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The Naked Truth | Why trailing spouses have it tough – stress, depression, loss of identity – and how to turn it into opportunity

- Trailing spouse syndrome is a group of symptoms resulting from the challenges of expatriate life for those who accompany working partners overseas
- Couples should devise a plan that will provide a sense of fulfilment and purpose for the trailing spouse before moving

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Trailing spouses who get left by themselves a lot in a strange new country with little support network can suffer from a lack of self-esteem and direction to anxiety and depression. Photo: Shutterstock

Nobody wants to hear the term “ball and chain” used to describe their relationship because it sounds burdensome and restrictive for both people. The term “trailing spouse”, unfortunately, gives a similar impression.

The term evokes an image of a person following closely behind their partner, much to the reluctance of the other person. That is quite a disturbing picture.

In truth, a trailing spouse is usually the opposite of that because they play more of a supporting role. When one partner gets relocated overseas for a job, more often than not the other partner is expected to follow them. Even without a job or any sort of prospects to fall into, a trailing spouse is expected to follow to keep the relationship intact. Not going is almost never an option, especially when there are children involved.

“In the 1980s, the professional world was first introduced to this new term. I have always had an issue with it, especially being one myself,” says clinical psychologist Dr Quratulain Zaidi, founding director of the Hong Kong-based MindnLife psychology practice. “To start, the partner who is supportive of their partner’s career at the cost of their own professional growth and social identity, as well as their sense of fulfilment, should be identified as a ‘supporting spouse’, not a ‘trailing spouse’.”



Dr Quratulain Zaidi says trailing spouses – or rather, supporting spouses – often feel neglected and lonely in a new place with no social support network.

Trailing spouse syndrome (TSS), a term commonly used by expatriates, captures the challenging impact of expatriate life for the trailing spouse who gives up their job support network and their sense of identity, Zaidi says. TSS can lead to disillusionment, stress and a general lack of identity, self-esteem and direction.

“More specifically, the trailing spouse subordinates their own career to allow their partner to advance professionally. Since many spouses and their partners possess their own distinct professional identities, relocation for a new job – even with the same employer – affects not only the candidate, but the spouse as well.”

Research shows that the most common feelings faced by the trailing spouse include a sense of loneliness, lack of direction and loss of identity, Zaidi says. One of these, or all in combination, could lead to relationship problems. A sense of disappointment could also be triggered by expectations that fail to match reality. Left unchecked, [this could lead to depression and anxiety](#).

The relationship could also be negatively affected if the working partner is too tied up with their new job.

“If they have to work long hours to prove themselves in the new demanding role and the supporting spouse is left on their own a lot of the time, it can lead to them feeling neglected and lonely in a new place with no social support network. As a result, resentment can build up in the relationship,” Zaidi says.



About 80 per cent of trailing spouses are women, Zaidi says. Photo: Shutterstock

Sometimes the trailing spouse might feel like a single parent bringing up the family alone because the working partner is too preoccupied with their career. “It’s easy to feel down or depressed when you don’t have that productive day and a sense of fulfilment that you were used to.”

About 80 per cent of trailing spouses are women, with 72 per cent of non-working trailing spouses saying they left a career when moving abroad, Zaidi says.

While relocating can have a negative impact on the trailing spouse’s well-being, the working partner is often sheltered from identity discontinuity by institutional frameworks, according to research on expatriate families. The trailing spouse will often have to face a sudden loss of essential social and psychological functions that establish their identity, such as a sense of belonging, professional achievement and social interactions, Zaidi explains.

But can TSS be avoided?

Research shows that when it comes to dealing with the trailing spouse’s adjustment, there are three prominent concerns to overcome: dual-career issues, marital stress and identity reconstruction, Zaidi says.

“These are all the topics that need to be discussed openly before the move happens. To avoid spousal resentment and maintain one’s mental health, it is important to evaluate what you want from the expatriate experience.

“You should devise a plan and some goals in your mind that will continue to provide a sense of fulfilment and sense of purpose. And ensure that the trailing spouse doesn’t eventually lose their voice in the course of constant relocation. Loss of voice in a relationship can eventually lead to maladaptive codependent behaviour.”



Trailing spouses can take this opportunity to reinvent themselves, but it requires personal initiative and huge self-motivation

Dr Quratulain Zaidi

The extraordinary levels of stress that can come with expatriate life may affect a couple’s ability to cope with problems, Zaidi says. This could result in polarising behaviours such as infidelity, excessive drinking, abuse and workaholism, all of which could be used as a means of coping, according to studies.

“It is no wonder that moving and settling in different cultures critically affects one’s self-esteem and the way one perceives oneself. Each move to another culture requires reinventing oneself and rebuilding one’s self-esteem,” Zaidi says.

She stresses that communicating openly and effectively with your partner without resentment and criticism is important as this is a decision you both made. Reaching out to ask for support is another way to be reassured that you are not alone.



Making new friends is one thing that can help provide trailing spouses with a sense of fulfilment. Photo: Shutterstock

Zaidi advises trailing spouses to turn the situation into an opportunity to thrive.

“They can take this opportunity to reinvent themselves, but it requires personal initiative and huge self-motivation. They can find ways to intellectually stimulate themselves by using the time to do things they have always wanted to do.”

Activities to pursue can include volunteering, learning new skills, studying, making new friends and using existing skills to give back to society, all of which can provide a sense of fulfilment and purpose, she adds.

“They can live their life on their own terms and become the best version of themselves. Far from the family and societal pressure in which they grew up, they now have the opportunity to do whatever they want.”

Luisa Tam is a correspondent at the Post