



athy Tsang-Feign MA MFT
PSYCHOTHERAPIST
California licence MFT24173

Room 1006 Commercial House
35 Queen's Road Central
Hong Kong
telephone 852 · 2122 9386
cathy@psychinternational.com
www.psychinternational.com

When One Partner Wants To Go Home by Cathy Tsang-Feign

Marianne is threatening to leave her husband Bob unless they move back to America at the end of his current contract.

"I'm tired of you avoiding the subject of moving back to Boston. Every time I bring it up you joke about it and totally ignore my feelings." Marianne was angry.

"I just don't want to fight, sweetheart. Of course I care about your feelings," Bob explained.

Bob and Marianne have been married for ten years and have one child. The family moved to Britain seven years ago, when Bob was promoted to branch financial manager. He feels comfortable and settled here. But his wife gave up her profession and hasn't felt totally satisfied living in the UK. As Bob's third term contract comes up for renewal Marianne has started pressuring him to transfer back home, which he had promised to do a few years back. The tension between them is apparent.

For Marianne life here was exciting and luxurious for awhile, but nothing could eliminate her dissatisfaction at being unable to pursue her own career. She makes frequent trips home to be with friends and family as her way to deal with the frustration of living in a foreign country.

"The money is good and yet I don't want to grow old here," claims Marianne. Secretly she is counting the days to move back home.

However, for Bob the idea of returning home is dreadful. He enjoys his little "empire" here. With tremendous responsibility and decision power, Bob gains a great sense of importance and being "somebody" among his staff and colleagues. On top of this, he enjoys all the expatriate status, perks and privileges, which make his life very charming. He cannot see himself transferring back home and returning to an "average" middle-class existence. Therefore his original two year contract has been extended several times.

Bob assumes that Marianne speaks of returning to Boston because of moodiness and occasional homesickness. Bob tries to avoid the subject, thinking she will soon forget it. This time around when she actually threatened to leave him, it took him by surprise. He believes that his wife's reaction is blown out of proportion. He feels that she is unappreciative of what she has in Britain, that she thinks only of herself and little of his career and ambition.

Marianne accuses Bob of being selfish, only thinking of his own needs and ambitions and totally disregarding hers. She feels hurt, angry and taken for granted. Even though they generally have a good marriage she cannot see herself continuing to be treated in this way. She feels she has given up so much for him. She believes she has a perfect right to ask him to do something for her -- that is, to move back home.

For many expatriates, the fear of returning home can be overwhelming. After investing several years of his or her life in Britain building up the present situation, going back seems like a step down. Trading in a singular, powerful position in business and society to become just another face back in the home office seems like going backwards in life. Naturally one will try earnestly to put off going home.

In this circumstance, there is no specific "right" or "wrong" for either side. Their problem is a lack of honest and direct communication. When the couple avoids fighting, "to keep the peace", they only make the situation worse.

Often a couple tries to avoid arguments at all cost. But in fact fights can be good, healthy, and even necessary. Arguing can give people a chance to vent their frustration as well as to uncover misunderstandings or assumptions between them. In Bob and Marianne's case, if things had been clarified much earlier on, they may not have built up to the point of explosion.

If one partner's dream is being fulfilled at the expense of their spouse's needs and desires, inevitably a crisis will result. A couple must be careful not to give precedence to one partner just because he or she makes more money. Similarly, the spouse should not swallow his or her objections to a major decision which affects both people equally.

Genuine agreement must be reached in order for everyone to be satisfied. Afterwards, frequent evaluations of the situation and open discussion of each others' feelings will help to prevent any bitterness or resentment from building up.

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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