

WEST AFRICAN RESCUE ASSOCIATION

PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR FOREIGNERS

Living in a foreign country can be a wonderful and sometimes a challenging experience. It is a major adjustment to move from one's home country and live outside of your usual comfort zone and away from your normal routine, family and friends. Some people find adjustment or transitions easier than others.

Going through normal life crisis in a foreign country without a support network around you, can potentially be very frightening and destabilizing. Foreigners who set up new support networks for themselves early on arrival find themselves less afraid and lonely in a crisis and feel less vulnerable and tend to get over their crisis easier than those without a support network.

Consider that, any crisis such as, dealing with grief, relationship problems, adjustment challenges or any personal challenge can become more difficult to deal with alone when one is separate from one's usual support network of family and friends.

Rather seek professional help than resorting to other sources of comfort like smoking, drinking, eating, gambling or other addictions. Habits like these can initially be a harmless stress relief or comfort but can turn into an addiction if kept unchecked. Our family and friends often bring our attention to massive changes in our bodies and lifestyles, which we ourselves, would preferably try to deny.

For those with children – each child will adjust at their own pace to a foreign country and like yourself some children's personalities adjust easier than others, looking out for the signs of adjustment difficulties for the first six months in their new environment may assist you to catch a problem early.

Those who move to a foreign country and have additional life changes going on at the same time are more susceptible to finding adjustment issues difficult. Adjustment issues are not only when moving house or countries but can include any major changes in one's life. For example: adjusting to having a new baby, adjusting to becoming a mother, adjusting to a new job, adjusting to being married and living with a partner, dealing with a loss of someone - just to name a few.

Remember that if you are struggling, it is always more helpful to reach out to friends or professional help. Professional help does not necessarily mean you have a "problem" or that "there is something wrong with you". Speaking to a professional about your stresses or difficulties can assist you to clearly see ways to cope with current issues and minimize the risk of your stress developing into more serious problems of anxiety or depression which can occur to anyone as a result of long term unresolved problems.

STRESS

Stress is not necessarily always negative. Some stress is actually an essential motivating, driving force which encourages us at times to provide necessary energy to perform tasks.

Having said that, exposure to ongoing stress in our body for long periods of time can be detrimental to your health. As a result, long term stress also slowly begins to erode our lives by negatively affecting our relationships, private and professional and our physical health by depleting you.

Stress can come from many areas in our lives - work, home, financial issues, relationships, and illness. Stress is actually a very normal part of adult life for all of us but it can quickly become harmful and not helpful. It is the ongoing kind of harmful stress which we need to all be aware of to ensure it is monitored and does not affect our health and happiness.

Some early signs of ongoing abundance of negative stress in your life could include:

- Increased heart rate
- Headaches
- Tension – muscles (especially back, neck and jaw)
- Reduced tolerance and more irritability
- Changes in appetite either loss or increased appetite
- Increase use in substances such as alcohol, coffee, cigarettes, drugs
- Changes in sleep patterns – either requiring more sleep or insomnia
- Changes in your regular toilet habits
- Feelings of being over burdened or under pressure all the time
- Loss of interest in fun, relaxation, people, sex
- Difficulties in concentration, decision making or focusing on tasks

The following useful steps can be helpful as “self help” methods to de-escalate your stress levels:

- Try and identify the possible source of your current stress. Analyze useful ways you could change the way you are doing things with regards to this trigger factor.
- Develop skills in relaxation techniques: breathing exercises, yoga, stretching, massage, time out or whatever form of relaxation suits your body and mind.
- Ensure that you build physical fitness into your life on a regular (3 times a week is recommended) basis. This can be extremely helpful to reduce muscle tension and release unwanted anxiety and stress.
- Develop and maintain a good and healthy lifestyle: this includes regular healthy sleep patterns, regular healthy diet with monitoring of unhealthy habits such as sugars, caffeine etc.
- Develop and maintaining healthy boundaries by being able to remind yourself of your choices and assertiveness in being able say no.
- Be aware of your internal self talk or internal dialogue (negativity, putting yourself down and discouraging yourself and irrational thoughts are all self defeating) – constantly challenge your thoughts

and ensure you only entertain healthy thought patterns that are well in perspective. Avoid black and white thinking styles and all or nothing outcomes.

- Equip yourself with good conflict management and problem solving techniques so that the normal life conflicts and decisions don't deplete you emotionally.
- Develop and maintain good organizational and time management skills so tasks don't overwhelm you.
- Remind yourself regularly of your humanness – your right not to have to be absolutely perfect and be forgiving of yourself if you make mistakes. Tendencies towards perfectionism can be a killer, for increasing ongoing and unnecessary stress.
- Spend time with the loving and kind people who provide you with fun, loving and supportive relationships.
- Give yourself adequate time off from work and responsibilities to re-charge your batteries. (if you tend to be a workaholic - maintain a regular and rigid off time and vacations time).
- Develop skills to manage your affairs in an organized and professional way – legally and financially so these don't burden you.
- Ensure that you build enough time in your life for FUN, JOY, HUMOUR /LAUGHTER AND HOBBIES THAT ENRICH YOUR LIFE.

When to get professional help:

- When stresses cross the line of becoming constant fears and anxiety which you can't shake off.
- When your stress/ anxiety causes you to become co-dependent on substances (alcohol/drugs) in order for you to relax or feel better and forget your problems.
- When a negative situation overwhelms you with feelings of hopelessness, depression, guilt, shame, anger, confusion, insecurity, resentment, frustration or fear.
- When your life is being interrupted and you can't function the way you used to.
- When you feel you can't enjoy life anymore.

THE CHALLENGES OF ADJUSTMENT OR TRANSITION

Moving into a new house can be a big adjustment for some people let alone moving to a new country. Moving countries can bring about massive adjustments to one's life style, culture, habits, customs and values. Some individuals can find all these changes in their lives stressful and challenging and it is likely that each person in a family will face the challenge of transition in a different way. Some may find it motivating, exciting and positively challenging and others may find it daunting, intimidating and destabilizing.

Moving away from the extended family, friends and social network can leave some feeling lonely and lost, particularly during the first three months and when one goes through a personal challenge. For some children a change in schools can be particularly challenging especially in the teenage years. Some children need professional support at first in order to be able to adjust smoothly without losing confidence in themselves. Children are sensitive to react additionally if there are large changes in rules, financial status of the family and language changes. Toddlers may feel insecure as their whole world has been turned upside down and temporary minor regressions are not uncommon.

Parents should look out for signs of their children withdrawing into themselves and finding it difficult to make friends or if there are signs of total abandonment of their old culture and magnified ways of taking on a new identity soon after a transition. These may be signs that a child is struggling with their new environment. If your child persistently does not want to attend school or is sickly it may be a sign to seek some professional support.

A healthy adjustment leaves a child and adult making the best of their new situation and the “best of both worlds”, so to speak, by learning a new way of life but not abandoning the old and maintaining the family culture and value systems. A healthy transition and adjustment can be an excellent opportunity for both adult and child in personal growth and development if it can be done with the loving support of a spouse or parent and with minimal stress. It is very normal for everyone to both expect and anticipate a certain amount of stress within the first three months of any major adjustment or transition.

By reading and researching on your new country prior to a move can be helpful for both adults and children to anticipate some of the new social norms and cultures in what to expect on arrival and can reduce the “culture shock”.

Extra care should be taken during a transition with adults and children with tendencies to be negative or pessimistic as those with a more positive attitude towards life tend to adjust easier. Families and couples should be encouraged to talk openly, regularly and honestly about their personal adjustment challenges so individuals can support to each other. Become a good listener to your children and your spouse.

Consider that for couples the transition may be entirely different for each individual which in itself can be a challenge. For couples one party may not have been as keen as the other for the transition in the first place. One may be facing a huge new career challenge as part of the adjustment and the other have no job at all and may be lonely and lost. Couples should show each other a huge amount of understanding and care over this time should this be the case and try and understand each other’s unique situation from their perspective. This can be particularly exacerbated if one party has given up a life style, close family ties and or a career in order to become a following spouse. Without good communications, honesty and support from each other resentment and bitterness can make transitions and adjustment issues even more complex.

It is important that families use the change to make healthy and sensible life style choices for themselves as part of their adjustment so the family can keep healthy and happy. Changes in diet or massive changes in exercise routines for example can also throw a person or a family out of their routine and as long as one makes healthy choices one’s health should not be affected.

Maintaining a regular routine of emails, Skype or telephone calls can be helpful especially for children to adjust to new circumstances without their friends or grandparents around. This can also ensure that good and close bonds are maintained through the transition and throughout the expatriate experience which ultimately will assist with readjustment back home afterwards.