particular mental disorders. The model predicts that most people are able to cope with the challenges of life on a daily basis until a major change in life takes place. Those changes are also called *stressful life events*. The life events that are usually the hardest to cope with are unpredictable, e.g. sudden death of a close relative. But more predictable life events can also induce stress. Simply moving house within your region is a stressful life event for everybody. Changing the location within your country can be even seen as a major stressful life event. Considering that, estimate what impact international relocation might have on your mental stability. In this article I want to describe three major reasons why international relocation has such a challenging power. I want to explain this by using moving to Germany (specifically Berlin) as an example, and give ideas for how to cope with the upcoming stress in a better way.

## Assimilating to a new culture

One of the most obvious things that come with a new country is a new culture. Especially in an increasingly globalized world and Europe, where a huge diversity of cultures exist peacefully next to each other (fingers crossed), intercultural competence becomes a new emerging social skill. Germany itself is a good example how diverse culture can be within a country. As it borders

nine other countries at a length of around 3750 kilometres, it has a wide cultural richness. In the transition zones to other countries, the identities of a culture usually become blurred. The southwest of Germany is historically influenced by France, the East more by Poland. The south is more influenced by Austria, Switzerland and northern Italy, the north and northwest by the Netherlands and Scandinavian culture. That demonstrates why political borders are often of a second interest, when it comes to a culture. The small things of everyday life become more and more obvious after a while in the new culture. How you behave at a supermarket checkout, what you say in restaurants, the habits of welcoming people at a party, rituals at work, what people laugh about and many other smaller issues can become the playground for confusion and awkwardness. A natural delivered reaction to new situations like this is usually anxiety. To fight, flight or freeze in anxiety-provoking situations is our natural behaviour, and serves to guarantee survival on the long run. Beside that a moderate level of anxiety also provides us with the necessary brain arousal to mentally produce fitting solutions. Anxieties only get problematic if they stop us from taking action when it's necessary. A good solution to deal with anxieties in general is to face them at their cores. An arrival in a new culture is not easy, but there are actions to be taken that clearly help managing the fears which arise. Many expats try to solve the problem in a maladaptive way, particularly by sticking to people from their own cultural sphere. Especially people from Anglo-Saxon countries can rely on a network of English speakers that are spread all over the world and that stick together when the crunch comes. In Berlin it is especially easy to find English natives, but also various other nationalities. The same might also apply to other large communities like the Chinese, French, Spanish, Italians, etc. A genuine curiosity about the new culture and the will to adapt to different rituals and forms of living can help a lot. Interest for other cultures is a compassionate act; and liberating yourself from the delusion that everything and everywhere is just like the place where you were born and raised.

## **Learning a new language**

The German language is widely feared as a complicated one. With its four cases, three articles, a huge diversity in verbs, a love for details and precise concepts it's not easy to learn. No doubt. Many native Germans even don't know how difficult it is, as they learned it easily with the brains of children. Especially for native English speakers who generally don't need to learn a foreign language as desperately like other people, if they want to travel around the globe, a second language can be a huge challenge. There seems to be a widely-known fear of learning a new language in general among English natives. What we practice, we become confident in. As there is a lower emphasis on foreign languages in Anglo-Saxon school systems, the practice begins pretty late and therefore the confidence in other languages suffers. It might be true, that in

international places like Berlin with its common cross cultural scene, you can survive with English pretty well to a certain degree. But to fully settle in Germany and to get a feeling of integration, learning German is a key necessity and also a sign of respect for the culture. Twenty kilometres out of Berlin, nobody will understand English as well as in the capital. But other people have succeeded in learning German. Some people might have a bigger talent to learn a new language, some might be slower. Too many worries about this circumstance might just distract you from the actual goal of learning the language. Practicing a few minutes each day is better than rushing into it too quickly. First of all it takes constant processing for the human brain to learn and integrate new information, and it's crucial to maintain enough motivation over a time of several years to learn a new language. This is done the best in slow steps anyway, as we know from psychological studies, that *realistic, slightly challenging goals* are superior to unchallenging or overwhelming goals, when it comes to maintaining motivation. Learning a language cannot be expected to be an overnight success. The best motivation to learn is the so called *intrinsic motivation* – the joyful motivation that comes just from within. Here as an expat you have a great advantage compared to the people learning a new language from abroad: You're already in the field! Each day can be an interesting learning experience if you want it to be. The city is full of German and full of people who want to learn it too. Streets signs, restaurant menus, the many people who speak it in public life are great reminders of daily practice. Getting in touch (also with native German speakers) can be a good system to keep your motivation up in natural phases of demotivation. Sometimes people argue that learning German is secondary. I would agree, if you would consider a language just as a tool to communicate. But it is more. It stores and expresses the cultural development of the country. It's the framework of how a particular culture is thinking. To understand Germans and Germany, learning the language is inevitable, and is an often underestimated factor in successfully settling in. Learning German can be exciting and fulfilling, even by slow and steady progress. It makes you satisfyingly more independent in everyday life. On internet platforms like for instance *www.meetup.com* you can also find people that make learning German a social group activity without the cost and formality of lessons.

### **Loss of close relatives, friends and relationships**

Human beings are social. Like to other apes, humans are not solitary. Since our beginnings as a species we are used to being organized in tribes and cultures. Beside the intake of energy through breathing, eating and drinking, as well as sexual activities and a need for stimulation and structure, we have a big need for attention and social exchange. A social network equals security. Over the years we build intimate connections to family, friends, acquaintances and partners, with whom we also share a certain environment. We take our bonds so much for granted that we don't

see its stabilizing impact on our lives until we lose them through death or relocation. Modern communication provides marvellous methods to stay in touch even over the whole globe, yet the quality of attention from near-by persons in real life is irreplaceable. To get used to a new environment, we need to let go of our old world and settle into a new one. That can be particularly hard, as our identity is affected. We might not see it that way, because we are so used to our environment, but part of our self is built up by the culture we were born and raised in. Not only us, but also the people left back home are affected. Sometimes we might leave those people behind with an impression of rejection or abandonment by the simple action of moving away. Whether this is justified or not, it can lead expats into feelings of guilt or shame. Relocating overseas is therefore one of the biggest stressful life events available. Between leaving a country and arriving in another one lies a gap that needs to be filled. On the one hand we can be glad if we bring our spouse with us, who supports us with a feeling of home and familiarity in a new, sometimes frightening world. Yet even this can lead into other issues. Both partners might be in need of additional empathy and affection that the other can't give because they both arrived in the new life situation at the same time. Or they both can become so dependent on each other that the healthy need for autonomy is not guaranteed anymore. Children might also be involved. The parents might feel helpless and needy on their own and can't provide their children with the attention and security they would need. Times like these demand everything from us, like excellent communication skills, awareness of one's own needs, physical and mental stamina and a good portion of courage to overcome the crisis. In moments like this, emotional support from a skilful counsellor or therapist can help enormously, to lessen the stress within the family or relationship. This is especially important in times where new contacts haven't been made yet. Getting in touch with other expats can bring additional support and a big relief, or depending on their own situation, even further distress. That has to be taken into account. In big cities like Berlin, where the fluctuation is high, it might be harder to find people to bond with on a longer scale. That is likewise true for Germans. Locals might have made already their experiences with expat friendships, which can be over astonishingly quickly through another relocation. For those reasons, it is important to also find German acquaintances that might lead into friendships on the long run, where it is more likely that they will stay in the country. Residents can also show you more about the culture, and make it easier to adapt. It is important to notice that in vulnerable situations such as arriving in a new country, a few stable contacts are far more valuable than loose contacts to a huge number of people. In the beginning it might make sense to try to reach a variety of people, and then to intensify the contacts that have the biggest potential for you to grow. As a foreigner you have also something to offer. You might know yourself and your culture pretty well, but for other people you are exotic. Even if residents might be cautious at the

beginning (depending on where you come from Germans might seem a bit reserved in the beginning) you can gather attention through your differentness and an open interest for their country, culture and people. Long term connection to people is nothing that can be forced, but can only be gained by investment of time, trust and effort.

### **What one can do to better cope with the stress**

Fortunately, moving abroad is usually not an unpredictable life event. In some cases, when you are working for an international corporation, in academia or a military service it might be necessary to change place frequently, but even those changes are still mostly foreseeable. The more predictable they are, the better the chances of successfully coping with the new situation. Therefore moving abroad usually starts with a decision. Before you leave you can examine your motivations behind the decision precisely. Why do you want to move abroad? Are you having naive ideas that everything is simply better in the other place? Are you trying to get rid of issues that can't be solved? Is it just for an adventure? Are you aware of the challenge? It's not necessarily important to have a good answer to these questions. Just the act of being aware gives you a certain realistic estimation of the challenge ahead. If you have already made your decision, you can start to prepare yourself already when you are still in your home country. Try to take in as much information as possible about the new culture. That might already provide you with some security. Try to find out information about everyday life. What is more or less than back home? What is different? Why is it different? What does the landscape look like? What are the stereotypes that other people have about this culture? Do you already know someone living there? Then get first hand experiences. Before you come over, you can already find a language school that can help you to learn the new language as well as possible, at the pace you need. Also, language classes are great opportunities to find new contacts that might lead into later friendships, usually with people in a similar situation to you. You might even want to know a few words already on your own before you arrive. The internet offers great resources to learn a new language, for instance the free internet platform *www.duolingo.com*.

While saying goodbye to your closer friends and relatives back home, take the time to show them that you are happy to know them, even if you are living abroad now. If you have to sort out long term conflicts, that is a good moment to try to resolve them. Think about who you want to stay in touch with frequently, as you will not be able to have contact to all of them without limiting yourself in the new country. Make it a conscious decision now than later letting coincidences rule your life. Take stuff from back home that gives you stability for the first year in the new country. Pictures, letters, whatever works for you. Bring receipts for traditional meals from

back home that you can cook for other people. Make your new flat a home as quick as possible. Even if you don't have a job, get a structure for your day. Don't sleep in each day. Go out and explore.

As loss of close people is an event that provokes deep grief and sadness in us, let those emotions circulate. They will fade after a while anyway if you allow them to be. Unexpressed grief can turn into depressive episodes, as it still exists in the background of our consciousness. It is okay to grieve even if you might feel irritated and aggressive. Once you are relocated, try to integrate as well as possible – that means to widen the borders of the expat bubble. Emphasising meaningful connections to locals can help. Assimilation comes in waves or circles of enthusiasm and frustration. Accept them as normal and necessary, and give yourself the time to grow steadily with the challenges.

If your struggle becomes too tough, don't hesitate to consult a counsellor, therapist or psychiatrist. It's not a weakness, but a big strength to have the courage to ask for help in a vulnerable life situation.