



DR QURATULAIN ZAIDI of MindNLife discusses the pressures that expat life can exert on married couples – and how to combat them.

Does Your Marriage Need Help?

In recent years, I've seen a notable increase in married people seeking help because they've discovered their partner has been unfaithful. About seven in ten of these believed they had happy, stable marriages. And every single one expressed the same sentiment: "I knew this happened in Hong Kong, and I've had friends who've gone through it, but I never thought it would happen to me!"

But somehow, it did. So, what is it about Hong Kong that can make it a "marriage graveyard"?

Work getting in the way

Expats in Hong Kong can have extremely demanding jobs. People are often taken out of their comfort zone and challenged with all-consuming positions. The pressure to succeed can be very stressful, particularly in the current market conditions.

As a result, working spouses may be irritable and preoccupied, and can suffer from stress-related problems such as disturbed sleep or anxiety. At home, this can manifest itself as frustrations with small things, leading to escalations in arguments. The

strain, originating with work-related stress, can eventually lead to a sense of marital dissatisfaction.

Jobs may also take on important global roles with big titles and sizeable paycheques. For some individuals, the combination can be heady, leading to an augmented sense of importance and entitlement.

It's no secret that business socialising in Hong Kong can include lots of late nights and alcohol and recreational drug use. Many businesspeople report that nights often end in girl bars and strip joints, which are abundant in the city. Between the disinhibiting effects of alcohol, and the unspoken understanding from colleagues that extramarital sex or affairs are okay, if not expected, it's not a surprise that some spouses stray. It certainly echoes in a phrase that I've heard countless times in my office: "In this city, you work hard and then play hard; and I work hard so I have the right to play hard."

Power meets temptation

Research supports this notion as well. In a study of over 4,000 male business leaders, executives and professionals,

researchers found that the more successful a man was and the greater his income, the more likely he was to have an affair. In effect, expectations and values surrounding entitlement and infidelity can easily be taken up by many successful career-driven men, even though they are detrimental to their marriage.

But people are unfaithful everywhere in the world – why place extra blame on this location? One specific temptation my male clients talk about is being actively pursued by women. Many report being repeatedly contacted by women they have met out socialising. Mistakenly trading telephone numbers late at night leads to a barrage of provocative calls and texts. The combination of positive, sexually charged attention and temptation cause some to take a chance, never expecting to get caught.

When I question straying clients about their own set of values when they are at the brink of losing their spouse and family, the vast majority understand their behaviour has been wrong, and not considered normal in the context of their home culture.

Abandonment and isolation

Expat life can involve major dislocation and the morphing of marital roles, so it can be a time of great stress and strain on a marriage. Couples must confront these issues while dealing with new resentments that can surface if both partners aren't equally enthusiastic about their new life.

The stresses expat couples face can include extensive travel by one spouse. Extended absences force even more adjustments in the relationship. In addition, one spouse often sacrifices their own job or career for the sake of their partner's career advancement. Feeling abandoned, isolated and stripped of professional identity and worth, "trailing" spouses can become very resentful of working spouses.

Seven signs of change

How can couples keep their marriages safe when facing these destabilising forces? First and foremost, be aware of the little changes that are both symptoms and causes of marital breakdown. These can include the following:



#1 Outsourcing your intimacy. If you don't feel valued and respected by your partner, you may find yourself leaning on others as primary sources for emotional intimacy, value and respect.

#2 Communication ruts. Avoid only talking about kids and helpers, or conversely, work and colleagues. Share your thoughts and feelings. Don't neglect the special emotional connection with your partner.

#3 Building walls. Every couple runs into challenges at some time. It's important not to build walls in a relationship. Don't let unresolved conflicts lead to resentment, which in turn breed anger and animosity.

#4 Shrinking common ground. The demands of work, travel, children's activities and social lives can create distance between couples. Make time actively just for the two of you and connect: see movies, hike, play a sport, have a meal, and discuss current events. Make firm appointments with each other, and keep them.

#5 Cold, cold bed. Packed schedules can impact relational intimacy. Some of my clients admit to not having had sex for up to eight years! Physical intimacy is like exercise: the more you do it, the more you enjoy it, and the more you want it again. It has real benefits for building intimacy, too, so don't neglect the marital bed.

#6 Living in denial. Pretending that problems don't exist in your marriage is never helpful. Don't ignore your feelings or rationalise mounting warnings signs. The sooner you face the truth, the more likely you'll be able to salvage your relationship.

#7 Compromising your core values. People over time can forget why they fell in love. It's important to remind yourself of what's important rather than choose to cheat when the opportunity presents itself. In settings where infidelity is accepted, it takes real integrity to honour commitment instead of convenience.

A sense of certainty

In long-term relationships, the importance of individuals' feelings and emotions can get pushed aside to serve more functional needs. Making time for each other to maintain that special emotional connection and making it stronger is an investment in your marriage.

Don't underestimate the power of spending time with your partner and really being present during that time for each other. It's helpful to talk about how to safeguard your marriage if this city's temptations come your way. If you feel you're not spending enough time together, ask for it.

Keep your marriage as a top priority. Make sure you're both working to meet each other's most important needs. If you don't know what they are, talk to each other and find out. These simple but effective ways of keeping your spouse close and connected will create a sense of certainty and safety in your marriage – and may make it even better.

Finally, it's important that you don't wait for problems to arise; anticipate and address the unique challenges of expat life. Pre-empt the challenges that come with living in Hong Kong and prepare yourself to safeguard your marriage or relationship rather than react to infidelity. 

Dr Zaidi is a British-registered clinical psychologist who works with individuals, couples and families in her private practice in Central, and as a mental health consultant for a number of NGOs and international corporations.

+852 9700 2786 | +44 7918 092865
info@mindnlife.com | mindnlife.com

