

A Portable Identity

A Woman's Guide to Maintaining a Sense of Self While Moving Overseas

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Chapter 10

Resource #3: Ability to Manage Stress

How We Define Ability to Manage Stress

The ability to manage stress involves making choices about how you respond when stress hits. Imagine that you have an internal barometer that rises and falls according to the stress you experience. The stress could stem from anything: a conflict with someone, getting stuck in traffic, a worry that you're carrying, or a change in your health or financial situation. The cause of the stress is not our primary concern when we talk about this resource. We are primarily concerned with what you do once you're stressed, and how you respond to whatever is creating stress for you. When you learn to manage your internal response to stress, you're able to remain in charge of yourself, even if the situation seems to be out of your control.

Your Ability to Manage Stress

When your internal barometer rises, you have your own signs of stress. They can include changes in heart rate, breathing, skin tone and color, facial expression, body posture, and physical sensations (e.g., tightening in the shoulders or knots in the stomach). These are all physiological changes that occur at the time of stress. When a reaction to stress persists over time or does not fully subside, more long-term symptoms can develop. These symptoms may include headaches, body aches and pains, sleep or appetite disturbances, or general irritability.

How do you know when you're feeling stressed? What are your signs of stress?

What do you do when you recognize that you're feeling stressed?

Do you acknowledge your stress and find ways to manage it (e.g., take a few deep breaths, give yourself a pep talk, go to a safe spot and vent)? If yes, what are the ways you manage stress?

Stress and the Move

It is important to acknowledge that chaos accompanies any move overseas. While you may attempt to weather the move gracefully, it's not a graceful process. All overseas moves involve upheaval, mess, and a great deal of confusion about how to restore order. When in your home country, you know how to get things done. You don't need to think much about how you do this. Unless something unexpected happens, you can coast along to a certain degree. When you move overseas, you must give your full attention to the task of meeting your basic needs. You're figuring out how to inhabit your new home and community. Small things challenge you every day. You have to figure out how and where to buy groceries and other things you need. This takes patience. You have to decide how to go about unpacking and setting up your household. This takes time. You must figure out how to make yourself understood to the native people. This takes effort. You look for kinship, for someone you can be comfortable with. This takes courage. The basic requirements of daily living are not easy.

Daily life becomes stressful because everything is new or different. You are navigating in a foreign environment. You may also feel that you have little sense of control. For example, you may be dependent on your husband for information from the company or sending organization. Or, if you have others helping you (such as maids or drivers), you may feel dependent on them for the accomplishment of many tasks.

To alleviate the stress you experience you may find yourself choosing behaviors that provide temporary relief, such as bingeing on food, drinking more alcohol, spending more money or time on things that only briefly or superficially satisfy you. However, these behaviors are attempts to get rid of or mask the stress you feel. Instead, you can decide to learn more about how you react to stress, and then develop a more effective plan to help you manage the stress you experience.