



Common Expat Problems

Becoming (or being) an expatriate (expat) is as exciting as it is frightening. A life in a new place can bring all kinds of new things. From new food and drinks to new habits and rituals. But you can also encounter expat problems. Common problems expats face are loneliness, cultural differences, sorting out health care, cost of living, finding proper schools for children, learning the language and relationship problems. Other, underestimated, expat problems are: running away from your problems at home, bad preparation, and not being able to choose the friends you want. Some expat problems are easier to deal with than others.

Everyone living abroad has their own expat problems and ways of dealing with them, and of course every place in the world comes with its own difficulties. The expats in Dubai encounter different problems than expats Cape town or expats in Shanghai. But in general all expats have to deal with the same type of expat problems. In this article, I will discuss the most common expat problems and give you some handy tips to make your (new) life easier.

Social life.

Establishing a social life is one of the of the biggest problems expats struggle with when trying to adjust to their new surroundings. Making new friends and finding things to do in your new town is challenging. Especially when you've just moved and are still dealing with everything you've just left behind (friends and family). It's these people you need the most when you're processing all the new impressions and experiences in your new town. But, at the same time, it's good to blend in, to make new friends, and to establish new interests and activities. This is the toughest part for most expats: saying 'goodbye' to loved ones and 'hello' to strangers at the same time.

Luckily, staying in contact with loved ones is easier now than ever, with easy communication tools .However, it's very difficult to live somewhere without having any friend at all. A huge problem for expats is making close friends again. The friends expats often make frequently turn out to be worse than the ones they had before (which makes sense if you think about the time you needed to find the right friends at home). Yet, you have no other choice than to deal with these 'friends'. But before you can complain about friends you first have to find them. Unfortunately, you can't take a short-cut when it comes to establishing a social life. You have to get out and meet with people.

What can you do about these expat problems?

- Ask a co-worker or neighbour for information about what's going on.
- Browse the internet (expat forums) to find out if you can become a member of a (sports) club, organisation, or expat group.
- Regularly visit the local pubs.
- Introduce yourself to your neighbours and co-workers.
- Invite your neighbours or co-workers for a drink (at your place/ in a pubs).
- Do some volunteer work.
- Don't get too personal during the first encounter with someone. That may scare people away.

Feeling lonely.

It's difficult to leave your family and friends behind. Even if you have new friends, attend social events regularly, and have a good connection with your co-workers, you can still feel very lonely. Loneliness is one of the toughest expat problems to tackle because it can mean so much more than just having no-one around you. Some people have problems making friends or finding the right people to hang out with. Others hang out with everyone, but experience difficulties opening up to other people. Both types of people may feel lonely from time to time.

What can you do about these expat problems?

Try to relocate your family as well. (The majority of the people who have their family with them experience less loneliness).

Plan ahead: plan your next visit or plan when and where to meet with your family. (If it is difficult to relocate your family).

Skype, WhatsApp, or FaceTime with your family and friends to share the latest gossip and news.

Write each other a hand written letter. (This gives you something to look forward to) In some cases: try to stay away from reminders of home if it makes you feel home sick.

Career concerns.

Some people move abroad because of their jobs, whereas others move abroad to find a job. In both cases it means you're on your own. Whenever you have a conflict at work or when you are not satisfied at work there is no-one nearby to support you. Other common career concerned related expat problems are:

What if I don't like the job?

What if I experience difficulties fitting in?

What if there is too much stress at work?

How does the new culture affect my communication?

Where should I go in case of a conflict? And what are my rights?

Do I need a working permit? And do I need to meet certain criteria in order to obtain a working permit?

Are my qualifications recognised in this new country?

Where should I look for (new) job opportunities?

What should I aim for (salary/ position)?

Did I specialise enough to find employment?

What can you do about these expat problems?

Preparation is very important when it comes to taking away some of your career concerns. Before you move abroad try to get to know the market, the main differences in regards to communication, rights, and expectations. But also check the political situation, the country's economy, and foreigner policy.

There are many social networks for expats, and people over there are willing to answer all of your questions.

Try to connect with professionals living there, and search for country specific expat guides.

Try to find out if there is a lot of competition in your industry and if you need to further develop your skills specific areas.

Language barriers.

Understanding and speaking the language of the new country is one of the expat problems that tends to be the toughest. Learning a language takes a lot of time and effort and there is no way you can speed up the process without studying a lot. But there are a few tips and tricks that work for the vast majority of the expats.

What can you do about these expat problems?

Take a language course as soon as you decide to relocate.

Find native speakers of that language in your current city and practice their language with them.

Download online language applications to master the basics.

When relocated: try to watch a lot of local television programs, listen to the radio, and to the natives around you.

When relocated: try to speak as much as possible, even if you are afraid of making mistakes. You'll see that people around you will appreciate your efforts and they will help you.

When relocated: take an intensive language course and study hard.

When relocated: try to find local people to become friends with. If you only have fellow expat friends you won't speak the native language and you miss a great opportunity to learn the language.

Food.

Every culture has its own cuisine. Some cuisines are very famous (Chinese, French, Italian) whereas others are pretty depressing to the majority of the people (American, British, Dutch). Not surprisingly, each part of the world has its own vegetables, herbs and spices. This can mean a struggle for you to find the food you normally eat. And even if you are able to buy your fruit it may taste differently in comparison to what you had in your country. So when it comes to getting good food, your food, being an expat can be quite a challenge.

Some people choose to stick to their traditional dishes and find themselves frustrated after a while because they can't get what they are looking for or because the prices are too high. Others try to adapt and try to get used to the local cuisine, but unfortunately, adapting isn't easy for everyone. So what can you do about this food problem?

Before you move abroad read something about the local cuisine. Perhaps you can even find a restaurant near by where you can try the food of your future country.

Use Google and other search engines to get some information about restaurants and bars in your new town where they serve foreign dishes.
Use expatriate forums to find out more about the availability of products in supermarkets and if there are stores that sell foreign products there.
Ask friends and family to ship certain products from your home country to you, particularly the ones you miss the most.
In the case of supermarkets not having a great variety of different products, you can try to grow these items yourself.

Sorting out healthcare.

What is the healthcare system like in your new country? Is the level of expertise comparable to that of your country, or do they have an unsophisticated medical system? You probably have a lot of questions and doubts. Expat problems regarding healthcare are the type of problems you want to avoid, so a good preparation is a must.

What can you do about these expat problems?

Check out if there are any health hazards in the new country.
Check out if there is a difference between healthcare for locals and expats. Sometimes expats need to turn to more expensive private hospitals.
Check out what the standard of public and private healthcare is.
What type of health insurance policy will you take? Are you staying for a long time or only for a few months?
Check out how quick you can get a prescription for medication. And in case you are on medication: if you are allowed to bring medication into the country.

Standard of living.

Most people moving abroad can expect a different standard of living (change in salary, rent, and taxes. But also types and cost of food).
And with change comes preparation and adjustment. Does an increase in salary mean you will be able to save more, or does rent, taxes, and others costs rise as well? And what about the availability of certain food and utilities? Are there things you are/aren't allowed to do? All these aspects affect your experience abroad and determine whether or not your move was/ is successful.

What can you do about these expat problems?

Visit your new country before you move and see how people live and what they buy.
Check out (online or during a visit) how much money you need to spend on apartments, electrical utilities, cars and so on.
Check out if your wage will be enough to make a living, and if it's comparable to other people with your job/qualifications.

Ask people who live there about their experience (use social media, expat forums, or simply ask people over there).

Prepare yourself mentally for a change in lifestyle. Be sure not to compare everything with 'home' and take things as they are.

Check out the area where you want to live (prices may vary in different parts of the city/country).

Cultural adaptation.

Changing countries often means changing cultures, norms, and values. For a lot of expats, the change in culture when moving from Europe, North America and Australia to Asia, the Middle East or Africa is a huge concern and causes typical expats problems. Of course the same goes for people moving from Africa, Asia and the Middle East to Europe, North America and Australia. Differences in religion, norms, and values make cultural adaptation very difficult to achieve at first. But when you take a closer look you see that cultural adaptation has everything to do with acceptance and being flexible. For more information about the culture shock and its stages, please read: dealing with a culture shock. In the end it's not your new country that should change, but it's you (the visitor) that should try to understand and accept the changes. And by understanding and accepting I don't mean that you have to agree with them or have to replace your norms and values for these new ones. Most people automatically defend their own norms and values and think other's norms and values are not as good as their own. By defending your own norms and values you set yourself apart from that culture and subsequently adapting becomes a lot more difficult.

What can you do about these expat problems?

Read about the history of your new country. Try to understand where they are coming from.

Read about their norms and values and try to put them in historical perspective.

Be open minded about the differences in culture; about the differences in norms and values.

Connect with other expats and ask about their experiences.

Go on a holiday to your new country before your move and observe people around you.

Be flexible: if you can't wear certain clothes, then simply wear something else. If people don't queue nicely in the stores/public transport platforms, then it may be more effective if you don't try to queue either.

Bureaucracy / corruption.

Wherever you go... you will have to face bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is boring, time consuming and often redundant, and for expats it's even worse. In many countries you need to speak their language, or you need to have official documents translated in their language. In some countries there is a lot of paperwork, whereas in other countries there can be less work but the length of time it takes to get a reply can be longer. Corruption is another problem in some countries. Being pulled over by the police to pay a fine (for no particular reason) is common in a few countries, whereas paying someone to speed up the bureaucracy process is common in other countries.

What can you do about these expat problems?

Before you move check if you have all the documents needed: information from your previous employer, the city municipality, the tax company, and so on.

Make sure your passport and driver's license are valid.

Check in which language you need to have your documents. If you need them to be translated find a certified translator.

For some documents you need a notary. Make sure they speak your language.

Always double check if you have everything you need before sending out or delivering all the paperwork. Nothing is more frustrating than having to go back because you left it at home.

Read about the procedures in your new country and try to find out within how many days you should get a reply.

Talk to expats who are already there who may want to help you out.

Ask expats about corruption and how much you are expected to pay for which services.



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