

# Expatriate Women: Confessions

50 Answers to Your Real-Life  
Questions about Living Abroad



Andrea Martins & Victoria Hepworth

## Praise for This Book

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“For once, a book that tells the truth about the expat experience. An inspiring account, and a must-read for those contemplating an international assignment or those already on one.”

—Yvonne McNulty, PhD, Assistant Professor,  
James Cook University, Singapore

“*Expat Women: Confessions* is a wonderful addition to the literature on the experiences of women during their lives abroad. Andrea and Victoria answer difficult questions with empathy, an upbeat attitude, and wisdom. This is a book that every expat woman should keep at her bedside for the moments that inevitably surface when abroad—and even after repatriation.”

—Elizabeth Perelstein, President, School Choice  
International, and named one of Fortune Magazine’s  
10 Most Powerful Women Entrepreneurs (2010)

“With the voice of your most resourceful girlfriends, Andrea and Victoria give expat women worldwide a fabulous collection of practical advice.”

—Kathleen Simon, President, and My-Linh Kunst, 1st  
Vice President Communications, FAWCO (Federation  
of American Women’s Clubs Overseas Inc.)

“Expatriation can be very rewarding and yet a challenge at the same time, but it is, for everyone, a life-changing experience. This is a comprehensive book about diverse expat experiences and I believe it could be a useful point of reference for those seeking encouragement and understanding in meeting the challenges they face. It made me realize how fortunate we are to work in a company that invests in expatriate support.”

—Karin Brakel, Global Outpost Manager, Shell International B.V.

“An inspiring book which gives a great insight into expatriate life.”

—Elske van Holk, Director, Expatriate Archive Centre,  
The Netherlands

“Living abroad can be a mind-opening experience that enhances your personal and professional lives, but it can also be a lonely place. *Expat Women: Confessions* eases that loneliness by collecting many of the challenges faced by expats and offering practical solutions to problems unique to the globetrotting woman.”

—Stacie Nevadomski Berdan, Co-author, *Get Ahead by Going Abroad: A Woman's Guide to Fast-track Career Success*, and Author, *Go Global! A Student's Guide to Launching an International Career*

“A very interesting, easy-to-read and helpful companion guide for women trailing their spouses around the world.”

—Missy Dover, Director of Global Mobility,  
The McGraw-Hill Companies

“With regard to all matters of mobility, knowledge adds a powerful tool: for the assignment manager, for service partners, and perhaps most importantly, for expats and their families. We can always applaud work that adds clarity to the international assignment process.”

—Peggy Smith, SCRP, SGMS, CEO, Worldwide ERC®

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**50 Answers to Your Real-Life  
Questions about Living Abroad**

**SAMPLE**

**Andrea Martins & Victoria Hepworth**

For bulk orders and customized corporate editions, please email us at:  
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*To all of the wonderful expatriate women across the globe. There are fun times and there are tough times, but at all times, believe in yourself and know that you are not alone.*

# Foreword

**F**irst, a confession of my own: I have been a longtime fan of the Expat Confessions column on ExpatWomen.com—the extremely readable and appropriately named website that Andrea Martins co-created and works tirelessly to maintain. Both Andrea and Victoria Hepworth, a trained psychologist, should be congratulated for their tremendous service to the far-flung community of expatriate women living abroad, first with their monthly Expat Confessions column and now with this wonderful volume in print.

Second confession: when Andrea asked me to write this foreword, I was not sure “confession” was the right word to include in the book’s title. To me, the meaning of “confession” was more in keeping with the one in my desk-side dictionary: “an acknowledgement of one’s faults or crimes.” Since when, I wondered, did it become a crime to be an expat woman? Then, of course, it hit me. Many women *feel* they are somehow letting the side down by not knowing everything there is to know about living and loving globally. Too often they also feel they are the *only* ones worrying or wondering, so to publicly, albeit anonymously, pose their question really is akin to making a confession.

Depending on where you are posted and what your particular circumstances are, remaining silent about your concerns can be a survival tactic. Consequently, many expats simply do not want to question or speak up about the challenges of international relocation, so they just slap a smile on their face that may remain frozen there

for years! After more than two decades of writing for and lecturing to expat families around the world (and learning too many secrets to count), I am still surprised at the number of women who are afraid to appear anything less than perfectly well adjusted.

But life is too short and the overseas opportunities for cultural experiences, new friendships and personal transformation so numerous that women need to know they are not alone in experiencing a bad day or even wanting to run back “home.” Everyone handles transition differently. As many of us in the culture shock “business” like to say, there is no right or wrong, only different. But I still worry, even after all these years of meeting expats, that when women go into denial about challenges, and literally repress these issues for years, this cannot possibly be good for their physical or emotional health. Better to get everything out into the open to enable us to move on and take advantage of the considerable privileges of living abroad.

In *Expat Women: Confessions—50 Answers to Your Real-Life Questions about Living Abroad*, women are encouraged to air their issues, learn that others often feel exactly the same way, and find comfort, reassurance and, often, validation in the knowledge that their own feelings are real and not imagined. Thankfully, the authors have not shied away from addressing tough questions about the “hidden” aspects of global living, such as domestic violence, infidelity and alcohol abuse. These are issues that few people want to acknowledge exist, despite all the evidence to the contrary.

Another message in this book is the importance of supporting one another abroad. I have been incredibly lucky to have both authors step up to be my own extremely supportive expatriate girlfriends. Andrea is now in Kuala Lumpur, but she and I met when her family was posted to Mexico City. We were communicating about website matters when I finally asked: “By the way, where in the world are you?” When she said Mexico, I seized the chance to say I had always

wanted to lecture there. The next thing I knew, I was busy speaking at various locations around Mexico City, including speaking to the Newcomers Club of Mexico City in Andrea's own living room.

Likewise, I met Victoria, who is in Dubai at the moment, in Shanghai when Lifeline Shanghai (a hotline for the city's international community, which she founded) was coincidentally celebrating its first anniversary around the time I was planning to visit. Again, within days, Victoria had my entire program organized.

Many are the adventures and laughs I shared with both women. I hope that when they embark on their own book tours, they too will find new expat girlfriends who offer them the support and friendship they so kindly extended to me.

If there is one message contained within these fifty confessions and the thoughtful responses to each of them, it is this: the challenges of expat women are universal. While locations, languages, weather and food may change, when expat women support one another, as Andrea and Victoria do so well in the pages to follow, it will *always* make a difference.

Enjoy your time abroad, and *keep supporting one another*,

**Robin Pascoe**

—Author

*A Broad Abroad: The Expat Wife's Guide to Successful Living Abroad*

*Raising Global Nomads: Parenting Abroad in an On-Demand World*

*A Moveable Marriage: Relocate Your Relationship Without Breaking It*

*Homeward Bound: A Spouse's Guide to Repatriation*

# Introduction

**A**pril Davidson was twenty-three and had never left the United States. In mid-2005, April's world was turned upside down. She moved to Mexico City, where her husband's company had sent him to help with local operations. April arrived with two young children in tow, little Spanish, and none of the established expat support infrastructure enjoyed by employee families of larger, multinational companies.

Four months after arriving, April called me to inquire about the playgroup at my house that afternoon. My name and number were listed with the Newcomers Club of Mexico City, and I would often get phone calls from new arrivals and long-termers alike.

"Hi, my name is April... Is this Andrea?" she inquired tentatively.

"Hi, April. Yes, this is Andrea. How can I help you?" I replied, juggling my attention between April and my one-year-old daughter making a mess of the cheese tortillas at the kitchen table.

"I'm calling to ask if you have a playgroup today. I got your number from the Newcomers Club and was wondering if my children and I could come along?" April asked, sounding more confident.

"Yes, four o'clock," I replied. "How old are your children?"

"Madison is three and Tommy is one and a half," April answered.

"Perfect. Please come along at four o'clock. We usually get anywhere from twenty to sixty people, including children. Everyone is really fabulous, and I am sure they would love to meet you."

By the way, “How long have you been in Mexico, April?”

“We’ve been here four months,” she answered. “But I do not speak much Spanish, so the children and I haven’t really been out of the apartment yet. Except to buy groceries, of course.”

*Oh, my, gosh!* I thought to myself. *How could she have been here four months and hardly ventured out of the apartment?* I am no superwoman, but by the time I had been in Mexico City for four months, I had explored nearly every inch of my neighborhood, walked my son in his stroller twice a day around the nearby park inhabited by questionable armed guards, been swindled by many of the local food stalls, embarrassed myself speaking Spanish, suffered a few dubious leg waxes at the local salons, attended several Newcomers Club gatherings, and learned how to drive on the opposite side of the road. Sure, I had shed some tears along the way, but more importantly, I had overcome my fears and met some fantastic expat mentors who were invaluable during my settling-in period.

April’s experience got me thinking. *Why had our experiences been so different? Was it because I had lived abroad before that I knew a little better how to “jump in”? Did being ten years older help boost my confidence? What was it?*

Fast-forward one year, to mid-2006. April and I had become friends and visited each other often for children’s play dates. Fellow expat Jill Lengré and I were working hard behind the scenes to get ExpatWomen.com ready to launch the following January. I asked April if she would please read Robin Pascoe’s book *A Moveable Marriage: Relocate Your Relationship without Breaking It* and write a review for our soon-to-be-launched website. April happily volunteered to read Robin’s excellent “common sense advice” book. But never did I anticipate what happened next.

April returned Robin’s book to me the following week with tears in her eyes. She took a deep breath as she plucked up the courage

to confess: “I never knew that anyone else felt this way. I thought it was just me who felt alone and unable to cope well. I have been taking medication for unexplained stomach problems since arriving, and now my doctor has me on medication for anxiety as well—to help me sleep at night. Finally I understand what is happening. I’m so happy to know that it’s not just me.”

I stood in my doorway, shocked. April might have taken a while to settle in, but she was always so happy on the outside. I had never imagined she might still be secretly struggling and have something to confess on the inside.

“Do you have any more of Robin’s books?” April quipped with a smile, trying to lighten the mood.

Interestingly, April was no novice at relocation: she had relocated domestically ten times before graduating from high school. So what was it about relocating abroad that had overwhelmed her? How can we reassure women that they are *not alone* and provide some more “common sense advice” to help?

It is questions like these that inspired ExpatWomen.com’s Expat Confessions column, and it is April and emails from hundreds of women like her who have inspired this book.

My co-author Victoria Hepworth and I thank you very much for supporting this book. We hope that it encourages and inspires you.

Wishing you success abroad,

**Andrea Martins**

—Director and co-founder, ExpatWomen.com

# Chapter 2

## Career and Money



# I Need More Than Coffee

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**Q.** I am a professional woman and have decided to take a break from my job as a political advisor to the United Nations to join my husband on sabbatical here in Portugal for two years. We knew about the move five months prior so had enough time to research, plan and get excited about our new adventure. I made a list of all the activities I wanted to do during these two years and contacted many of the international clubs before arriving. I daydreamed about my well-deserved break from work, the time I would get to spend with my husband and all the things I was going to do.

However, we have been here for six months and I cannot believe how lost and dissatisfied I feel. I am shocked and embarrassed to feel this way, as I genuinely thought I would get enough stimulation from my surroundings, supplemented by the local expat club activities. I realize now that I need more than coffee. I know this is a turnaround from my initial plans, but it is very obvious to me that I cannot continue down this path for much longer. My visa does not allow me to work here. Any suggestions?

**A.** As you have discovered, the transition from full-time employment to not working at all can be a difficult one. Take heart, however, in the fact that many professional women before you have taken time off and had a rewarding and valuable experience, whether overseas or at home.

**After the “honeymoon.”** It is not uncommon for the nonworking partner to feel lost after relocating. The first six months are often referred to as the “honeymoon period” of expatriate life, when you are busy setting up your home, exploring your new city and discovering who you are outside of your own country. Yet once the final boxes are

unpacked and you have visited the last museum on your list, “real life” begins, which can be quite a crash back down to earth. Quite quickly, the glamor and excitement of expat life can wear off, and you are left trying to put some meaning back into your life.

If you want to stay with your husband in Portugal and abide by your visa restrictions, you can choose to spend the next year and a half either fighting your decision to take time off or accepting your situation and using your time wisely. Your stay is not forever, you do have an end date, so do not be so hard on yourself. There are many things you can do over the next eighteen months that do not have to involve just coffee mornings.

**Plan of action.** First of all, we suggest you dig up the list of to-do activities you wrote before arrival. These were obviously things that motivated and inspired you when you were excited about having time off. Review your list and see which things are possible and interesting to you now. If you can only look at that list with a tired, lost face, then go out, get some exercise, take a shower and come back to look at the list with new, positive eyes.

Choose three items that stimulate you the most and make them this week’s project. Along with physical exercise, being proactive is the best way to ward off depression, self-pity and negativity—especially for a goal-oriented person.

Second, look into volunteer work, perhaps in a field that would enhance your credibility as a political advisor with the UN or perhaps in a completely unrelated area that has always interested you. Alternatively, have you thought about the possibility of furthering your education via online or long-distance courses? You said that you cannot work locally, but can you do some home-based work projects with your previous employer or any other employer willing for you to work virtually, which may not require a change to your Portuguese visa?

As a political advisor, you most likely have very good interpersonal and written communication skills. Consider using these skills to write a how-to book about your location or about any other area of your expertise. There are always new angles for existing books—and many gaps in the marketplace for new book ideas. Getting a book published is also easier than it used to be, with the advent of print-on-demand self-publishing companies that are only too happy to print anything you might like to write. If you have ever nurtured an unfulfilled dream of being a published author, maybe now is your chance to prove what you can do.

Third, if despite your best efforts, you cannot escape the fact that you are a high achiever who must have daily deadlines and goals, then create some tasks and deadlines for yourself each day. Before you go to bed each evening, know exactly which tasks you need to complete the next day, remembering to include health, well-being and feel-good activities.

**Make networking pay off.** The next step is to find the “right” expat clubs or local associations for you to join—because, coffee or no coffee, there really is great value in building supportive networks for yourself abroad. You never know when you might need someone, now or in the future, for work contacts, social contacts or help in an emergency. If you cannot find your ideal group, start your own. (See *Starting Your Own Club*)

When you network, remember to have some business cards (yes, you can make your own!) with a professional title on them and target the business-related groups. Meeting like-minded individuals should not only provide some inspiration and understanding but should also provide you with support and friendship.

It sounds as if you are an ambitious person who expects results in all that you do. So, set yourself some direction and a sense of purpose each day—and live it! While it might sometimes feel like a

burden, if you think about it, it really is a privilege to be able to have the time and financial support to enjoy and experience another culture and all that it has to offer, without the pressure of working.

We hope you make the most of your time abroad and come home enriched, refreshed and inspired.

# No Money Left

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**Q.** In a few months' time, my partner and I will be returning to home base. We have enjoyed postings in Madrid, Berlin, Santiago and now Cairo. We have indulged in amazing holidays, eaten at spectacular restaurants and basically had a lifestyle that was second to none. The problem now is that this upcoming move home has made us realize we have no more than two months' salary saved in our joint bank account, which is virtually nothing. This is causing us both great anxiety, as we now see that we have been a little careless with our impressive salaries abroad and we are concerned we have not set ourselves up properly for the future. What can we do?

**A.** Congratulations for recognizing that you need to take more proactive steps to achieve the future you seek. There are six key financial scenarios that couples tend to fall into, that move them to the point of frustration or a breakdown in the relationship. In many cases, more than one scenario is present. Identify which of the following are true for your relationship:

- \* No personalized spending plan.
- \* No *agreed-upon* personalized spending plan.
- \* No *clearly defined* short-, medium- or long-term financial goals.
- \* No *agreed-upon*, clearly defined short-, medium- or long-term financial goals.
- \* No structure set up to carry out what has been agreed upon.
- \* A lack of commitment by one or both partners to do what it will

take to reach the financial future that has been envisioned.

In terms of what you can do now, do not despair—there is plenty you can do to set yourselves up for a bright future. None of these steps are magic fixes, but if you commit to them, they will help to alleviate some of your anxiety and reassure you that you are getting back on track to achieving what you want for the future.

**Step 1: Take responsibility and be accountable.** You and your partner both need to accept responsibility for the joint spending of the past and realize that you will only change your joint habits if you work together. By encouraging and supporting each other in doing what is needed, not only will your stress levels be reduced, you will find it easier to reach your individual and joint goals.

**Step 2: Identify spending triggers.** Apart from buying the essentials, what has triggered you to spend money in the past? Is it a sense that your income is never-ending and therefore it has never needed to be monitored? Is it due to the influence of your peers? Is it due to habit—for example, have you a weekend routine that starts at the department stores, then moves to your favorite restaurant for lunch, followed by an afternoon or evening of entertainment with friends, at somewhere super expensive? Or have you spent money because it has made you feel better?

**Step 3: Visualize the future.** Take some time to think about what you most value and/or enjoy in life? What do you most want to have, whom do you most want to be, what will your close personal relationships look like, where will you be and what will you be doing one, five and ten years from now?

**Step 4: Establish goals.** Set goals that will help you to create your vision(s) of the future. Goals are the tangible benchmarks you identify that need to be accomplished to achieve your vision.

*Goals* need to be distinguished from *tasks*—those actions we need to take to keep our lives running smoothly, like paying the bills, servicing the car, and all of the things that do not lead directly to fulfilling our life’s *vision*. Goals must be attainable, be measurable and have time frames. For example, I will pay off my credit cards within six months, or starting today, I will set aside \$100 per week until I build an emergency fund equal to three months’ basic living expenses.

Brainstorm a list of goals that will get you closer to your vision(s). Then rank the goals you have listed, agree on priorities, and categorize the priorities by time. For example: immediate (within the next twelve months), short-term (one to five years), and long-term (more than five years away).

**Step 5: Create a spending plan.** Get into the habit of designing an annual spending plan to support your short and long term goals. A spending plan is different from a traditional budget, in that it is not just based on last year’s expenditures but sets new figures, based on your new homework, experience and priorities. If, for instance, an exotic family vacation is a goal for the year and it is to be paid for in addition to your “usual” annual travel expenses, your total estimate for this category may be larger than last year and may require you to reduce spending in other categories.

When you fill in figures for the spending plan, you begin by listing all of your monthly or annual commitments and then move on to discretionary expenses. By planning out how you envision spending your money before you actually spend it, you should be able to reduce the frequency of or eliminate those spending triggers you may have identified in step two. The benefit for your relationship is that you will engage in genuine discussions about financial capability, and you will be making joint decisions about how to work together to achieve your vision(s) for the future.

**Step 6: Review spending regularly.** Track your spending as best you can and review it against the spending plan on a quarterly or semi-annual basis. This will allow you to make adjustments as you move through the calendar year. Review your goals annually to inform your next annual spending plan.

**Step 7: Train your mind.** A Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) professional might argue that if you train your mind to believe you are struggling with your finances, then that is exactly what will happen. Instead, they might suggest that if you train your mind to believe you are in control of your finances and that you have the power to say no when you previously would have spent money, then that instead will be your outcome. We suggest you try training your mind to support you in your financial commitments, rather than to drag you down.

**Step 8: Get professional help.** One of your first tasks on arrival at home base should be to find yourselves a reputable financial planner. In addition, you may also find it useful to engage a life coach, either now in your current location or once you arrive home, who can help you clarify your vision of the future, motivate you and support you in taking action. A counselor may also be appropriate, depending on what your triggers for spending money have been in the past. In short, the more help and support you seek, the higher the likelihood you will move forward with your vision of a brighter financial future.

Here's wishing you a fast, sustainable financial recovery!

*Special thanks to Jennifer A. Patterson, CFP® (US), CIMC™, CIMA®, TEP for helping with the original website version of this confession. Jennifer is the managing director of Patterson Partners Ltd. (www.patterson-partners.com), an international wealth management firm that specializes in cross-border financial planning. She is also the author of When Families Cross Borders: A Guide for Internationally Mobile People and she contributed to the finance chapter of Jeanne A. Heinzer's Living Your Best Life Abroad.*

# Chapter 3

## Raising Children



## Homesick New Mother Abroad

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**Q.** I am a trailing spouse and mother of one. We have been living in South Korea for seven months. When we first arrived, I loved the thrill of it all. But now I hate it. We are living in a tiny apartment with no backyard or outside space and we all sleep in the same room. My son is cooped up inside unless we take a couple of forms of public transport to get to the local park. My husband works from home on occasion, and then I have the impossible task of keeping our sixteen-month-old son quiet and occupied so as not to distract his father.

As an Australian who grew up on a large property, I had never envisaged my son's childhood or my parenting style to be anything like this. I desperately miss my mum for the emotional support and I wish she could help more with her grandson. I feel like I do not have five minutes to myself or anywhere in our home to "get away." Our situation was not like this on our first assignment in Canada. I miss Australia dreadfully and although my husband says we can go back once this assignment has finished, I have a sinking feeling that he does not want to go back to Australia at all. Can you offer any encouraging comments?

**A.** As is often the case for a trailing spouse, you are trying to deal with various situational, environmental, emotional and personal issues simultaneously. Ensuring that your family is safe, secure and comfortable in their new home, while you yourself are trying to figure out a new culture and navigate the emotional upheaval that this brings, can be downright difficult. Throw into the mix your new role as a parent and suddenly life looks completely different—and quite often not at all how you had pictured. More often than not, your own needs are sacrificed for those of the rest of your family unit.

**Be realistic and live for today.** Our first word of caution is about being too nostalgic about “home.” The reality of life in your home country might not actually match your memories of “home” anymore. We tend to reflect on the positive and blank out the negative aspects of our lives, especially when we are in an unhappy space. You may be reminiscing with rose-tinted glasses on. Be careful.

Unfortunately, if you are living in the past and yearning to be back in Australia, it will be nearly impossible to adjust and assimilate in your new location. In order to integrate into or adapt to life in Korea, you need to live it and be present in it. Get out and experience new things: try new foods, go to new places, join a club, get involved in Korean cultural activities, do some sightseeing. Your life in Korea is not “instead of” your life in Australia. Think of it as “in addition to.”

**Positive changes you can make.** Assuming that you will be in Korea for a while longer, the only real way to move forward is to articulate some positive changes that you can make in your day-to-day life that might help you to feel better about your new location. Can you change where you live? Granted, you might lose some money on the current lease, but are you able to find someone to take it over, or are you willing to lose a bit of money on the rent in an effort to improve the happiness of everyone in your home? Have you thought about contacting some estate agents to get an idea of what is available? We appreciate Korea is not the cheapest of places to rent accommodation, but you will not know if you do not investigate.

If you cannot move, can you befriend others nearby who might have an outside yard or play area, where you could visit with your son? Have you considered enrolling your son in a kindergarten or nursery for a few mornings a week? This will give your son contact with other children his age, plus space to run around and play—and it will hopefully give you the time you deserve to do

something for yourself. Another idea would be to take your son out to more activities, such as swimming lessons, music classes or any other type of socialization classes that will get you both out of the apartment and feeling more involved in your community.

What about joining a playgroup (or two) of other expatriate or internationally minded mothers? This could provide you with an outlet to share your joys and struggles with like-minded new mothers who empathize with what you are going through and are probably going through the same things themselves. If there are no such groups in your immediate vicinity, you could always advertise (in local media, via a flyer at the local supermarket or via online forums) and start your own (see *Starting Your Own Club*).

**Recognize realities.** Another major consideration is, just how much of your frustration is due to your location versus your new role as a mother? Motherhood is a massive adjustment in itself and an ever-evolving one as your children grow. It has a huge impact on your life, given its around-the-clock responsibility, sleep deprivation and the feeling that you never have any time to yourself. These are issues that mothers all over the world deal with, so be careful not to blame these frustrations on your host country.

With regards to not having your parents around to help out, again a word of caution: many an expat has been lured home by the promise of free babysitting from grandparents, only to find that the busy schedules of grandparents today might not match those of their children. With sixty being the new fifty and fifty being the new forty, grandparents today are more than likely still working (at least part-time), regularly traveling for pleasure and/or just being very busy in their own right.

**Take action to find happiness.** We suggest that once things are clearer in your mind, in terms of why you are frustrated, what you

can change and what you cannot, talk to your husband (because open and ongoing communication is vital) and then set yourself some goals and time frames for making positive changes to improve your situation. If you find that you have genuinely tried to be happy in Korea but cannot, then again, you need to speak with your husband and articulate clearly how you feel and why. Together, you need to work out what is important and how you can both be happy.

Many relationships have broken up overseas (and at home) because couples cannot see how to change a current, unhappy situation. However, many other relationships have survived because together, couples have made difficult decisions (such as moving home, quitting a job and/or changing a career path) that have ultimately improved their family's happiness and kept them together.

Note: Do not be afraid to get external counseling to help both of you think about and talk through what you are seeking to improve in your current situation.

Unfortunately, not all expat assignments work out. Nor do all marriages. But before you think about separating or moving home, think how you personally, and you as a couple, can try to transform your situation so that your time in Korea might later become a wonderful memory.

Best wishes.

# My Kids Are My All

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**Q.** Hello. I am a lawyer who gave up my own very successful practice to move abroad with my husband fourteen years ago. We have three children, now fourteen, twelve and eleven, and we currently live in Norway. My husband travels extensively for work, and I am worried that I am too attached to my children. A close friend recently pointed out to me that my days revolve around my kids entirely and I willingly turn down social functions with adults, in case my children need me.

I am also concerned that my children rely on me for every little bump in the road and have become too dependent on me as well. They have not made so many friends this year and are constantly asking for my help, which I am only too happy to give. I have read about “enmeshed families” and how children are left without a sense of self and outward mission, and I am scared that I am robbing my children of valuable life skills in an attempt to fill a void in my own life. Any suggestions?

**A.** The most difficult part of resolving an issue is realizing that you have one, and it sounds as if you are on the right track with your reasoning and self-diagnosis. However, be careful not to be too drastic in your thinking: “enmeshed families” are families that tend to operate as a group rather than as individuals—independence is discouraged and even seen as disloyal to the family unit. Are you sure this accurately describes your situation?

Allow us to address your two fundamental issues: How do you help yourself to grow and develop as a wife, mother and individual? And how do you help your children grow and develop as individuals and become self-sufficient adults? Here are some points to consider.

**Decide what you want from your life.** What are your priorities? Give yourself some definitions to work toward—define who you are and who you want to reestablish yourself as. You have been a successful lawyer, a supportive wife and a loving, giving mother. Now what? Write down your ideal picture of your own identity, and then brainstorm how you can start to become more of the person you would like to be. Do not feel guilty about what has passed. Focus only on the “new you.” If you feel stifled at home, go away for the weekend. Enjoy some downtime with no family responsibilities, and think through exactly what it is that you would like to create in your “new” life. Having your husband spend quality time with the children one weekend, without you around, is also a positive thing and might actually be a rare treat for all of you. Maybe when you come back you can plan some more “date nights” with your husband too.

**Talk to your children about their priorities.** Are they sacrificing activities that they enjoy because they feel obligated to be with you? Do your children feel free to express their goals and objectives? Maybe you have cultivated such a fabulous relationship with your children that you know their priorities and there are no changes needed here. But it does not hurt to ask—and give your children the freedom to respond openly.

**Establish some goals.** Write down your goals and the action tasks that you need to achieve these goals. At the same time, ask your children their goals and write down how you can support (but not dominate) your children to achieve their objectives too. These goals and tasks can be as significant or as small as you like. The important part of the process is allowing everyone in the family to speak up about what is important to them and checking that each family member is creating their most satisfying life possible.

**Set definite boundaries.** Be clear about your responsibilities and those of your partner and children. Although sometimes it is difficult to give your children the space and responsibility they need to grow and to make mistakes, it is necessary to do so for them to develop the skills and confidence they need in life. A healthy family is one in which each member can be themselves and be loved, within the safety of defined limits. Children especially need clear-cut intellectual, emotional and physical parameters, so they understand where their responsibilities start and where yours as a parent end.

Part of the experience of growing up is learning right from wrong and learning from experience, so you are quite right in inferring that your children need to make mistakes and learn from them, rather than have you catch them before they fall. This does not mean you love them any less.

**Model the type of person you want your children to become.** This means that if you want your children to socialize, be active, care about things and eat healthily, you need to do the same. It does not mean that they will become you, but they will notice your positive habits—and if such habits help you become happier, they will notice this too.

If new hobbies or interests mean that you are unable to pick them up from school on occasion, great. This teaches your children that you have commitments too and that they will be perfectly fine if someone else collects them, or (given their ages) if they walk or catch the bus home sometimes, or wait for you in the school library until you can collect them later. Once you stand on your own, as your own person, your children will most likely look to their mother as a role model and emulate your positive, independent behavior.

**Break old habits.** If you are not happy with your habits now, you need to have the courage to break them. For example, if you try to solve all of your children's problems—stop. If you try to compensate for their lack of school friends by morphing into a school-like buddy, do not—your children need to nurture school friendships of their own. If you encourage your children to skip team sports to join in family activities, change this—team sports are important in teaching your children about leadership, teamwork and adaptability in social settings. If you feel too busy with your children's after-school activities to join that tennis group you have always wanted to join, adjust your thinking. Your needs are important too, and your children are old enough to understand this, and to respect and cope with any changes that you as their mother agree to make.

**Give your children the freedom to soar.** Above all else, believe in yourself and believe in your children. Take a step back from your strong involvement for a while and observe what happens. You might be surprised. Taking more time out for yourself might not only strengthen your inner spirit, but also be a welcome break for your children, who need your involvement but need their own space, identity and friends too.

Good luck!

# Chapter 4

## Relationships



## My Trailing Man

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**Q.** I moved to the Netherlands fourteen months ago for my career. I was offered a once-in-a-lifetime job and my partner agreed that it was just too good for me to refuse, so he happily supported our move and came as my “trailing spouse.” Having worked for twenty years already, my husband assured me that while he would possibly seek out work opportunities upon arrival, he saw this as the perfect opportunity for him to take some time out of the rat race and explore his interests of golf, photography and heritage-listed buildings.

The problem is, he seems to have exhausted his interests in nonwork pursuits and now keeps complaining to me that he hates it here because he is a “nobody.” I confess that I do not fully appreciate what he is going through, but I know I need to do something.

**A.** First, congratulations on your amazing job opportunity. We hope it turns out to be as incredible as you envisaged and that your time abroad strengthens your skills for whatever you do in the future. Second, you are smart to seek out ideas on how to help your partner. Some expats never do this, in favor of conveniently ignoring the problem, and unfortunately those relationships are often the ones that falter first.

**Your partner’s commitment.** This is a common issue for all trailing spouses—male and female—especially in what originally appear to be the “good” locations. The spouse initially agrees to the adventure but then finds it does not live up to their expectations. They then shift their perspective and change their minds about just how much they are willing to sacrifice in terms of their own identity and career, in order to support their partner’s.

To be fair, no one can ever really know what a situation will be like until they have been in it. A new mother can never appreciate what it is like to have a baby that refuses to sleep at night until they have one. A widower can never understand just how lonely life can be until after they have lost their life companion forever. So too, a trailing spouse can never appreciate what their new reality will be like until they are living the role, day in, day out. Take heart that if your partner's commitment was there originally, you do have a partner who is actively willing to make sacrifices to be with you. Remember that.

**Ways you can help your partner.** In the case of your partner, you have two choices: hold him to his commitment, regardless; or recognize that life is not as he thought it would be, and help him to figure out “where to from here.” If you are committed to a successful relationship, the latter option is really your only option. Let us look at five simple things you can do to help your partner.

\* *Ask him exactly what he hates and why he hates it.* Encourage him to treat the problem as he would treat a project for a business—identify and write down each issue to clarify the problem. This should not only articulate his thoughts for you to better understand his concerns, but also give you both a starting point for exploring possible solutions.

\* *Help him to build his identity.* It is critical that trailing spouses feel a strong sense of their own identity abroad. If your partner does not have his own business cards, encourage him to get some made. They may simply state his name and details, or they may portray him as a freelancer or consultant of some sort. Either way, they should help introduce him at business functions that he attends with or without you—and give him a stronger sense of his identity in social settings. Encourage him also to practice

an “elevator speech” with you to describe what he does—and make sure you can deliver the same speech for him. In terms of business contacts, do you have contacts in your networks that could utilize his skills either in a paid or a voluntary sense, doing something that would satisfy him and/or make him feel useful?

\* *Does he have his own transport?* For example, if you have a car, but he relies on public transport, helping him purchase a car could boost his sense of identity and freedom dramatically.

\* *Help him find some other male trailing spouses.* You may not have time to join in on the local expat coffee mornings or monthly gatherings to find like-minded men for him, but if anyone is likely to find working executive women who might have male trailing spouses, it is you—so try it. Also keep your ears open at business functions for people with whom your husband might share a connection or interest.

\* *Spend more time with him.* No doubt you are a super-busy executive who can never find enough hours in the day, but whatever you do, do not fall into the trap of working so much that it is to the detriment of what you would consider an important relationship in your life. A lonely trailing spouse can become a negative trailing spouse. All partners need to feel valued, useful and worthy of your time. Reorganize your work tasks, get up an hour earlier, return your partner’s phone messages as soon as possible, keep your laptop and cellphone turned off on weekends if you can—and try to do whatever it takes to hold on to the things that are important to you.

**Working together.** You had the support of a willing partner when you began this adventure. Perhaps if you genuinely invest some time in and show compassion for your partner’s situation, and the two of you make a mutual effort to more effectively communicate

your concerns, your partner's support and enthusiasm should be able to be reignited so that you can both go on to enjoy your expat experience.

Best wishes to both of you!

*Special thanks to Jeff Porter—a trailing man and the owner of the Ausmerican Blog ([www.ausmerica.com/blog/](http://www.ausmerica.com/blog/)) for his input on the original website version of this confession.*

## A Lonely Affair

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**Q.** My husband and I have been on assignment here in Bangkok, Thailand, for three and a half years. Life has been good to us—and we have always supported each other when times have been tough. However, last year, things changed. My husband’s company promoted him to the role of director, Asia Pacific, which meant that our assignment was extended for another three years. I agreed to this, but was devastated because I had already made plans to restart my pediatric practice back home when our assignment was due to finish here at the end of last year. Since then my husband’s new role has become very demanding and has required him to travel a lot.

Sadly, my loneliness has led to an affair with my neighbor. My neighbor is a sweet, caring and educated man who makes me feel so good about myself. I feel guilty about what I am doing because I really do love my husband and want our relationship to get back on track. Ironically, I started the affair to ease my loneliness, but now I feel lonelier than ever. What should I do?

**A.** Unfortunately, you are not alone. Many relationships start to come undone abroad when one person is absent from the relationship due to long work hours and/or frequent travel, and one person is left at home waiting. When someone lends an ear or shoulder and makes time for you, especially when you might be struggling, we can understand how you might go against your character and become drawn to them.

The situation becomes complicated, however, when that ear does not belong to the person to whom you are married and your emotional dependence falls more and more on the “other person.” The relationship becomes a problem when you start trusting in

this person more than your husband, if you find yourself turning to this person to get all of the support you need and/or if the relationship becomes romantic.

The fact that you have acknowledged there is a problem, is a step in the right direction. You have identified what you are missing in your marital relationship and stated that you want your relationship to go back to how it was. This might just prove that you have the will and strength to pull your marriage back together.

**The relationship and the reasons.** There are two pivotal issues we suggest you address. The first is your affair and your affection for your neighbor. As wonderful as your neighbor makes you feel, if you really want to set things right with your husband, you need to stop having your affair. This means you need to stop turning to your neighbor for emotional and/or physical support. Given your neighbor's close proximity, you also need to seriously consider confessing to your husband, because although neighborly relations will likely turn extremely sour once your husband finds out, think through the consequences of your neighbor telling your husband before you do.

The second and most important issue is to address the reasons *why* you are relying on your neighbor for support, so that it does not happen again. Marital affairs are often the visible symptoms of an underlying psychological issue that the sufferer has not come to terms with. Before you can address the actual affair, you need to try to understand the *why*.

You mentioned that you were devastated when your husband was promoted and your time in Bangkok extended. Could it be that you hold your husband personally responsible for your delay in being able to move back home to your life and subconsciously you are lashing out at him through this affair? Your husband is now all-consumed with his new, high-travel role, which has meant

that you are feeling neglected and lonely. Could it be that you resent your husband and his success now because you are left home alone feeling lost and angry? Are you missing your husband's love and companionship and subconsciously looking for things to fill that gap in your life now?

**Voicing your frustrations.** We suggest you work through your frustrations of an extended stay in Bangkok and what that means for you. Speak to your husband about his traveling and how this makes you feel. Whether you tell him about your affair or not, you need to talk to him about how serious the rift is in your relationship. Many a husband who has said that he cannot reduce his travel schedule has later, in a relationship crisis, found that there really *are* ways to cut back on the amount of travel they need to do personally—sending delegates sometimes instead or solving problems via phone calls, videoconferencing and the like. It is amazing what high-travel executives can do when they realize that their work behavior is being destructive to their family life. Remember, your husband, like most high-travel executives, probably cares deeply about his family and would not want to seriously jeopardize his family for the sake of his job.

**Rebuilding your relationship.** You may both also need to become more proactive about making time together. Perhaps you need to start to schedule special date nights in his diary or join him on one of his work trips (combined with a stay over a weekend). This might help to rekindle your intimacy, and you can start to transfer your emotional dependence back onto your husband and away from your neighbor.

Although be warned: if you confess your affair to your husband, he might not be so keen on date nights in the short term. Being told that your partner has had an affair can take months if not years to mentally reconcile, as a huge element of trust has been broken and trust is not repaired easily.

**Rebuilding your inner strength.** Start to look at ways to rebuild your inner strength, confidence and resilience, so that you are not unexpectedly turning to others for support when your husband is away. Reconnect with the organizations, friends and contacts you were connected to during the first three years when you were happy in Bangkok. Alternatively, join some new clubs, take up a new hobby or start a business (see *Starting a Business*). Keeping busy with something that is meaningful and significant to you will offer much-needed distraction and help build your confidence again.

Very few people become successful without a team of supporters behind them. Treat yourself as important and rally a team to support you in your mission to revive your marriage. This might involve seeing a psychologist, who is trained to work through issues like this with you in a professional way.

A life coach might also help to re-inspire and motivate you personally, helping you to articulate your values and set goals for yourself, along with supporting you and keeping you accountable in your efforts to achieve the things you really want in life.

**A better life.** Accept responsibility for your actions, work through your pain, and if you tell your husband, be willing to support him through his pain. Then focus on creating a better life for you, your husband and your marriage.

It will be a tough journey, but you can do it.

# About the Authors



**Andrea Martins** is an Australian who has lived in Brisbane, Melbourne, Canberra, and near the beautiful beaches of the Sunshine Coast. Her experience as an expatriate comes from three years in Jakarta, Indonesia; four years in Mexico City, Mexico; and now nearly two years in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, with her French-born Portuguese-Australian husband and two children.

Since ExpatWomen.com's inception in March 2006, Andrea has dedicated her work life to building Expat Women into the treasure chest of information and inspiration that it is today for so many women around the world. She has networked with and learned from countless peers and mentors in the global mobility industry, and she has answered thousands of emails from members, website visitors, peers and clients about a whole range of issues related to living abroad.

Representing ExpatWomen.com, Andrea has been a guest presenter to internationally minded audiences in Houston, Washington, Mexico City, Amsterdam, the Hague, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Marrakech.

Andrea's professional background includes coordinating large networks in two major government organizations in Australia; working in the Australian embassy in Jakarta; and working as

an executive headhunter in an international HR consulting firm in Jakarta. Andrea has a bachelor of arts from the University of Queensland, Australia, and a postgraduate diploma in electronic commerce from La Trobe University, Australia.



**Victoria Hepworth** is a New Zealander who left in 1996 and has since lived (and worked) in Miyazaki, Japan; Shanghai, China; Saint Petersburg, Russia; Gothenburg, Sweden; and Mumbai, India. Victoria currently lives in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, with her English husband and two young children—the youngest of which was born on the day this manuscript was submitted to our editor!

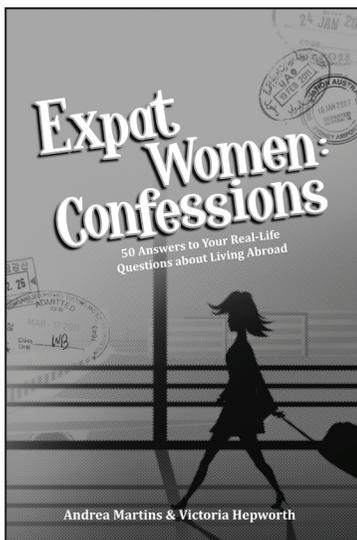
In 2004, Victoria built on her experience working with expatriate support issues at the private, corporate and nonprofit level to found and help establish Lifeline Shanghai, a not-for-profit telephone hotline for the expatriate community. This gave her enormous insight into the everyday struggles and challenges expats were facing and inspired her to complete her master's degree in psychology. Victoria majored in cross-cultural issues and completed her thesis on the "trailing spouse." She left Shanghai to follow her heart and suddenly found herself living the challenges many of the callers faced, as a new trailing spouse.

From early 2007 to late 2009, Victoria volunteered her time to help write most of the web versions of these confessions. She later went on to work with ExpatWomen.com in an official capacity—answering confessions, assisting with key projects and managing the Expat Women Blog Directory.

Victoria has a bachelor of business in human resources and a master of arts in psychology, both from Massey University, New Zealand. She also has a diploma in clinical nutrition from Stonebridge Associated Colleges in the United Kingdom.

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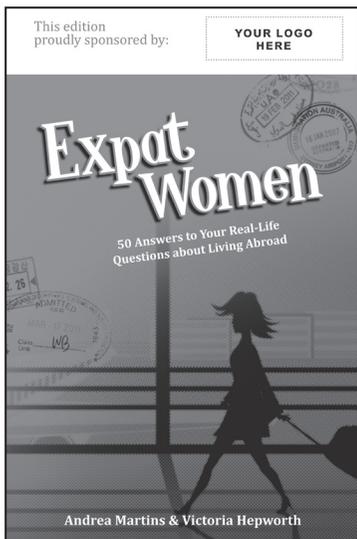
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