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Expatriate Family Syndrome by Cathy Tsang-Feign

Ever since Lucy returned from visiting her sister's family in the United States, she finds herself moody and unhappy. Whenever her husband tries to comfort her she lashes out at him.

“I enjoy our lifestyle and I wouldn't trade it for anything, but I also never realized how much I'm missing,” said Lucy.

Lucy moved to London six months ago. Before that she lived in Egypt, Poland, and Greece. Because of her husband Dave's position with the company they are required to relocate about every three years. Britain is their fourth overseas post in the last ten years.

“I never could imagine how my sister can live a mundane suburban life. Now I understand there are many rich experiences that I cannot have,” she said. Seeing that her sister has a stable home life, a house, close friends, friendly neighbors, etc., she suddenly realizes how much these things mean to her.

Lucy enjoys the colorful experience of living in different parts of the world, yet all of a sudden she feels that she wants something more than “interesting experiences”. After all these years Lucy finds herself with no close friends, no place that really feels like home. As much as they call the States “home”, after a decade abroad she doesn't really feel their roots are there any more.

Lucy's dilemma is a result of “Transient Family Syndrome”, which is common among people who have to move around regularly. Such an individual or family starts planning their next move almost as soon as they arrive at their latest assignment.

Although they will establish an active social life, yet when any relationship becomes too personal or emotionally involved, unintentionally they pull back. Rather than going through the repeated pain of separation and loss, they unconsciously avoid letting friendships get too close.

In addition, people in this group tend to associate with other expatriates and their families, who also are transferred frequently. Living amongst such a transient population is not conducive to forming close, lasting relationships.

“Transient Family Syndrome” is especially hard on spouses. Since one person's career

requires frequent moves, the partner doesn't have time to develop their own career or formal outside interests. In Lucy's case, she doesn't have the chance to be a normal homemaker. She doesn't have the time necessary to build bonds or support with any long-term neighbors. She is unable to take root in the local community and establish a close circle of friends. When she is feeling down she doesn't have someone close to call upon or a shoulder to cry on.

“At times I feel terribly lonely,” Lucy claimed. Besides her husband and children she has no other outlets.

This problem not only affects individuals, but the whole family. Without outside support such families put tremendous pressure on each other and expect the marriage and family life to meet all emotional needs. Such families often become so interdependent that individual outside friendships may seem like “treason”. This will inhibit them even more toward outside contact, which results in further isolation.

The effective way to deal with Transient Family Syndrome is not relocating back home, but finding the courage to open up emotionally and reaching out to establish genuine friendships. This will not only make life easier but will also create a pleasant memory even after having left a particular place.

It is true that distance can create obstacles to sustaining close friendships. However, if mutual effort is made to stay in touch, such obstacles can be conquered. Correspondence, phone calls and occasional visits can keep friendships alive. It all depends on how one values each relationship. It is a matter of attitude rather than merely a problem of distance.

Every expatriate family needs to be aware of whether they are in any way sabotaging each other's personal growth. It is important for them to give space to each other and encourage outside contacts. This will not only promote building friendships but also speed up acculturation.

When such families decide to reach out they will likely find others experiencing similar vulnerability. Nothing will better erase the myth that “we are all alone”. At the same time they will find mutual support.

Transient Family Syndrome is not necessarily experienced by all expatriate families. Yet often an individual or family may not recognize its impact until it suddenly strikes them what they're missing. Therefore it is important for people to acknowledge their own feelings and note whether any family members' needs are disrupted or not fulfilled because of frequent relocations.

The above is not an actual case, but a reconstruction based on actual cases.

*Cathy Tsang-Feign is an American- licensed psychotherapist based in Hong Kong. She works with individuals and families on problems of stress, marital dilemmas, career pressures, foreign relocation, and other issues. She is the author of the book **KEEPING YOUR LIFE, FAMILY AND CAREER INTACT WHILE LIVING ABROAD.***

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