



Taking The Lead as a Trailing Spouse

By Annalisa Burgos

The phrase "trailing spouse" isn't exactly something people put on their resume.

For many expat spouses like myself, the decision to give up a successful career and move to a foreign country for a loved one's job is a selfless one. While you may justify the decision with the prospect of travel and adventure, the transition from working professional to trailing spouse is not as easy as you think. After all, the idea of leaving the rat race sounds appealing, until you realize that you're not only leaving a job, but your family, friends and entire social identity as well.

About 80 percent of expats quit their jobs to follow their husband or wife, says Aude Beneton, a consultant with Harmony & Mobility, a human resources agency that counsels companies and individuals on the expatriation process. "When they arrive in the new country, sometimes they don't have a new job and this represents a very big loss of identity," Beneton explains.

Even partners who didn't work in their home country suffer identity loss. "They don't have the same framework, they don't have the same environment, so they need to rebuild their environment," Beneton says.

A common mistake first time expats make is underestimating the adjustment process. While you may be initially excited about

moving to a new country, most people are not prepared for the feelings of loneliness and anxiety that follow.

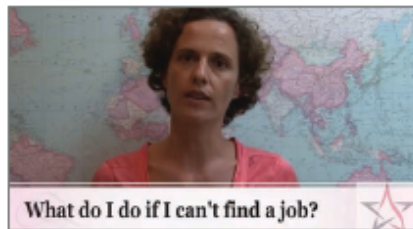
At a recent CRCE workshop, Beneton and colleague Françoise Carbonnel outlined the emotional journey of a typical expat. The four stages are:

- **Honeymoon Phase: Excitement and feeling that everything is great**
- **Crisis or Culture Shock Phase (3-6 months after arrival): Anxiety of not knowing the culture and having to create new relationships**
- **Adjustment Phase: Making new friends and getting to know the environment**
- **Adaptation Phase: Acceptance of the new country as home**

Workshop attendees, attorneys, executives and other professionals who left their careers, expressed frustration with being labeled a "trailing spouse" and sought ways to find fulfillment amid a challenging job search and adjustment experience.

Before moving to Singapore a few months ago, Lauren Power and her fiance lived in Tokyo, which was their first expat experience. She recalls the culture shock she experienced after leaving their hometown in Texas.

"You feel a little bit sad, you feel a little



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bit lonely and very alienated because of the language barrier," says Power. "You can start kinda feeling sorry for yourself and sitting on the couch and wondering what happened to your life... But you don't have to have that happen to you. Feel empowered. Get out there and network."

She adds: "In Singapore, it's extremely easy to get involved because everyone speaks English and the people are very active and very social and they are very entrepreneurial."

Indeed, as far as host countries go, Singapore isn't a bad place to be. The city-state is home to the world's wealthiest expats and was named the best place for expats in HSBC's 2012 Expat Explorer Survey, based on criteria like availability of domestic help, high earning potential and access to luxuries.

Singapore's first-world amenities make it easy for expats to keep to themselves, but that's not a good idea, says Laura O'Gorman, who moved from New Jersey a year ago. "Singapore can feel a little soulless if you don't get out of the CBD or Orchard or Robertson Quay," she explains. "When you've gotten on your feet and feel comfortable, start exploring and wandering around because Singapore has some fantastic hidden gems."

The local culture is what kept Carolyn Soemarjono in Singapore for 10 years. The former HR manager was one of the lucky

ones who secured a job before following her boyfriend to Singapore from Australia. But when she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer two years ago, she had to quit work to focus on her health.

"It's strange to realize that so much of your identity is tied to your job," she recalls. Now that her cancer is in remission, Soemarjono is taking advantage of another perk of living in Singapore – the ease of starting a consultancy and small business.

Expats and experts agree that one benefit of expatriation is the ability to reflect on what you want out of life. And when combined with a proactive attitude, a trailing spouse can take control of his/her expat experience.

"Be clear about what you want to do with your professional side and personal side and have in mind where you want to reach," Beneton suggests. "Begin to build your project. Begin to reinvent yourself and to find the best way you can to lead your expatriation and have something which is really your experience."

After all, just because you're trailing, doesn't mean you have to be behind.

Annalisa is a TV reporter and multimedia journalist who's worked at Forbes, HGTV and Food Network and is taking charge of her expat experience with her blog! [vlog.foodnation.com](#) and [annalisaburgos.com](#).