

## **Trials and tribulations of expat life**



**Moving to another country can certainly have its highs and lows. Some people just seem to thrive in a new environment, while others appear unable to adjust to such a big change in their surroundings. In her Expatica column, Cultural Clues, Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich answers a letter from a reader about the stresses of expat life.**

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*Nina wrote: Hilly, we have recently relocated to somewhere outside of Brussels, the house is beautiful and that sums it up. I am constantly tired, sleep a lot, feel up to nothing, I am depressed. I crashed my new car and to compensate for that misfortune I crashed my husband's car too.*

*What is wrong me?*

Dear Nina,

Thank you for sharing your inner thoughts and feelings with me. For privacy reasons I chose not to disclose all the details. Your plight is not unusual and therefore very relevant to share with our readers.

To answer your question: nothing is wrong with you!

Nothing?

Absolutely... making major changes in our lives is an onslaught on our emotional balance. The transitions we go through are multiple: changing from a metropolitan lifestyle to the peace and quiet of a pastoral village; a new country with a different culture; and not speaking the local language. This is a challenge bigger than we ever imagined.

Confirmation of our self-image is no longer fed by our friends and family

The confirmation of our self-image is no longer fed by our friends and family, our old community or colleagues, as we left everyone and everything behind. We tend to underestimate what it means to have to redefine ourselves, as all of a sudden we are thrown back upon ourselves.

In the beginning, stress is your steady and (maybe only) company.



**Living in another country can have its highs and lows**

Our loved ones who depart in the morning in order to continue their routines on the job or at school come home assuming that things take care of themselves.

Not initially having the tools to master these new challenges can make us feel inadequate and possibly resentful towards our partners for getting us into this mess in the first place ("grrrr why did YOU have to take on this assignment?")

The price tag of this rollercoaster has "culture shock" written on it.

Living in another country can have its highs and lows

Realising that you are just not yourself is the first step to recovery and going out for help is the second. Having a supportive spouse who doesn't push is also very beneficial.

But you can give yourself a piggy back as well, do not hang out with "negative expats" and celebrate each advancement you make - be they ever so little.

Have you misplaced your sense of humor?

There will be times where you think you act like a fool, you know what - you probably do. But so what? Just turn around and laugh at yourself and the awkward situation and it takes the sting out of things.

Letting go of concepts such as being self-reliant and in control allows you to take stock of what is happening within you and your family. Listen to your inner voice when it says to take time and do the things that are important to you.

Oh, and by the way, the locals are not out to get you! For the most part they do not even know you exist. So don't blame it on the Germans, the Dutch or the Belgians. What you experience is universal and can happen to anyone anywhere.

The good news?

The fact that you going through this dip is positive proof that you have entered the adaptation phase. Hey, who said it was easy?

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