

Bangkok's own expatriate counselor Ann White answers your questions about culture shock, expat life and relationships.



ask Ann



Everyone I meet here seems happy and grateful to be in Bangkok. Am I the only one struggling here?



Trust me, not everyone is happy living here, but that can be said about any place in the world. This is a good time for self-reflection. Were you happy in the last place you

lived? If yes, what was it that made you happy living there? Was it a place where you lived or worked for a long time? Did you have family or support of close friends that you are currently missing? You could be dealing with Culture Shock, which can be overcome with time, patience and a willingness to be open to a new culture. (Please see Issue 1, 2008, for more information about Culture Shock.)

Perhaps you had a home that was a safe place where you could recharge your batteries. Do you have that here? If you have not made your home a "sanctuary," look at ways that you can enhance your personal space. If you are renting a furnished apartment and do not have many of your personal belongings here, you can still personalize your space. You might drape a shawl in a color you love over the sofa

or display fresh orchids that make you smile when you look at their beauty.

Did you have to give up a great job or volunteer position that you loved in order to follow your husband's career? If so, you might be feeling some resentment for having to give that up and not yet finding an outlet for your special skill set. You could seek gainful employment or find ways to use your talents in the many organizations here that depend on volunteers.

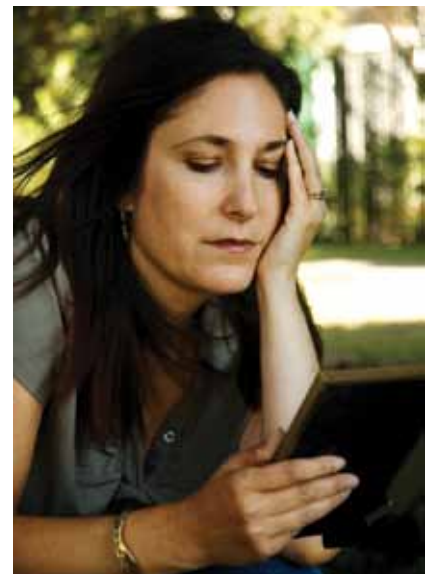
Finally, consider your attitude, which is the one thing that you can always control. Do you *want* to be here? What can you do to make it a good place for you to live? Be proactive and seek a group that shares your interests and join in on their activities. You noted that others seem to be grateful to live here. By contemplating and focusing on the positive aspects of your life here, you might start to appreciate the benefits.

Please note that if you have suffered from major depression in the past or feel that you are currently depressed, (exhibited by: depressed mood, inability to experience pleasure, inexplicable crying spells, sadness or irritability, fatigue or loss of energy, insomnia or hypersomnia, loss of appetite or overeating, lack of sexual desire, suicidal thoughts or feelings) please seek professional help. You may want to start with a physical

exam and rule out any underlying problems such as peri-menopause or menopause. Once the physical is ruled out, there are professional counselors available who can offer assistance.



I really love living overseas. I love the adventure and chaos, and we're saving a lot of money, too. But, as I get older, I feel guilty about being so far from my family. What if something happened, and I couldn't get back quickly enough?



Am I missing out on too many important family events living so far away? Is this normal? Do you have any advice for handling it?



If you love what you are doing, don't you think your loved ones benefit from knowing that you are happy living a richly rewarding life overseas? Living overseas does require an extra responsibility to plan ahead so that we can participate in some of the important family events, be it anniversaries, holidays, weddings, births, times of illness or the deaths of our loved ones. If you are worried about a family member's health and think you might need to make an unexpected trip home, you might consider purchasing an open ticket where you can change the date of departure. With a ticket in hand you might be able to get on an earlier flight without the penalties of last minute purchase fees. Plan ahead for scheduled events you want to attend, but also keep emergency funds reserved should you need to take an unexpected trip.

Planning your visits to coincide with important holidays or special family times can serve as an incentive and motivation for elderly parents to anticipate your next visit. The world is a much smaller place than it used to be with all the tools at hand to stay connected to family and friends (see page 16 for tools for keeping in touch). As long as you maintain regular contact, it is easier to pick up where you left off on your last visit. By the way, there is something to be said for getting mail that has been postmarked and can be read over and over again. You might send beautiful postcards with amazing stamps to share some of your adventures with loved ones. Remember that for some elderly people, checking the mail can be a highlight in their day, and a simple postcard could bring a smile to someone far away.

Only you can answer the question if you "are missing too many important family events." There is a part in most of us that wonders if we are doing the right thing, living overseas. Be careful not to spend your time worrying about the "what ifs" and try to stay in the present

moment and enjoy the "what is." You are here now, so make the most out of it!



Everyone I meet seems to have more money than we do. My husband earns a decent salary, and we are saving enough to have a comfortable retirement. But everyone else seems to be buying expensive jewelry, or taking extravagant trips. I feel funny about being less well-off than others. How can I deal with it?



It sounds like you and your husband have made a good retirement plan and are working towards your financial goals. All couples are unique. If you both agree that this is what you want, does it really matter that other couples have different priorities or needs? Some people love expensive jewelry or taking extravagant trips. Others spend lots of money on fancy dinners, expensive clothes or cars.



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Perhaps you choose to spend your money to make more frequent trips home each year so you can stay in touch with your family. Or maybe you are assured of a nest egg in case of some unexpected crisis.

Examine your priorities to see if you really want the expensive jewelry or extravagant trips. If you do, then don't be afraid to ask for what you want. It might be time to revise or adjust your financial plan so you can enjoy the present more, and not live just for the future. What's important is that you and your partner have shared goals and an equal voice in the planning. When you can come to terms with the decisions you have made, hold your head high and try to be grateful that you have as many choices as you do.

Q I think I'd like to talk to a counselor or therapist. How do I find the right one for me?

A There are many different ways to find a good therapist or counselor. "Word of mouth" referrals from people who have had good experiences with counselors are typically a good place to start. However, many people who have benefited from good counseling do not announce it or share that with others (to protect their own confidentiality). Ask people that you admire and trust if they can guide you to a professional with a good reputation. ANZWG's *Bangkok Guide* and many of the women's clubs have lists of counseling referral contacts. If you have children in an international school you could ask the school counselor for the current International School Bangkok (ISB) Referral List, which is quite comprehensive.

You might need to meet with more than one counselor to find a good match. If you do not have a good connection from the onset, do not be afraid to look further for another counselor or therapist. This is a very intimate relationship and is based on trust. Before you meet with any counselor, make sure he/she is willing to inform you of his/her credentials,

fees and theoretical base. Does she hold and maintain a license from her home country? Is he under supervision of another professional or organization? What code of ethics does she follow? Has he had experience with the primary issue you want to resolve? Don't

Q be afraid to ask questions.
I feel guilty having so much when many around me have so little. Sometimes I feel better if I give my maid a little extra money, or leave a big tip for the hairdresser. But, is there a more constructive way to deal with my guilt?

A Guilt is an emotion that is calling you to "do something." It can be transformed to propel you to do something "different." While there may be greater disparity between the haves and have-nots here than in your home country, you can always reach out and help others. Financial help is not always the only answer. There are so many vehicles to donate to good causes that make a difference here (time, energy, expertise). What might make you feel better is getting involved in something that you enjoy doing as well. Check out ANZWG's *Bangkok Guide* under Welfare for "Expatriate Group Activities," "Animal Welfare," "Sponsorship & Donations," "Shops- Fairs- Fundraising Events" and "Volunteer Opportunities." By participating and volunteering your time and energy, you will gain increased satisfaction in making a small difference. It is the small ways in which we make a difference that add up to leaving a positive footprint.

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Do you have a question for Ann?

Email us at:
ask@acclimatemagazine.com,
and you might find your answer in an upcoming issue.



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