

# Relocation blues: ensuring psychological 'wellness' when travelling

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The place of psychological assessment in travel medicine has been undervalued. This article suggests that being psychologically prepared for relocation is a distinct advantage for relocation longevity and success. Psychological 'inoculation' for travel needs to be added to the pretravel consultation.



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Australians travel for pleasure or business. However, for those who are expected to travel or relocate for their work, the trip and the stay are not always comfortable or successful. The outcome of the relocation may frequently be determined by psychological factors not consciously countenanced by the traveller and his or her company or GP.

Some of these psychological difficulties have been identified in travel books and company notices or advice sheets, but they are rarely addressed in a meaningful way before, during and after relocation.

## Psychological problems in relocation

Medical screening and concern for physical health and diseases have frequently overshadowed the need for greater awareness of, and strategies for dealing with, disturbing and potentially destructive

personal aspects of relocation. These may include:

- the stress of preparation
- concern about medical assessment and fear of injections
- fear of flying
- fear of terrorist attacks and safety during flights, and of safety living within the country of relocation
- culture shock in dealing with day to day issues in a new land
- not being able to speak the language of the new country
- depression and loneliness without familiar routines, family and friends
- lack of support for spouses
- lack of direct social support from family, friends and workmates once moving has occurred
- establishment alienation, a need for adjustment and delays when relocating

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- interpersonal relationship issues heightened by travel demands.

Those who have travelled and worked overseas often report that the most difficult aspects to cope with are psychological. Those same personal issues are ironically and typically overlooked by the employees when they are back in Australia (for fear of appearing 'weak'), yet this may be costly to companies in the long term.

Recent articles in newspapers and human resources magazines have featured research and commentary about expatriates initially adopting a 'holiday' approach to relocating in another country. However, this holiday often dissipates into unease and loneliness. Quite often this applies to male executives who begin to miss taken-for-granted familiar routines and become psychologically isolated from familiar friends, family and colleagues. Some people handle this situation better than others.

### Stressors and pre-existing difficulties

Inevitably, stressors emerge and occur at all stages of the relocation process. Often they are symptoms of pre-existing personal difficulties.

### Before the relocation

Pre-relocation stressors include fear of flying, agoraphobia, selling the house or house-sitting arrangements, organising transport, accommodation issues, budgeting issues, health insurance, work handovers and family reorganisation.

### Settling in

Settling in overseas may produce general disorientation, loneliness for spouse and family, lack of regular friends, and problems adjusting to a different climate, air pollution, humidity or altitude. Some expatriates experience differing cultural imperatives surrounding gender roles and rules, insomnia, loss of comfortable routines, new driving rules, getting used to different monetary and finance systems,

and loss of quality interactions. Others have to cope with infectious disease precautions, different foods, jet lag, new work conditions or unfamiliar work practices, and language barriers.

### After the return 'home'

The return to Australia may also exacerbate pre-existing personal concerns. These issues may revolve around jet lag, re-establishment concerns, loss of continuity with work and family, the search for new accommodation and a general sense of disequilibrium.

### Specific symptoms

Quite often, specific psychological symptoms of stress occur when issues magnify into 'crises' for the individual. These may surface at any phase of the relocation process. Symptoms typically include:

- poor sleep
- irritability
- impatience
- a sense of helplessness
- mood swings
- panic attacks
- loss of appetite or increase in appetite
- feelings of loss, confusion and/or depression.

### Ensuring psychological 'wellness'

While some major companies provide counselling through employment assistance providers, it is frequently left to the individual to access any assistance. In this respect, many employees neglect or purposely choose not to seek counselling for fear of stigmatisation by managers, or because such 'weakness' may jeopardise further advancement in the company.

We advocate that it should become the role of the physician to systematically screen the relocation candidate and also offer a strong recommendation to visit a properly qualified person for psychological care as part of an integrated medical screening process. This procedure could be functional for:

- first time travellers (individuals and families travelling intrastate, interstate or overseas)
- small and large businesses with executives travelling intrastate, interstate or overseas for work-related relocation at short notice
- individuals from international or local companies who need to relocate interstate because of downsizing, expansion or rationalisation
- the travellers' families and relatives at home
- any organisations with small or large investments in the skills of those representing them intrastate, interstate or overseas.

Finally, psychological screening may be a useful preventive tool, integrated with medical screening, to help the relocatee find solutions. For example, the relocation candidate can be helped to ascertain his or her adaptability to change or 'mental hardiness', deal effectively with preparation issues and regain life balance through effective goal setting. This can be achieved by coaching him or her to identify stress triggers and cope with issues while overseas in a more effective manner. It may also help to provide an emergency contact for use while overseas or interstate to dissipate more urgent personal dilemmas. **MT**

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