Unknown entities: dealing with the stresses of an unexpected relocation

Changing environments, even at the best of times, can bring on a host of emotional highs and lows all at the same time. So when the relocation is one you really hadn't planned on, it can put that much more stress on the situation. Common to all types of relocation is the displacement of the old with the new. This creates a sense of loss that can only be described as grief. According to "The Grief Recovery Handbook" (1998, Harper Collins) we feel 'grief' when there are "conflicting feelings caused by a change or an end in a familiar pattern of behaviour involved."



When people have to relocate, this grief is usually unexpected and is hidden under layers of anxiety, excitement and anticipation over the unknown. The inevitable feeling of loss that comes with suddenly uprooting can leave you feeling uncertain and "mixed up" emotionally. On one hand, you might be looking forward to new surroundings, new people and a fresh start, while at the same time left sad over the idea of leaving friends and family behind. If you can get over the initial bumps of the relocation, you'll probably move past your grief fairly quickly and adjust. But if you're unable to push past this, the effects of your unhappiness can be physical and psychological.

Moving past relocation stress

Whether you're relocating to a new city or country or returning home, there are steps you can take to prepare yourself for the transition and minimize the stress it causes to your life.

Before moving...

Have a meaningful farewell. Set aside a special time to meet with loved ones and close friends (not necessarily all at once) to put the move in perspective and make plans to stay in contact and lessen the feeling and perception of leaving your old life behind.

Avoid major decisions. Avoid making any other emotional decisions like buying a home right away. Moving itself is a profound and emotionally-charged event and, if at all possible, should not be paired with any other emotionally taxing activities. If you must make any major decisions, delegate them or get help from a relocation service, area real estate agent or other local professional.

Take what you need. While you may be limited in what you can take, ensure you bring along a few important pieces of your former life such as furniture, appliances, books, clothes, etc. These items can help your new apartment or house feel like your "home" and reduce feelings of being displaced.

Ask for help. Besides reducing the physical workload and demands on your time and energy, getting others to pitch in can give you the emotional boost you need to get through the transition and help you feel less lonely.

Be good to yourself. Do what you need to do to ease the psychological burden of moving. During and after the move, if you're tired, sleep; hungry, eat; bored, watch a movie, etc.

Children

If children are involved in the move make it easier on them by encouraging them to ask questions. Give them as much information about their new living arrangements as possible, have them create an address book, help them plan a farewell and say goodbye to their favourite places. Taking them through these steps can be cathartic for you as well and will remind you of things you need to do for yourself.

During and after the move:

Prepare yourself by researching your new home as soon and as often as you can. This can be very empowering and will at best create some positive anticipation. Look at change as an opportunity for a bright future and think positively about the person you can become by embracing the new culture.

Give it time. Many people arrive in their new location and expect everything to instantly fall into place. The reality is, though, that it takes time, patience and effort to get used to a new area, make new friends and develop a comfortable routine. Manage expectations around this and create a "to-do" list in the meantime. Part of that list could be: joining a sports team or club, taking language lessons or connecting with an expat group online. Be sure to include your family in setting these goals if they're moving with you.

Listen to others. When everything is new, it's easy to get lost in your own thoughts and ideas, but you need to actively engage in this new world and learn how to communicate with those around you in these surroundings. Effective communication will be important to building a strong circle of support that will make regaining control easier and quicker.

Expect some level of culture shock, even when moving within your own country. In a survey of American companies one of the most common barriers to functioning in a new environment was the "inability to adapt." At home you have symbols in the form of people and behaviours that you use to continually evaluate yourself. In a new environment though, this ongoing process of self-evaluation and validation is suddenly gone. Relocation not only requires you to change where you live, but how you live and who you are. It is this adjusting and adapting to a new home that is important to regaining a sense of control. You'll successfully adapt by identifying and evaluating yourself within the new system.

Will you get used to your new surroundings overnight? Probably not, but with patience, a concerted effort and insight into your own emotional journey and needs, you'll settle into your new move less stressed and more open to what this opportunity has to offer.