

Loneliness and isolation and how to over come them...

The expat point of view. How many of you here today consider yourselves expatriates? How many here have never left Switzerland or this region? How many of you have move once or twice and then come back? Who has the most moves?

Loneliness is part of the human condition yet I think there is something more scary and isolating about expat loneliness. I have felt very, very lonely in my expat life – I'll tell you a bit about that in a minute. I have found that there are periods of life that have been more lonely than others, and places I have lived where I have felt more lonely. I have also found ways to understand the loneliness and isolation and developed a different attitude to my position that I want to share with you all as I hope it may help.

I was born and for 25 years lived in England when 24 years ago almost to the day I married a foreigner and we moved to Africa together. I haven't been back to England much since then. Of course I love to visit friends and family when I can, but I don't think I will ever return to live there. Not even when I retire. I have changed, the country has changed: it would be like moving to a new place – and is that what I want? Is it still home? My husband has never lived there and I am not sure if he would like it or if it would be a good place for him. He spent the first 25 years of his life in St Louis, Missouri, then he moved a bit, lived in San Francisco for a while and he changed his career – always in the medical profession – he got a job in Lesotho in Southern Africa ...and that is where we met.

When you move around a lot you meet a lot of people who don't know you – people come and go a lot in expatriate communities. And a common question we were always asked – usually the first question anyone asks,

“Hello. Where are you from?” “Where are you from?”

Well,

I hate this question. I don't know how to answer it – for myself or for my family...It may seem like a simple question but these days it is not.

Do you want to know my nationality? My passport? Do you mean where was I born? Do you mean where do I perceive myself as coming from? So that you can locate me on your map of the world and say aha she is one of those? (stereotyping)

“OKOK”, people say, “So, where is HOME?”

That's easier – “HERE!” I say.

“Yes but,” they say, “I mean where is your real home? Where do you really live?”

“I really live here and this is home for me!”

Anyway, the whole idea of where is home is really important for a sense of identity. And it is a question that may occur as we move towards retirement or when we are retired.

As anyone who has contact with expats and their families will know this is a question that children and young people dread.

Defining home may be easier – home has elements of where we are from, but it doesn't have to be somewhere that you are not – it can be right here if you want it to be. And for me to feel at home it is important that the people with whom I live accept that this is my home.... And again as an expat knowing that there are people out there who don't want you here – we can feel wholly unwelcome - or to whom your very presence is perceived as a threat ... we are perceived as the unknown, we are perceived as different, we can feel judged for our inability to speak the language, or for our own cultural ways that have stuck through the years – this type of thing increases enormously our sense of social isolation

In a way it was easy making a home with small children aroundBUT how you sustain that feeling while making multiple moves, and how you create it as a retiree are different challenges
How do you think of home when you think of your retirement?
One thing all the experts say is “spend more time with your family” – but that may not be easy for us expats as our children may never have lived here or have found work far away ...another typical aspect of the expat experience....

When you go abroad to live you are going to experience Culture Shock – and this can happen at times of big transition in life – such as becoming a parent or retirement.

This is something which can put you into a spin.

You feel right out of your comfort zone. You have a loss of identity. As I said you don't know what to answer when people ask where are you from? You feel afraid – you have fear... loneliness. Isolated, you don't know anyone, you don't know how to talk to the people around you;

I was very, very lonely in an African village with a small child knowing no one and finding it very hard to reach out. And it is no less lonely and isolating being in a European city - you feel a sense of disempowerment as nothing is familiar, the stress of everyday little things can be overwhelming, you can't read the labels on the food in the supermarkets – perhaps there are no labels and no supermarkets but you still have to feed your family ...

You don't know how to use the money,
Clothes that people are wearing might be different – from the clothes you want to wear so you can't just go out and get a new outfit to cheer yourself up. Body shapes are different... nothing fits.

Being a parent faced with all these unknowns this was very hard for me.

It was my children – and other children - who helped me learn about over coming lonelinessand what they taught me I want to share with you today....

As my children grew up and as children do, they would ask a lot of questions:

They would ask me why is the shop closed?

What is that man doing?
Where are those people going?
What is that?
What is that for?
Why are they wearing that dress?
What did she say?
Or Where are we???? when I got lost...

And I had to say all the time to my children “I don’t know”

I couldn’t be the mummy who had all the answers, who could tell these young people what they needed to know, to feel safe and secure, ..of course I still could love them, but there were a lot of questions that I simply couldn’t answer, questions I didn’t even know how to ask.....

I didn’t know the questions.....I didn’t know the answers Even though I had no idea how I should be behaving in these strange circumstances I felt inadequate – not up to task!

Nancy Kline in her Book called Time to Think makes a very good point that the quality of everything we do depends on the quality of our attention – the attention we give our surroundings – and one thing about living in a different country and being made aware of all these differences is that you are forced to pay attention -

And it’s a great way to start learning. I learned through the questions my children asked about the places I was living in and I learned that the best way to learn is to ask a question.

There's a saying I came across when I was preparing this talk – I believe it is a Japanese saying but I am not sure –
It goes like this:

Ask a question and feel a fool for 5 minutes

Don't ask, and be a fool for a lifetime.....

So ask questions of yourself – what do I want to do? Who can help me? How do I want this period of my life to be? Why? How do I know that I will always feel this way? What are the alternatives?

Dr. Shimi Kang, author of Parenting the Dolphin Way describes curiosity as follows:

“When we look at the world through curious eyes we don't judge or react but simply observe and interact. Curiosity takes us out of our fear mode and engages our thinking brain”

This is what we need to do when we feel afraid: engage our thinking brain and that gives us back a feeling of being in control.

So I share this story about me with you as I use it as a model everyday when I am faced with a challengeI remember how their openness, their curiosity trying to figure out what was going on around them helped me to engage with my surroundings with a better quality of attention, to learn to ask questions and to use my thinking brain.

Fear and uncertainty cause people to cover up their emotions and their vulnerability – yet it is key for progress that we can access these emotions and develop the vulnerability based trust that enables relationships to flourish.

In today's world there is so much uncertainty – so that a simple question like “Where are you from?” can cause stress and confusion –

The old ‘certainties’ that our grandparents and parents depended on are no longer dominant – we have choices – let us explore our options using this child like innocent curiosity and make the changes in our lives that we want them to be {.....suddenly difference is not a stigma anymore but a reality for everyone}

From Alice Through the Looking Glass by Louis Carroll

Alice came to a fork in the road
“Which way do I take?” she asked

“Where do you want to go?” responded the Cheshire Cat

“I don't know” Alice answered

“Then” said the Cheshire Cat, “it doesn't really matter.”

Well, I think those of us here today and many others think it does matter – if you don't know where you are heading, and where you are going, who does? And if you don't care, who will?

I think the worst thing about loneliness and feelings of isolation is how powerless it can make us.....

We can feel excluded,

Of no importance

And very, very afraid...too afraid to act. This is NORMAL

Loneliness is a feeling of sadness or distress about being by yourself, feeling disconnected from the world around you.

It may be felt more over a long period of time. It may start small but it is a feeling that can intensify over time

You can feel lonely, even when surrounded by people. You may be lonely in a crowd, lonely in a marriage. It is not to do with how many people you are with each day – its whether you feel connected. It may be a feeling you are used to.

Isolation is being separated from other people and your environment. Sometimes this occurs through decisions we make ourselves, or because of circumstances – such as choosing to work abroad.

There are now, according to the World Bank, more than 2 hundred million people who live outside the land of their passport – who struggle as I do with that simple question where is home? Who struggle as we do here to understand the system, to fill in strange forms, who feel afraid because they don't always understand what is going on or know if they are being understood or know where

they are going to ...but these days who does????

There are benefits of loneliness, so you don't want to be totally without it

By feeling lonely you are able to have understanding and compassion for others in the same condition

You gain insight about the human condition – there is power in vulnerability! You can be kind to yourself and others once you recognize how tough it is.

Yet it can signal that you yearn to feel connected. And we are human – we are meant to be connected so it is no surprise that we don't feel comfortable – or at worst we feel ashamed when connections aren't working out...

When we start feeling isolated we may have thoughts of NOT BELONGING

Or of feeling rejected by others

Or even of being rejected by ourselves

This can happen to people who go “home” to retire....completely unexpected but very common.

Imagine the loneliness of going “home” to retire only to find that it is not home after all....

And it is helpful to be able to recognize – yes – this is what I feel – I understand.

Your Critical Inner Voice can be the worst enemy

Your critical inner voice will almost always try to prevent you from challenging yourself and from struggling through uncomfortable situations and feeling at ease with yourself

It can make you resistant to change

You become more comfortable with the discomfort you know than with looking for the alternative that you don't know

No one likes to feel shame, fear

No one likes to feel that they are not doing the right thing

That we might have made the wrong choices....

And this is another factor that unites us as expats: the choices we have made ..

How much as expats is the loneliness or isolation or solitude we feel a part of our lives that we have chosen

After all, we have chosen to live

In a foreign culture

Where people do things differently..... It's worth pondering why we chose this expatriate life....

When we left our home or origin did we think it would be forever?

Did we think it was going to be more fun than staying? Did we think we could just go back at the end of the next contract? What has happened in the meantime?

In a foreign country undergoing retirement is an alien condition – BUT even in your own home country – where ever that is – in every country - it is an alien condition....After a life time of feeling

in control this huge change is about to take place or has already taken place and it doesn't feel ok

You may not know yourself as the retired person you are or are about to become.

You may feel disconnected from yourself and this is where the critical inner voice shouts louder than before and the doubts set in

But this is nothing to be ashamed of.

Your feelings are important – so important – you can't do anything without them - even if they seem inconvenient and clumsy....

If I may, I have a few suggestions to offerHere are some ideas about what to do.

Think about what you really want.

In her book *The Top 5 Regrets of the Dying* Bronnie Ware found out that people regret working too much and expressing their feelings too little. She broke down the countless sentiments she heard from patients over years of work and the central theme she found was this:

Stay true to what matters most – stay true to yourself

Do the things you like:

Join a club to meet new people and get involved – such as the American International Women's Club – its been proved to help – many women join when they retire, make new friends and take

part in all sorts of different activities

Don't be put off by the name. The Club only costs 200CHF a year, and if that is beyond your reach there is a fund to help pay the fees. The Club is run by volunteers, there are over 500 members from 50 different countries. You can join just to make friends, to go on trips to Art galleries, hikes, volunteer in the community, learn a language, join a book group, cook and eat with the Travelling Gourmets group, play Bridge or chess. There are Swiss members who have been expats outside Switzerland who find that they come back and miss the international atmosphere so join up. The only proviso is that English is the language used in the Club – you can join even if you don't speak English at all well as just by being there with friendly people will give your language learning a boost.

Look at blogs – there are many dealing with the experience of retirement perhaps you can write something that will help others or start a group of your own on a site like glocals

If you have always wanted to skydive, or write or see more movies, now is the time.

Set Specific Goals

And set them in a positive light

Accountability, commitment and writing down goals really help bring about change

Ignore your inner critic

As you start to make change the first reaction of your inner critic is to throw up a massive road block – you can't do this you don't

deserve this what do you think you are doing

Totally normal – anxiety increases as you gather the strength to make a step

The inner critic developed in your childhood to protect you -its not protecting you anymore!! Ignore it as much as you can!

Your Attitude is the difference between an ordeal and an adventure

It takes even more courage to take these steps as a foreigner – especially if lots of people in our lives don't really see that part of us. That is something that we may have chosen to hide but it may not be the best thing to keep that part hidden now

All the experts in change say, we have to allow ourselves to be really seen and this is hard for those of us who wanting to fit in have hidden this difference away....

There is no right way forward except the way you choose and for any change to happen, you do have to choose!.

I'll finish with Alice ..

There she is in the wood with the Cheshire cat fading in and out of focus asking her where she wants to go and if it matters to her...

And what does she say?

“I don’t much care where I am going”

and the Cat replies, “Well then, it doesn’t matter much which way you go”

Then Alice thinks again and adds”As long as I get somewhere....”

And the Cheshire Cat says

“Oh well, you’re sure to do that, if only you walk enough”.

Where ever you go and however you get there I wish you a wonderful journey!

List of resources

The American International Women’s Club of Geneva

www.aiwcgeneva.org

TED talks

www.ted.com

Brene Brown The Power of Vulnerability and the list of

The 11 Greatest TED talks for Anyone Over 50 at

www.nextavenue.org by Donna Sapolin

www.expatarivals.com

/article/beating-loneliness-as-an-expat-living-abroad-or-working-overseas by Stephanie Katz

and other articles including the benefits of joining an expat women's group in your new host country by Nicola McCall

www.usatoday.com

retirement-loneliness-shortens-life

How to combat loneliness and live longer by

Nanci Helmich

www.theguardian.com/science

Loneliness twice as unhealthy as obesity for older people, study finds by Ian Sample

www.monkeyandmountains.com/loneliness-when-living-abroad

blog by Laurel

www.psychologytoday.com

Compassion Matters

3 essential steps to living your own life by Lisa Firestone, Ph.D

www.halthland.com

on loneliness and isolation

www.newrepublic.com

article Loneliness is Lethal!

www.lifeline.co.au

Loneliness and isolation: facts and information

Lewis Carroll Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

Bronnie Ware The Top 5 Regrets of the Dying – A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing Hay House 2012

Leo Buscaglia

Born for Love by Fawcett Books New York 1994

“Each of us brings to our life a unique temperament and style. This is our special gift to the world. How monotonous it would be if we all expressed ourselves in similar predictable ways. Difference is the spice of human behavior that makes us so fascinating.

Some of us charge boldly through life taking risks; others choose to play it safe. Some of us are eager for social interactions; others are more contented being loners. Some are spontaneous; others are planned. Some approach each day with gusto; others are cautious. Some are perfectionists; others are less exacting. In love we become acutely aware of these differences and are careful not to force our values upon those with different behaviors.

Our love makes room for everyone. As long as we remain open to differences, we are constantly enriched. There are as many approaches to life as there are people in this world. The more of these ways we can understand and accept, the more full and loving our life becomes.

The French say, “Vive la difference.” Love echoes the phrase.

Rosalind Cutler

Care and support for expats and their families

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www.familymatterscoaching.com

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