

A Portable Identity

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

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Introduction

The Untold Story

Image of Life as an Expatriate Spouse

To some, life as an expatriate spouse compares to a modern-day fairy tale. In exchange for a woman's willingness to enter expatriate life to support her husband's career, she accepts an adventure to move to a foreign land and gains a comfortable living arrangement. She will likely acquire more wealth, more personal time, and more help to maintain her house and family needs. It's easy to see why she would seize such an opportunity. But the fairy-tale image of expatriate life is like a veil. It hides the untold story of women's lives overseas. It does not begin to describe the reality of a woman's experience.

When a woman leaves her homeland, she experiences a loss of the familiar, of continuity, connection to her surroundings, and contact with people who have been central to her life. When she lands on foreign soil, she plunges into a new country and culture, often very different from her own. She must quickly learn how to navigate in her new surroundings. Overnight she becomes an expatriate spouse, the "wife of," or a "dependent of," her husband or partner. She must make new friends and carve out a new path for herself.

Historically, the ways in which an expatriate spouse manages the effect of so much sudden change in her life, as well as her feelings about these changes, have been her personal struggle. When an expatriate spouse experiences difficulty because of the multitude of changes and losses in her life, most believe that something is wrong with her, that she's not adjusting well. The consequences to women and their families have been distressing.

According to Nancy J. Adler, "The spouse's dissatisfaction, which often leads to early return, is the single most frequently reported reason for failure on a foreign assignment. Nearly half of 300 surveyed companies have brought families home early due to the reported unwillingness or inability of the spouse to adapt."¹

Although adjustment to a foreign culture is necessary for a woman's successful overseas experience, it's only part of the story. If we continue to focus on the prevailing view that something is wrong with the individual if she experiences problems after moving overseas, the more accurate story of what actually occurs to her when she moves overseas remains untold.

The Key

In *A Portable Identity* we focus on revealing this untold story. **We believe the key to understanding a woman's experience when she moves overseas is simply this: an overseas move affects a woman at the deepest level of who she is, her identity.** An overseas move changes the fundamental structure of a woman's life and her sense of self and replaces organization with chaos.

The process begins the moment a woman discovers she will move overseas. Internally, she may experience this as twinges of anxiety whose origins she can't trace. During the move itself, as a woman leaves familiar roles, relationships, and surroundings behind, she may feel that she is losing her identity, or parts of it.

Once she arrives abroad and starts interacting with a different culture and takes on new roles and relationships, her identity becomes even more vulnerable. This vulnerability may come in the form of self-questioning or self-doubt about who she is. Or she may find herself experiencing one, two, or a whole gamut of emotions and behaviors that seem out of character for her. For example, she may find herself feeling tearful, irritable, angry, or frustrated. Or she may feel resentful, hopeless, or numb. She may find herself feeling depressed, impulsive, or anxious. To distract herself from her feelings, she may find that she eats too much or too little, drinks more alcohol, or shops excessively. In an attempt to avoid her feelings, she may withdraw from others, or use fantasy as a way to escape her situation. She may notice these feelings and behaviors spilling over into her relationships, and she may have difficulty relating to her husband, partner, or her children.

A woman in this situation may not realize that what she is experiencing could be a reflection of the enormous impact the overseas move has had on her identity. Until now, there has been a lack of in-depth information available to her on this topic. All too often she's had to pick up the pieces of her life and try to make sense of it by herself.

Who this Book is For

We wrote *A Portable Identity* primarily for women who move overseas in support of their husband's career, either for the first time or any move after that. Our book is devoted to helping a woman in this situation understand:

- how her identity is affected at each stage of an overseas move;
- why thoughts and feelings she may experience during the move are normal within the context of so much change;
- why she may be having difficulty in her new life overseas;
- how she can decide to take charge of the changes that occur in identity while living abroad;
- how she can make choices that will help make the overseas life a happier and more meaningful experience.

Note: We originally wrote *A Portable Identity* for women because the majority of accompanying spouses are female, our professional work has primarily been with wives of male expatriates, and our own personal experience is that of women supporting our husbands' careers

overseas. However, based on feedback from those who have read this book and from professionals in the field of international relocation, the content of the book may also be applicable to male expatriate spouses (a growing population) and to the international expatriate woman pursuing her own career. In essence, *A Portable Identity* is about taking charge of change, regardless of a person's given situation.

Professionals who work in the field of international relocation, such as human resource managers, relocation specialists, and employee assistance professionals will also benefit by reading *A Portable Identity*. They will develop greater awareness and understanding of this critical topic for spouses, and the book provides them with a valuable expatriate resource that they can provide or recommend to spouses moving and living overseas in support of their partners' careers.

How to Use this Book

You, the spouse, are the central character of *A Portable Identity: A Woman's Guide to Maintaining a Sense of Self While Moving Overseas*. The book is written from the perspective that you have already moved overseas because this is when you are most likely to become aware of the impact of the move. However, you can begin reading the book in the pre-departure stage of your move. We encourage you to start at the beginning and follow the order of the book, as each chapter and each section builds on the previous one. In Chapters 1 through 5, your story of how the overseas move has affected your identity will unfold as you record your answers to the questions and exercises in these chapters. (Note: If you are in the pre-departure stage of the move, complete Chapters 1 through 3 only. Then, after you move, resume reading the book starting with Chapter 4.) In Chapter 6, we introduce The Wheel, a model we developed that you can use to help reconstruct your identity. In Chapters 7 through 20, we guide you in applying the various components of The Wheel to your own life. By using The Wheel, you'll take charge of how your identity takes shape.

This book provides interaction between you, the reader, and us, the authors. We step out of our traditional counselor roles to share our personal experiences about moving overseas with you for several reasons. First, we want to let you know that you're not alone in what you may be experiencing. Expatriate women often live in remote corners of the world, in places where privacy may be an issue or where personal growth opportunities are limited. We hope our stories will encourage you to write your stories. Secondly, we use our stories as true-life examples of the concepts we present in the book.

Please accept our support and encouragement as you strive to better understand how your overseas move has affected your identity.

Disclaimer

Our primary purpose for writing this book is to help you understand how moving overseas affects your identity. Although this book in part evolved from our professional work, counseling and conducting workshops with women in Bangkok, Thailand, don't use this book in lieu of therapy. If you currently, or while completing this book, experience emotions or behaviors that you're unable to manage on your own, we encourage you to seek professional help and support.