

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

# ask Ann



Do you have a question for Ann? Email us at: [ask@acclimatemagazine.com](mailto:ask@acclimatemagazine.com), and you might find your answer in an upcoming issue.

**Q** I am married to an abusive man and need to get out of the marriage for my own safety. I don't imagine handling a divorce is easy, and living abroad certainly doesn't make it easier. Which country's laws apply: our home country's or Thailand's? Can you advise me?

**A** Your safety and that of your children must take priority. If you or your children are in physical danger, you need to develop a safety plan today. Have documents (like your passport, health insurance information, bank account numbers, family contact information, cash, credit cards, etc.) and your mobile phone ready, should you need to leave your home quickly. Consider pre-arranging a stay with a close friend who is willing and able to help, or find a hotel.

According to Khun Piyachat Finney, a U.S.-trained, licensed marriage and family therapist (LMFT), there are two options for battered women who do not have financial or social support. "Women's Shelter," located near Don Muang Airport, can accommodate up to 140 women for short-term stays, in dormitory style rooms. They provide brief counseling and collaborate with other agencies to get legal help. T: 02 929 2222. Another resource is "Women's Friends Foundation," which provides legal advice.

While they do not provide boarding, they can offer more information about shelters around Bangkok. T: 02 513 1001; 02 513 2780; 02 513 2708.

Once you have ensured your safety, then you can consider your next steps. Marriage is about the relationship; divorce is about the money. While I personally prefer to work as a marriage preservationist, when there is abuse, divorce may be the best option. When that happens, I suggest you get the best legal advice you can afford. Often women in abusive relationships undervalue themselves and have low self-esteem, which can lead to shopping for an inexpensive attorney who may not have the most accurate information or their best interests in mind, rather than finding the best.

I have learned from clients that there are many opposing opinions from Thai and international lawyers. If you were married abroad, and have real property in your home country, then I suggest that you seek advice from your home country first. Check with your embassy for a list of local or international attorneys that are qualified to practice in Thailand and your home country.

You might also want to get legal advice from a qualified Thai Family Court attorney. Thai Family Court recognizes foreign marriages and tends to be supportive of women's rights. Khun Saranya Chaiyasuta is a Thai Family Court

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According to Khun Saranya, Thai law does not recognize "legal separation" of the couple, but rather, "only separation of assets under certain grounds, for example, if the husband gambles a lot. If one spouse voluntarily lives separately for over three years, then either spouse can file for divorce. To stay in Thailand requires an immigration visa, which could be a barrier for a trailing spouse if the husband continues to work here and the wife is no longer included on his work visa as a dependent. Couples can agree to separate without divorce, but it is not recognized as a 'legal' separation, and the couple will still be recognized as husband and wife under the law. Even if a judge orders the separation, they are still legally husband and wife. Claiming for maintenance (alimony) can be done without divorce."


If you have offshore accounts and/or substantial assets, talk to your lawyer about an International Mareva Injunction to freeze financial transactions so that one party may not drain funds out of joint accounts into new accounts.


As they say, timing is everything. Once you've decided where to file, you'll want to file first, because the divorce must proceed wherever those first papers are

filed. Check out your options and try to get the best advice you can afford. In some countries, you may also request financial support for continuing education so the trailing spouse can rejoin the workforce at a later date.

When you meet with a lawyer, take a friend who can listen and support you. Take your long list of questions and ask about fees, timing, your rights, and those of your spouse. If you have children, you will need to go to court to work out custody.

Check out these sites for more helpful information: <http://www.marilynstowe.co.uk/2008/09/03/marriage-and-divorce-what-every-ex-pat-bride-should-know-and-do/#more-249> and [www.expatexpert.com](http://www.expatexpert.com). Good luck in finding the help you need.

 The global financial crisis has me in a panic. I'm worried all the time: What if my husband loses his job? What if we have to pull our kids out of the international school they love? What if we don't have enough money for retirement? Do you have any tips for dealing with this and getting back to normal life?

 Very few among the expatriate community have been unaffected by the current economic crisis. There is great uncertainty about how long this will last. Have we hit the bottom yet? How long before the recovery and we are able to breathe a sigh of relief? Certainly the Thai unemployment rate is indicative of the toll that our host country is struggling with at the moment.

While we are all sharing the same anxieties, we do not need to let our concerns over the future overpower the good things that occur in the present moment. Is your anxiety based on your husband's real work situation? Are others being laid off in his company or is he the only expat and most expensive employee to support? You might sit down with your spouse to discuss and anticipate what you would do in various situations (laid off with no job back home; take a different job in the same or different company; enter a new career).

Is there a way you can downsize and cut costs now to build up your nest egg? If you consider all of your options and make some contingency plans, then you will feel more proactive. That should help lower

your anxiety. This is a great time to work together as a family team. Will you need to re-enter the workforce? If so, what can you do to prepare for that? Are there skills you need to reactivate? Or do you need to reconstruct or update your resume to include all the skills you developed living abroad? Volunteering with Bangkok's many community organizations can teach you new skills that might expand your job options.

Recognize that if you spend your energy worrying about the future, you will miss the present moment. Do your homework and "always be prepared." After that, an attitude of gratitude can shift your current perspective. Rather than being in a panic, try re-framing your thoughts. You can be grateful that your husband still has a job that pays the bills; that your children are currently in an excellent school that they love; that you do have some savings for retirement and can keep working longer if necessary. Be grateful if you have your health and are capable of employment.

We are probably not going back to a "normal" life anytime soon. Rather we are going back to a simpler time, where relationships could be more meaningful and material needs lessened. During the Great Depression there were many acts of courage, faith, and hard work that enabled that generation to overcome severe hardships. This is when people reach out to one another, helping family, friends, and the destitute. This is an opportunity for us to downsize, reduce expenditures, and to help others less fortunate than ourselves.

One important question to ask is why we live an international life. Is it not to learn to be resilient (a quality we strive to impart to our children), to be open to learn about cultures different from our own, to see the world through our own eyes? We need to lead by example so that we model resilience, openness, and appreciation for our children. It is a gift and privilege to live here. And when things change—unemployment; repatriation; sending your kids to public school—trust that you will weather the economic storm and land on your feet.

 Since we moved here a few months ago, I've gained quite a bit of weight. I'm always hungry and always eating! It's so difficult to replace my clothes here, and I'm feeling so ugly in my now-tight stuff that I don't even want to leave the house. Help!



When we face transitions or are under stress, we often turn to food for comfort. It's how our mothers soothed us as babies, and it continues throughout our lives to offer a source of comfort. Turning to food to reduce our stress, to "numb out," or to distract us from other problems (like making new friends; finding our way around a busy city; avoiding a strained relationship with our spouse) is called "comfort eating."

Unlike other compulsive behaviors, we all need to eat, so you can't just stop eating. However, start keeping a food journal and check in with yourself when you grab the second helping or another cookie. Ask yourself: Are you eating for comfort or real hunger? If you are truly hungry, try eating smaller meals with healthy snacks in between, like raisins, carrot sticks, or apple slices. Incorporate more exercise into your daily routine. Push away from the table and start engaging in relationships with new friends, activities, and adventures.

You might also find help in meeting with others who share this problem. Overeaters Anonymous meetings are held at the Holy Redeemer Church in the rectory on Tuesdays at 4p.m., and Sundays at 5p.m. "Overeaters Anonymous is a Fellowship of individuals, who, through shared experience, strength, and hope, are recovering from compulsive overeating.... After years of guilt over repeated failures to control our eating and our weight, we now have a solution that works. Our solution is a program of recovery—a program of twelve simple steps. By following these steps, thousands of compulsive overeaters have stopped eating compulsively.

"In OA we have no program of diets and exercise, no scales, no magic pills. What we do have to offer is far greater than any of these things—a Fellowship in which we find and share the healing power of love. Our common bonds are two: the disease of compulsive eating from which we all have suffered, and the solution we all are finding as we live by the principles embodied in these steps."—From *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous*.

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