



Headington
Institute



FAMILY MATTERS:
SELF CARE FOR FAMILY MEMBERS
OF HUMANITARIAN WORKERS
by Lisa McKay

ONLINE TRAINING **MODULE FIVE**



Headington Institute

402 South Marengo Ave.
Pasadena, CA 91101
USA

626.229.9336
www.headington-institute.org

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INTRODUCTION

“Social support networks and family can be particularly important in offsetting stressors encountered by aid workers.”

— (Barbara Lopes Cardozo & Peter Salama)¹

Few careers can impact an entire family like humanitarian work. It is rarely just a 9-to-5 job. Everyone in the family – the humanitarian worker, partner, and children – can be enriched by the diverse experiences and opportunities to help others that come with this work. But humanitarian work can also bring stressful challenges that test relationships and the stability of the entire family unit. Often, both are true.

Most humanitarian workers say that their families are extremely important to them, and “separation from family” is often listed by humanitarian workers as one of the most stressful aspects of their job. Research supports this. Humanitarian workers without strong family or friendship networks are much more likely to get physically sick and experience high levels of stress.

Families play a key role in supporting humanitarian workers, yet few support services and little information are offered to these families. As a result, partners and families can become isolated and overwhelmed, relationships can suffer, and work may be compromised.

Everyone benefits when families are equipped to understand and cope with the inevitable pressures of humanitarian work. Partners and children end up healthier and happier and, as a result, so do the humanitarian workers.

Who should read this module?

- The partners and other family members of humanitarian workers.
- Humanitarian workers interested in supporting their families.
- Others interested in supporting the families of humanitarian workers (including friends, human resources personnel, managers, and staff support professionals).

What should you get out of this module? By the end of this module you should:

- Understand three types of stress associated with humanitarian work (chronic stress, vicarious trauma, and trauma).
- Understand three aspects of thriving in the face of stress (resilience, hardiness, and vitality).
- Recognize signs of stress and thriving in adults and children.
- Be able to describe self-care strategies and skills that promote thriving as an individual, couple, and family with children.



How can you get the most out of this module?

Don't rush through this module. Make time to think carefully about the material and how it might apply to you and your family. In particular, take time to consider the questions in the To think about and discuss boxes (like the one below) before you read on.

To think and discuss...

- You will find these questions most helpful if you can either talk to others about your responses or write down your thoughts.

Other Headington Institute training resources

This is one of a series of training modules on stress and humanitarian work produced by the Headington Institute. Additional modules include:

- **Understanding and coping with traumatic stress**
- **Trauma and critical incident care for humanitarian workers**
- **On the road again: Coping with travel and reentry stress**
- **Understanding and coping with vicarious trauma**

Visit our [Online Training Program](#) to find these and other free resources provided by the Headington Institute.



PART ONE | *How Important are Family and Friends?*

“Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it family. Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.”

— (Jane Howard)

Little research has been done on the experiences of humanitarian workers' families and friends. However, there has been research on what helps humanitarian workers stay healthy and happy. One of the most important factors is something often referred to as “social support.”

What is social support?

Social support is often defined as the physical and emotional comfort given to you by family, friends, colleagues, and others. It's knowing that you are part of a community of people who care for you and think well of you.

Social support, therefore, is really your perception of the quality of your relationship networks. If you feel your relationships are plentiful, helpful, and positive, you would score high on a scale measuring social support. If, on the other hand, you think you don't have many helpful and positive relationships in your life, you would score lower.



Social support is your perception of the quality of your relationship networks. If you feel that your relationships are plentiful, helpful, and positive, you have high social support.

What does the research say about social support?

Social support can have a big impact on the health and happiness of humanitarian workers. Take a look at the following research findings:

- Several studies report that separation from family because of work is one of the most significant stressors humanitarian workers experience. ²
 - In one study of World Vision staff, almost 70 percent of those surveyed reported experiencing moderate to extreme stress related to separation from their families.
- More than one study reports that high levels of social support “buffer” humanitarian workers against stress and posttraumatic distress. ³
 - For example, one study of 215 humanitarian workers reported that trauma symptoms were lower for those with high social support. The effect was stronger for those that had high social support outside the organization (family and friends outside of work).
 - When humanitarian workers with low social support were compared to those with medium to high levels of support, they found that the staff with low social support were:
 - ▶ 4 times more likely to experience traumatization;



- ▶ 3 times more likely to experience some form of “unwellness”;
- ▶ 2.5 times more likely to experience some form of acute anxiety; and
- ▶ 2.5 times more likely to experience some form of physical illness. ⁴

“If social support is compromised, then front-line aid workers are not only statistically more likely to be symptomatic of stress and trauma, but the differences are huge.”

— (John Fawcett) ⁵



Whether you are a family member, a humanitarian worker, or both, social support is one of the most important of the factors that contributes to your emotional and physical well-being. Good social support plays a key role in keeping people healthy and happy.

So, how important *are* family and friends?

How important are family and friends? The short answer is, very!

For most people, family plays a very important role in their social support. Good social support plays a key role in keeping people healthy and happy. Some researchers have gone so far as to say “strong relationships afford the best protection in stressful and traumatic environments . . . it may well be our relationships that save us, rather than our knowledge and skills. Above all other factors, we seem to be dependent upon the strength and nature of our relationships.”⁶

So, what does this mean?

If you’re a humanitarian worker, know that there are many good reasons for you to invest time and energy in nurturing your relationships with your family and friends.

If you’re a family member or friend of a humanitarian worker, know that you’re important! You are important first and foremost because you are inherently valuable as a unique individual. But you are also very important to the humanitarian worker you know and love. Your care for them is a key part of their support and happiness, just as care from them is important to you. This module is written for you – to help support you, as you support them.

To think and discuss...

- Who is important in *your* social support network? (You might want to draw a diagram that shows different people and groups, or make a list.)
- What do you think about the research findings in this section? Do they surprise you? Why or why not?



PART TWO | *Stress, Trauma, and Humanitarian Work*

“I knew nothing about self-care, secondary traumatization, or burnout... I think it is unfortunate that both the French and US NGOs I worked for did not educate us more about such things. Instead, I wondered why I was so irritable and tired all the time, and dreaded hearing one more tragic story... I saw too many of my fellow relief workers get totally burned out. I am certain that if they had been more reassured that their reactions were mostly normal they would have known how to cope, rather than internalize their reactions, leading to depression. Being more knowledgeable can help enormously.”

— *(Maria Blaque-Belair, working in Bosnia)*⁷

Humanitarian work can be rewarding, but it can also be stressful. This section looks at three different types of stress that humanitarian workers and their families can encounter – trauma, vicarious trauma, and chronic stress. For each type of stress we’ve provided a definition and links to where you can find more information.

Trauma

Trauma is intense stress produced by highly distressing or life-threatening experiences which lead to feelings of intense fear, helplessness, or horror. Examples of events that may cause trauma include:

- Natural disasters (e.g., earthquake, tornado, or tsunami).
- Accidents (e.g., a fire, traffic accident, or medical emergency).
- Acts deliberately inflicted by other human beings (e.g., terrorist attacks, hostage taking, or sexual assault).



Trauma is intense stress produced by highly distressing or life-threatening experiences which lead to feelings of intense fear, helplessness, or horror.

Everyone is unique, and people react in very different ways after traumatic events. There are a wide range of normal signs and symptoms of trauma. To find out more about trauma, follow these links:

- [Signs and symptoms of trauma in adults](#)
- [Signs and symptoms of trauma in children](#)
- [Supporting adults after traumatic events](#)
- [Supporting children after traumatic events](#)

For more on trauma, see the Headington Institute’s online module on [Trauma and critical incident care](#).



Vicarious trauma

Traumatic events don't just impact the person involved. They can also vicariously impact someone's family and friends, and other people who see or hear about the event. When a large stone is dropped into a pond of still water, it makes waves. Traumatic events have a similar "ripple effect." If the place where the stone was dropped is trauma, then the resulting ripples are vicarious trauma.

Vicarious trauma is the stress that can come from seeing people in pain or need, or hearing many stories of people suffering (e.g., working with children who are starving, or hearing people describe being attacked). This can cause you to experience certain types of stress reactions, even though you are not the one directly involved in the situation.



Vicarious trauma is the stress that can come from seeing people in pain or need, or hearing many stories of people suffering.

There are a wide range of normal signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma. **To find out more about signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma, see the Headington Institute's online module on Understanding and coping with vicarious trauma.**

Stress

Chronic stress is related to lower-intensity stressors in your life that "pile up" on top of one another. Some common sources of chronic stress that the families of humanitarian workers may experience include:

- Caring for sick children, parents, or other relatives.
- Worry about finances.
- Tension or conflict with people at home or at work.
- Frequent separation due to work-related travel.
- "Environmental" stress such as hot weather, curfews that make it hard to travel at night, security risks, frequent power cuts.



Chronic stress is usually related to lower-intensity stressors in your life that "pile up" on top of one another.

For more on stress see the Headington Institute's online module on Understanding and Coping with Traumatic Stress.

We will look at coping with chronic stress in later chapters.



To think and discuss...

- What are the most significant sources of stress in your life right now? Make a list.
- Which of the three types of difficulties described above (trauma, vicarious trauma, and chronic stress) have you been most impacted by during the last year? Why?
- Which of the three types of difficulties described above do you think the humanitarian worker in your family is most impacted by? Why?



PART THREE | *Thriving*

We do not believe it is sufficient to train people to cope... Survival of suffering is the first step; flourishing and growing in healthy communities built on foundations of mutual respect and honor are the ultimate outcome of a comprehensive stress and trauma management strategy.”

— (John Fawcett)⁸

Stress is inevitable in life. Stress is caused by change and challenge, and no one goes through life without encountering at least some change and challenge. Stress management must not be just about how to *avoid stress*. It is important to consider how you can avoid *unnecessary stress*, but it is impossible to avoid stress completely. This means that how you think about and approach unavoidable stress is very important!



Effective stress management is not just about avoiding stress; it's about viewing and approaching change and challenge in ways that will help you thrive.

To think and discuss...

- Think about your life right now, today. Overall, do you feel as if you're thriving, or just surviving?

You can survive the stress in your life without thriving. **Surviving** stress means that you generally “cope okay.” Overall, you feel that you do a decent job of treading the water of life and keeping your head above the surface.

Thriving is something more than that. Thriving means flourishing and growing in the face of challenge. It doesn't mean you have to feel good all the time, or feel positive *every day*. You're human. You're going to have bad days just like everyone else. But thriving does mean you generally feel like you're moving forward in the face of stress – that you're growing, learning, and becoming stronger in important ways. You're not just treading water; you're swimming.

There are at least three related aspects of thriving – resilience, hardiness, and vitality. Let's look at each one in turn.



Thriving means to flourish and grow in the face of challenge and change. There are three related aspects of thriving – resilience, hardiness, and vitality.



Resilience

Resilience is the ability to “bounce back” and recover relatively quickly after a highly stressful or traumatic event knocks you off center. George Vaillant compares resilience to “a twig with a fresh, green, living core: when stepped on, such a twig bends, and yet springs back.”



Resilience is the ability to “bounce back” and recover relatively quickly after a highly stressful or traumatic event.

Hardiness

Hardiness is the ability to “bear up” under increased stress over time. This is not “bouncing back” from events like a car accident or a divorce. Instead, it has more to do with stamina, with your ability to function well in stressful situations over time.



Hardiness is the ability to “bear up” under increased stress – to function well in stressful situations over time.

Vitality

Vitality is related to “being engaged.” By “engaged” we mean feeling connected to sources of hope, purpose, meaning, and perspective in your life. If you are engaged in this way you generally feel that your life and your work are meaningful, fulfilling, and challenging (without being overwhelming). You feel that your life is contributing to a whole that is larger than you.



Vitality is related to “being engaged” – feeling connected to sources of hope, purpose, meaning, and perspective.

To think and discuss...

- Do you think you are naturally strongest in the area of resilience, hardiness, or vitality? Why? How has that strength been demonstrated in your life?
- Think of a time in your life when you have thrived. What specific qualities, behaviors, thoughts, or actions helped you thrive during that time?

Resilience, hardiness, and vitality are not traits that people either have or don't have. Thriving involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be nurtured and developed in anyone.

In the rest of this module we will look at some ways to thrive as an individual, couple, family with children, and expatriate. We will also look at how humanitarian organizations can help support the families of their staff.



PART FOUR | *Thriving as an Individual*

“People who believe they have the power to exercise some measure of control over their lives are healthier, more effective and more successful than those who lack faith in their ability to effect changes in their lives.”

— (Albert Bandura, Canadian psychologist)⁹

Strength factors for thriving

There are many ways of thinking and acting that can help you flourish and learn in the face of stress – we can call these characteristics strength factors for thriving. Here are just a few of the characteristics research suggests help people thrive. Some of these you may already possess; some you could develop with attention and practice:¹⁰

- **Good social support:** Having relationships that involve give and take and provide safety, encouragement, reassurance, intimacy, and support. Well-developed communication skills and the ability to secure and maintain good relationships are vital keys to emotional health.
- **Self-esteem:** Believing that you are valuable and capable. This is an important part of feeling that your life is worthwhile and that you have inner resources that can help you deal with challenges.
- **Flexibility and adaptability:** Being able to “go with the flow” when things take an unexpected turn, while still maintaining some necessary sense of personal control.
- **A sense of personal control:** Feeling that you generally have control over (or that you can at least influence) what happens to you in life rather than feeling like a helpless victim of fate.
- **Realistic optimism and humor:** A general tendency to expect the best in things and to look for positive meaning and the funny side of life. This is also related to a tendency to experience positive emotions (even alongside negative ones like anxiety and frustration).
- **Curiosity and openness to experience:** An active desire to learn and openness to new experiences in life and relationships.
- **Viewing stress as a challenge rather than a threat:** The tendency to see change, problems, and even crises as opportunities for growth rather than problems that can't be solved.
- **Active, problem-oriented coping:** The tendency to be proactive and problem solve, to take action in the face of stress instead of just detaching, ignoring it, and wishing it would go away.
- **Active spirituality:** Spirituality refers to your deepest sense of meaning, purpose, hope, and faith (often a belief in a power apart from your own existence and a coherent “meaningfulness” in the universe). Active spirituality involves knowing what you believe and value, and engaging with life in ways that feed your sense of groundedness, connection, and coherence.



There are many ways of thinking and acting that can help you thrive in the face of stress. Some of them may come naturally to you, while others can be developed with attention and practice.

To think and discuss...

Look at the list above:

- What is missing from this list – what other characteristics help you thrive in the face of stress?
- Which of these characteristics come naturally to you?
- Which would you like to develop further?

Self-care

You might be reading this because you are feeling stressed yourself. You might be reading it because a family member is stressed and you want to help and support him or her. Either way, taking the time to think about how well *you* take care of *yourself* is important. If you're stressed, self-care is the first and best line of defense. If you want to help someone else, it's important to do what you can to stay balanced and healthy yourself in the process. You will be in a much better position to support them consistently and effectively if you reach out from a position of personal strength and stability.

Self-care is doing things that use or help you build strength factors for thriving. Everyone is different when it comes to what helps them feel relaxed, less stressed, and better equipped to thrive. Here are 20 different self-care techniques that can help you stay healthy and grounded – even thrive – in the face of stress.

PHYSICAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Exercise regularly• Eat a balanced diet• Get enough sleep• Practice muscle relaxation or deep breathing• Reduce your intake of alcohol, caffeine, and other substances to healthy levels
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THINKING	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Realize that stress is a normal part of life, recognize its signs, and understand its impact• Have realistic expectations of yourself – you do not have to do everything perfectly• Practice being grateful and look for positives, even in times of high stress• Remind yourself of times you coped with stress before, and what helped you then• Acknowledge negative feelings, but don't allow yourself to dwell on them for days on end
EMOTIONAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Connect – talk to and spend time with others• Create – write, draw, paint, sculpt, play music, or photograph• Watch, read, or listen to something uplifting or soothing• Laugh or smile• Cry
SPIRITUAL/ PHILOSOPHICAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Participate in a community of meaning and purpose (e.g., a faith community)• Pray and/or meditate• Read or discuss something that inspires you or reconnects you with a sense of meaning and purpose• Spend time with art or music• Spend time in nature



If you're stressed, self-care is the first and best line of defense. If you want to help someone else, it's important that you do what you can to stay balanced and healthy yourself in the process.

Investing in your own physical and mental health is worth doing – it has payoffs for both you and others. If you're not used to thinking about whether or how you take care of yourself, it can be hard to know where to start, and perhaps tempting not too. Don't get overwhelmed! Remember that everyone is different, and the key is figuring out what works well for you. Then, bit by bit, practice different actions and ways of thinking that can help you take care of yourself. Just like getting fit takes time and consistency, self-care takes practice too. Over time it will probably come more naturally and require less effort and attention.

If you're already pretty good at taking care of yourself, use the following questions as a “checkup” to help you think about your relative strengths and weaknesses, and where you could improve.



To think and discuss...

Think about the sources of your stress you identified in the chapter on Stress and trauma:

- What are things you do to take care of yourself that help you deal with that stress?
- Which of these four self-care areas (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual) is your strongest?
- Which one is your weakest?

Think about what you learned above about strength factors for thriving:

- How do some of the self-care techniques you already use help you exercise or develop strength factors for thriving?
- What are some specific things you can do that might help you further practice or develop strength factors for thriving?

Setting and meeting achievable goals is another characteristic associated with thriving:

- What are two self-care techniques you would like to use in the next month?
- What is one self-care goal you can set for this next week? What will you do? When? Where?



PART FIVE | *Thriving as a Couple*

“Love is an ideal thing, marriage a real thing.” (Goethe)

Being part of a couple can bring great reward and great challenge. Every couple faces competing demands and obligations that come from balancing partner, work, friends, family, self, and sometimes children. When one or both partners are humanitarian workers, additional pressures (such as frequent or extended separation or uncertainty about the future because of short-term contracts) can also impact the relationship.

Social support is crucial for keeping people healthy, happy, and thriving. Your relationship with your partner or spouse is the single biggest piece of that social support puzzle. In this chapter we'll look at characteristics of couples who are thriving and ways to care for your relationship.



One of the best things you can do to help yourself and your partner thrive is to nurture your relationship as a couple.

To think and discuss...

Don't just think about these questions; discuss them with your partner! Communication is vital to thriving as a couple – time spent discussing these sorts of issues is never wasted.

- What impact has humanitarian work had on your relationship – both positive and negative?
- What do you see as the most significant challenges your humanitarian worker partner has to cope with?
- What are some of the things you find most challenging about his/her involvement in humanitarian work?

Strength factors for thriving as a couple

While we all need social support, the specifics of what a happy and healthy couple look like can vary widely across cultures and couples. Keep in mind that most of the research and stories cited here come from a Western context and think carefully about what you feel applies to you.



While social support is universally important, the specifics of what happy and healthy relationships look like can vary widely across cultures and couples.



Research has a lot to say about the common characteristics of couples who are thriving in their relationship. " These "strength factors" show up in at least three important areas:

- How partners view their relationship;
- How they meet challenges and deal with conflict; and
- How they invest positively in each other and their relationship.

Having and using good communication skills is absolutely foundational. Below we've listed 15 other characteristics commonly found in couples who are thriving.



Having and using good communication skills is foundational to thriving as a couple.

Ways that thriving couples commonly view their relationship:

- They view it as a serious, sacred, commitment – something to be protected and nourished.
- They highly value the companionship and intimacy the relationship brings.
- They trust one another.
- They tend to remember the good things about their relationship and each other and don't dwell on the bad.
- They know that change, challenge, and conflict are a normal part of any relationship. They don't fall prey to the misconceptions that it will be easy, or that a "good relationship" is always calm and peaceful.

Ways that thriving couples commonly meet challenges and deal with conflict:

- They approach personality and opinion differences with respect and tolerance, and view them more as strengths that offer balance to the relationship than as threats.
- They take a team approach to problem solving. In the face of challenges such as unemployment, health difficulties, and financial problems, they tend to look forward and focus more on possibility than blame.
- They navigate times of high frustration and conflict by using a variety of conflict resolution skills. For example, they acknowledge their own contribution to a problem and manage their own emotions so that they neither fester and turn into resentment nor escalate to anger and aggression.
- They look at mistakes and difficulties in the past and draw from them positive lessons for the future.
- They seek outside help from family, friends, spiritual mentors or counselors when needed, rather than "going it alone."

Ways that thriving couples commonly meet challenges and deal with conflict:

- They spend time together, especially in leisure and recreation. Interactive activities such as games, spending time outdoors, and mealtimes are the most beneficial way to spend time together. There is some benefit, but not much, to "parallel activities" where you are together but there is little interaction (e.g., watching TV).



- They say positive things to each other. It takes about 5 positive messages to counteract every negative message.
- They laugh together.
- They create a shared identity as a couple by establishing some rituals and traditions, shared activities, and investing together in a broader network of friends and family.
- They maintain some independence and a sense of their identity as individuals. They allow each other the freedom to have independent friendships and interests, which enable them to go outside the relationship and bring back energy and ideas to enrich the relationship.



Strength factors for thriving as a couple are related to how couples view their relationship, how they meet challenge and manage conflict, and how they invest positively in each other and their relationship.

To think and discuss...

- In which of these three areas (how you view the relationship, meet challenge, and invest positively) do you think your relationship is naturally strongest? How and why?
- Which of these three areas is your weakest? How and why?
- Think of a couple you greatly respect. What are three things you admire about their relationship?
- What are some strength factors for thriving that you would like to work on building or strengthening in your own relationship?

Caring for your relationship

Given the importance of your relationship and the challenges that can come when one or both of you are humanitarian workers, it is especially critical that you are intentional about caring for your partnership in ways that use and build up your strengths. There are many ways you can do that. Here are just a couple of suggestions to get you thinking.

- Practice good self-care. The first part of being able to care for your relationship over time is at least some basic level of caring for yourself.
- Do something fun and interactive together – play a game, go somewhere new, spend time outdoors.
- Look for ways to say things that praise, encourage, and build up your partner.
- Learn something new in an area of relative weakness, tension, or conflict. For example, buy a book about conflict resolution (or sex, money, or parenting) and read and discuss it together.



- Talk. Talk over breakfast, or dinner. Talk on the couch at night. Talk in the car. Talk on the phone. Talk while going for a walk. Just talk! Stuck on what to talk about? Here are five ideas:
 - Buy a book or a game designed around questions to promote discussion.
 - Write down five questions you'd like to ask your partner.
 - Write down five questions you'd like your partner to ask you.
 - Use the questions in this module to spark conversations.
 - Discuss what you are both grateful for.

To think and discuss...

- Research suggests that the two most common problems that destroy the foundations of relationships are poor communication and destructive fighting.** To which of these is your relationship currently most vulnerable?
- Since self-care is foundational to being able to care for your relationship, how can your partner encourage you to take care of yourself? (Don't forget to let them know ways in which they are already good at encouraging you to do this.)
- How can you encourage your partner to take care of themselves?
- What are three ways each of you really enjoy caring for your relationship?
- What are two specific ways you can commit to investing in your relationship this week?

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► **Spotlight on extra resources:** Look up the following on www.amazon.com (this will also lead you to related books): *The seven principles for making marriage work*, by J. Gottman and N. Silver (2000).

Caring for your relationship when you're apart

Long distance relationships, or those that involve frequent or extended separations, bring with them some significant and unusual challenges. It *is* possible to thrive in relationship across the miles – both of the authors of this module are proof of that. Bree and her husband spent four years dating before getting married, and two of those years were cross-country long distance in Australia. Lisa was living in Los Angeles when she met her husband, who was living in Papua New Guinea. They spent most of their dating relationship (and some significant time since getting married) coping with long distance.



So thriving in relationship across the miles is possible, but it takes time, effort, and energy. Here are some ideas about how you can care for your relationship during and after separation.

- Practice good self-care. A strong personal identity and good self-care and coping skills will stand you in good stead while you are apart.
- Communicate about the reasons for the separation. It will help tremendously if both partners agree that it's a good idea (or at least necessary).
- For extended separations consider pursuing common interests (such as reading the same book) that can help give you things to talk about.
- Pay attention to emotional reactions to your separation. Understanding that mood swings can be more common or severe may help you weather them without feeling as uncertain or threatened.
- Find ways of communicating that work well for you while you're apart. Ideally you should communicate often enough, for long enough, so that you both feel connected, but not so often that you feel pressured or resentful of the time and emotional energy involved. You will not always be able to find a balance that works equally well for both of you, and your ideal patterns may look completely different for short trips versus long ones. It can help to figure out what might work and manage expectations if you have discussed questions like:
 - How often would you like us to touch base while we're apart?
 - How (e.g., email, phone conversation, text message, etc.)?
 - Do you like having quick contacts like text messages or three-line emails, or not?
 - Do you feel pressured or expected to have an in-depth discussion every time we talk?
 - What do you find more rewarding or enjoyable about communication when we're apart?
 - What do you find most challenging about communication when we're apart? (E.g., do you find you're more emotional or lonely after talking to your partner than before? Do you communicate too much, or not enough? Do you often feel as if you have nothing to say, or that what you have to say is boring?)
 - Does communication always help you when we're apart, or are there times when you feel it hurts more than it helps? Think of specific examples if you can. How does it help? How can it hurt?
- Devote time to reconnecting and reestablishing intimacy upon reunion. This can take time and does not always come easily or naturally.



To think and discuss...

- What are some of the things you value about time apart (the silver linings of separations)?
- What are some things you really miss while you're apart? When do you tend to miss your partner the most?
- How do you care for your relationship when you're apart?
- What helps you feel connected to your partner when you're apart?
- Are your preferred communication patterns and needs the same or different for short-term trips versus longer separations?

► **Spotlight on extra resources:** Visit the Headington Institute's module on Understanding and coping with travel stress. Look up the following on www.amazon.com (this will also lead you to related books): *The long-distance relationship survival guide*, by C. Bell and K. Brauer Bell (2006).



PART SIX | *Thriving as a Family With Children*

“For me, my family is everything. Without my husband and children I could not keep doing this. I know I spend a long time away from them, but they are always there where my heart and spirit lie. My parents, my brothers and sisters, all my aunts and uncles, all those people Europeans call cousins. These are my family, my community, my life.”

— (Huyen, from Vietnam)¹³

“Family? How do we keep in touch?! You work long enough for the UN and you don’t have a family. Problem solved.”

— (Anonymous UN employee)¹⁴

To think and discuss...

- How has the involvement of one or more family members in humanitarian work impacted the whole family? Has it impacted different family members differently?
- What are two of the greatest challenges facing your family?
- What are two of your greatest strengths as a family?

Strength factors for thriving as a family

Just as with couples, keep in mind that thriving families can look quite different across cultures, and even within the same culture. But here are seven things research suggests often characterize thriving families:¹⁵

- **Communication:** Speaking and listening that is open, clear, affirming, mutual, consistent, empathetic, and honest.
- **Commitment:** Working toward shared goals and an environment of trust and dependability.
- **Connectedness:** Receiving support from and contributing to extended family and friendship communities.
- **Cohesion:** Fostering emotional closeness and practical interdependence, balanced with respect and support for each member’s uniqueness.
- **Adaptability:** Balancing stable roles and traditions with the flexibility to change course and adapt to changes.



- **Spirituality:** Believing in and acting on a positive sense of purpose and meaning and a value system beyond self-interest.
- **Resource management:** Managing time, money, and the pursuit of personal and family goals in a manner that is balanced, competent, and coordinated.

To think and discuss...

- What else would you add to this list, and why?
- Which of these do you think are particularly helpful in coping with the pressures posed by humanitarian work?
- Think about your own family. In which two the seven traits above are you naturally strongest right now? In which two are you weakest?
- For each of the seven traits listed above, write down two specific ways your family builds strength in that area.

Caring for your family

Most family strengths are made, not born, and every family is different. You and your family are in the best position to figure out practical strategies to care for your family by building important strengths. As you think about this, here are some particularly important areas to consider.

Planning ahead

How good at you at planning ahead and scheduling time to accomplish your priorities in caring for your family? Be proactive about devoting time to your family, just as you are in honoring work and other commitments. At least once a week close out the rest of the world and get some family time. Do whatever it takes to prioritize it, schedule it, and protect it.

Family fun times

What does your family do for fun together? Try to identify at least some activities you can enjoy together that also have positive spinoff benefits for physical or emotional health (e.g., walking or hiking, cooking, creative hobbies, storytelling or memory-sharing games).

Family celebrations and traditions

What milestones or accomplishments do you celebrate in your family? How? Can you think of other ways to add creativity or humor to ordinary and special events? Celebrating is an important part of affirming family members and focusing on the positive in life, even in the face of hardship.

Family routines

What routines connect you as a family? Do you eat certain meals together, have nighttime rituals, enjoy certain radio or TV programs, or have regular family meetings? Routines are an important part of providing a sense of groundedness and predictability in life, particularly for children.



Family involvement in decision making

How are decisions made and communicated in your family? Do you have regular family meetings? Would children feel like their input and opinions matter? Feeling heard and understood is an important part of feeling genuinely part of a cohesive and connected “family team.”

Family boundaries and discipline

Are there clear boundaries and expectations of children in the family? Are parents consistent and united in discipline? Children thrive most in a family environment that includes clear expectations of behavior and contributions, and boundaries that are enforced when necessary.

Spirituality

How do you acknowledge and address questions of meaning and purpose as a family? Do you discuss these issues openly? Are you involved in community service and/or religious communities? Believing in and acting on a value system beyond self-interest is an important part of thriving.

Social support

How do you foster family connections to extended family and friends? How do you encourage and enable your children’s peer relationships? Social support from outside the immediate family is very important, particularly in times of high stress. Build strong relationships by regularly spending time with relatives or friends living nearby. This issue is particularly important to pay attention to if your family has moved, or moves frequently.



Family strengths are made, not born, and every family is different. Use what you know to identify practical strategies for investing in your family.

To think and discuss...

- Think about the strategies listed above, and whatever else you would add to that list. In which of these areas is your family strong? What broader “strength factors” are these areas related too?
- In which is your family weaker? What broader “strength factors” are these areas related too?
- Ask your children what they think are the “best things” about your family? What do they “like doing together most”? What do they want to do more often?
- What are three strategies for caring for your family that you would like to develop further? Think about the next month. How and when will you do that? Be specific. The more specific you are the more likely you will follow through.

► **Spotlight on extra resources:** Look up the following on www.amazon.com (this will also lead you to related books): *The 7 habits of highly effective families*, by S.R. Covey (1997). You can also use Google to search for resources on specific topics such as problem solving as a family; tips on discipline for children; and guidelines for family meetings.



Caring for your family while you're apart

Frequent or extended travel is fairly common for humanitarian workers, even those working in their own country. The impact of this on families with children is significant. Although that impact is *not* necessarily all negative, it is worth being intentional about how you care for your family before, during, and after times of separation. Whether you are the one going or the one staying, there are things you can do to ease the impact. As you think about this, here are a couple of tips:

- The periods around leaving and returning can be very disruptive, as everyone must transition between routines. The one who is leaving is usually transitioning into a period of intense focus on work. The one who is staying is adjusting to parenting and coping solo. Children can find the changes in routine and the shift in authority and discipline dynamics unsettling. Realize that everyone's mood and behavior might be unusual during this time, and try to make appropriate allowances.
- Help children bid farewell and address or resolve any tension in the relationship. If you're leaving, take time to affirm them before you go and let them know you respect and love them. Listen to any worries or fears children voice about your departure. Treat these concerns seriously, but provide reassurance. If you're staying, provide children with extra connection and reassurance during this period.
- If you or your partner travel regularly, look for ways to develop family routines related to traveling. For example, you could:
 - Leave cards under children's pillows on departure days;
 - Send regular postcards or emails while away;
 - Connect regularly by phone;
 - Have special treats for kids to look forward to during these times, like outings or special meals;
 - Bring back small gifts with stories attached.
- Stay connected. Whether by phone, or email, or both, find ways to help everyone feel as connected as possible to the absent parent and vice versa.
- Do something fun to celebrate a return. It's a good idea to schedule this in advance so that it doesn't get lost in the busyness.



To think and discuss...

If you are the one that usually travels, ask your partner:

- What do they particularly appreciate about what you do to care for the family before you leave, while you're away, and after you return?
- What else could you do?

If you are the one that usually remains at home, ask your partner:

- What do they particularly appreciate about what you do to care for your family before, during, and after a trip?
- What else could you do?

Ask your children:

- What they “like” and “don’t like” about having their parent(s) away?
- What do they find “hard” about it? Their answers may give you clues on what’s important to them and how to reach out to them in ways that they will value.

► **Spotlight on extra resources:** Visit the Headington Institute’s module on [Understanding and coping with travel stress](#). Also, look up the following on www.amazon.com (this will also lead you to related books): *A parent’s guide to business travel: Practical advice and wisdom for when you have to be away*, by C. Hudson (2003).



PART SEVEN | *Thriving as an Expatriate*

Moving and living abroad can bring great rewards and some significant hardships. Everyone in the family is impacted. Children must change schools and make new friends. Parents must change friendship circles and jobs (or grapple with the dynamics of being a “trailing partner” who is not working). Everyone must learn to navigate a new country, culture, and city. This section focuses on the experiences and needs of the families of expatriate humanitarian workers.

Strength factors for thriving as an expatriate

There are many traits and skills that can help you thrive in the face of the stressful and uncertain conditions that come with an international move. Before you continue, think about the following questions.

To think and discuss...

- What are some of the skills (e.g., attitudes, styles of responding, or ways of behaving) that you think are most helpful in coping well with an international move? Why?
- How do you think your partner and/or children would answer this question?
- How *do* they answer it, when you ask them?

You may have listed things like:

- Good social support
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Optimism and a sense of humor
- Curiosity and openness to experience
- Willingness to learn
- Viewing stress as a challenge rather than a threat
- Active problem solving
- Tolerance for ambiguity
- Patience
- Perceptiveness
- Tolerance for differences
- Ability to handle your own negative feelings
- Self-reliance and independence



- Persistence, and not being easily discouraged
- Clear sense of purpose and meaning

There is no one “right answer” regarding the factors that are most helpful for thriving as an expatriate, and your answers may be different from those of your partner or children. All of the things listed above are helpful for different reasons.

What helps you thrive as an expatriate?

One veteran partner who had moved with her spouse seven times for assignments in five foreign countries answered the question above with, “reason and relationships, hands down.” She listed the following:¹⁶

1. **Strong sense of purpose and meaning:** “Even if it’s not some lofty ideal, but simply money or seeking adventure, this stands out as the most important factor for me (although in and of itself it is not close to being sufficient). There has to be some reason for putting up with hardships, homesickness, isolation, illness, and questioning.”
2. **Good relationships:** “Family first. Any individual is more likely to thrive if the marital /family relationship is healthy and harmonious. You typically need each other and depend on each other more overseas, especially at certain times such as when you first arrive. Settling in is also expedited by being able to network quickly – church and school proved very helpful with that.”



There is no one “right answer” regarding the factors that are most important in helping you thrive as an expatriate, and your answers may be different from those of your partner or children.

- **Spotlight on extra resources:** Look up the following on www.amazon.com (this will also lead you to related books): *The expert expatriate: Revised edition*, by M. Brayer Hess and P. Linderman (2007).

Caring for yourself

Most people reading this are probably a “trailing partner” (meaning you moved primarily because of your partner’s work, not your own). Both authors have personal experience as expatriates. Bree has moved internationally twice as a trailing spouse, and Lisa has moved internationally almost a dozen times and is married to a trailing spouse. We are both currently living as expatriates. When it comes to us, we clearly think the positives of these experiences outweigh the negatives. Keep that in mind as we go through these next two sections, which focus mostly on understanding and meeting the challenges associated with living as an expatriate. We don’t intend this discussion to be depressing. But we do want it to be a realistic look at some common pitfalls and problem areas. The more you know about those, the easier it will be for you to identify what you find challenging and work to transform that.



The more you know about the common pitfalls of expatriate living the better equipped you will be to identify what you find challenging and how to manage those challenges.



Living as an expatriate can be tough, particularly during certain seasons of your time abroad. Being a trailing partner can bring added stress. Some of the most common challenges include: ¹⁷

- **Dealing with the practical logistics of the move:** It can feel overwhelming and exhausting undertaking a move – sorting out what to take, store, and get rid of; finalizing bills and accounts; acquiring new furniture, cars, bank accounts, etc.
- **Culture shock and reentry issues:** It can be both rewarding and frustrating to learn to navigate (both physically and relationally) in a new place and culture. Interestingly, readjusting to the home culture after the assignment is over can be even more challenging!
- **Challenges to sense of self and purpose:** Transition shock is often even harder for trailing partners. The humanitarian worker has the natural networks, structure, and absorbing challenge provided by work. The trailing partner can struggle to meet people or find things to do, suffer an “identity crisis,” and feel as if they are not important or in control of their life.
- **Impact on career:** Trailing partners in particular may grapple with uncertainties related to finding work they enjoy, and whether the time abroad will adversely affect their own career.
- **Education concerns:** Parents are often worried about the impact of moving on their children’s schooling in general, and about the type and quality of education their children will receive at new schools abroad.
- **Children’s adjustment:** Just as adults find moving stressful, so do children. Children have a difficult time anticipating what being in a new environment might be like. Often, they can only see what they’re giving up. They can struggle to make new friends, especially if learning a new language is also involved.

To think and discuss...

- If you have already moved, what have you found to be the most challenging aspects of the process to date? These might be related to the things listed above, or other challenges entirely.
- If you are contemplating a move, what do you anticipate may be particularly challenging?
- What three strength factors for thriving as an expatriate would either like to develop further?
- Think about the next two weeks. How will you do this? Be specific, and realistic in setting your goals?

► **Spotlight on extra resources:** Look up the following on www.amazon.com (this will also lead you to related books): *A portable identity: A woman’s guide to maintaining a sense of self while moving overseas*, by D. Bryson and C. Hoge (2005).



Caring for your family

A move doesn't just affect you in a vacuum. It also impacts your relationship as a couple and the entire family unit. Given the importance of these relationships, this section looks at how to care for your partnership and children when moving.

Your marriage or partnership

Many couples don't give much thought to the pressures facing their relationship because of a move. They tend to focus on external challenges associated with packing, unpacking, and learning a new city. They often neglect the internal challenges – such as staying connected during the busyness and disruption, and renegotiating partnership roles and responsibilities as things change.

To think and discuss...

- Think about your current or previous move or posting abroad. When have you felt most connected to your partner? Why – what are things you or your partner did or said that helped you feel particularly connected or supported?
- When have you have felt most disconnected from your partner? Why? Are there things that you or your partner could have done or said that may have helped you feel more connected and supported?



Many couples don't give much thought to the pressures that their relationship faces during relocating and living abroad. They tend to focus on external challenges rather than internal ones.

Many couples report a “magnifying glass effect” – that a move can make a good relationship stronger, and a struggling one weaker. This relationship is probably your single most important resource, and it will be your single greatest stressor if it seriously flounders. Here are just a couple of ways you can nurture your relationship with your partner before, during, and after a move:

- **Talk about the move before you make it.** Talk about the pros and cons, what you're looking forward to and what you're not, your hopes and expectations related to where you'll live, your work, and other opportunities that might present themselves. It will be much better in the long run if the decision to move is a joint one, made by partners with equal voice in what is best for you as a couple and a family.
- **You are going to be very busy before the move and for a long time afterwards.** During this stage there are always going to be things on your “to do” list – spare time will rarely, if ever, exist. Make sure you set some time aside to connect as a couple, and to do things that are fun or relaxing.
- **Discuss many of the “life administration” tasks that will need attention (such as unpacking, organizing utilities, paying bills, preparing meals, etc.).** These are work too! It takes extra effort, time, patience, and energy to stay on top of life administration when living abroad. It may make sense for many of these tasks to fall to the trailing partner, but that should be discussed and agreed upon.
- **On a related note, give some thought to creating structure and goals for the trailing partner, and discuss this together.** The partner who will be starting work shortly after arriving will have the natural structure of a new job to guide them. The trailing partner will have fewer constraints on their time,



which can be both good and bad. If you are a trailing partner, you may need to be more intentional and proactive about meeting people, getting involved in communities, and finding work or other meaningful activities.

• **After you have settled abroad (perhaps at about the six-month stage) discuss questions like:**

- On the whole, are you finding yourself feeling more satisfied and confident, or frustrated, overwhelmed, and/or resentful?
- Apart from each other, who else do you have in your life that you can turn to during times of stress and struggle?
- Are you dividing up the work of living abroad fairly and facing challenges as a team?
- What are you finding most meaningful and interesting about where you're living and what you're involved in?
- What do you do together to take advantage of where you're living?
- How has your marriage changed since you left home?
- Are you glad you made the move?



It's very important to be intentional and proactive about communicating and connecting during the busyness and change that will come with an international move.

► **Spotlight on extra resources:** Look up the following on www.amazon.com (this will also lead you to related books): *A moveable marriage: Relocate your relationship without breaking it*, by R. Pascoe (2003). Visit the Families in Global Transition site (www.figt.org).

Your children

Children find moving stressful too. Some kids seem to adapt quickly and easily after a move, while others can struggle for months, perhaps years. Whether children adjust well can help make or break the experience for the whole family, and by far the largest part of children's adjustment will be related to their relationship with you and the friends they make at school and elsewhere.

To think and discuss...

- What do you think your children have found (or will find) hardest about moving? What do your children say when you ask them this question?
- What are some ways you can support your children before, during, and after a move? (Think specifically about how can you help them feel secure in your love for them, and make and grow new friendships).



Here are just a couple of ways you can help children before, during, and after a move:⁸

- Talk through the reasons for and against the move with your children. Ask for their opinion. Build a sense of team around the issue.
- Involve children in decision making as much as possible. If there are different options for schooling, for example, talk those over with your children. Ask them what they would like in their school. Discuss what you are looking for in a school, and why.
- Contact new schools in advance and ask about “buddy programs” which pair children up with host children upon arrival. Also ask whether the school has a “pen pal” program so that kids can have contact with someone at their new school even before they arrive.
- Know the signs that your child may be stressed and not coping well with the strain of change.
- Help children develop “cultural detective skills” – identifying differences between their own and the host culture with the aim of becoming aware of and accepting of these differences.
- Encourage and enable your children to stay in contact with former friends and family by phone and/or email.



The largest part of children's adjustments will be related to their relationship with you and the friends they make at school and elsewhere.

► **Spotlight on extra resources:** Look up the following books on www.amazon.com (this will also lead you to related books): *Third culture kids: The experience of growing up among worlds* by D. Pollock and R. Van Reeken (2001); *Moving with kids: 25 ways to ease your family's transition to a new home* by L. Burgan (2007).



PART EIGHT | *What Can Organizations do to Support Families?*

An organization's personnel policies and decisions can have a profound effect on an employee's family. The managers and administrators of humanitarian organizations usually consider corporate and employee needs, but they should also consider family needs for at least two reasons:

1. Their humanitarian imperative should not only be applied to the desperate, poor, and disenfranchised. If the organization is not doing a decent job of caring for their own employees (and by extension their employees' families), then they are failing at their mission.
2. It benefits the organization in the long term. Employees who are happy and thriving do better work and tend to remain with their organizations longer. And a very significant part of whether an employee is happy and thriving tends to be whether those closest to them are as well.



Humanitarian organizations should consider family needs as well as individual employee and corporate needs.

This section looks at ways a humanitarian organization can make decisions and provide services that can help their employees' families thrive. Given the primary importance of relationships in thriving, these tips are focused mostly on how an organization can help by:

- Supporting the relationships between employees and their families.
- Providing ways for the families of their employees to connect with each other.
- Helping families feel more directly connected to the organization and more appreciated for the role they play in supporting their loved one.

To think and discuss...

For families:

- How does your partner's organization (or your parent's, if you are a child) do a good job of supporting you and helping you thrive?
- How could the organization better support you?

For managers and administrators:

- What are policies and practices already in place that directly or indirectly support employees' families and help them thrive?
- What other policies and practices might help?

Enabling and supporting relationships between employees and their families

- Encourage staff to work reasonable hours so that they can invest in family life.



- Encourage and enable staff to take their vacation time (and any R&R).
- Be as flexible as possible with scheduling to allow staff to be present when family most needs them, or for important family events such as graduations.
- Know where to refer your staff if they need couples counseling.

Providing ways for families to connect with each other and build new relationships

- Organize and host activities that include partners and families. For example, a picnic day, games night, or training. You could use this module to organize an interactive workshop.
- Start a family newsletter and use it (among other things) for contributions from families and children, celebrating family achievements, and announcing organization-sponsored family events.

Helping families feel more directly connected to the organization, better informed, and more appreciated for the role they play

- Use a family newsletter to communicate organization news, programs that might be of interest to families, and information that will help families better understand the organization's mission.
- Connect directly with families to gather "in case of emergency details." Inform families who to contact in the event of a work-related emergency.
- Provide avenues for family members to volunteer with the organization (but be very careful not to pressure them to do so).



Given the primary importance of relationships in thriving, organizations should consider how they can help support their employee relationship with their family, connect their employees' families, and connect more directly as an organization with families.

To think and discuss...

For families:

- Which of the ideas above would you be most interested in?
- What other things can you think of that aren't listed?
- What would you be most interested in getting involved in as a participant or volunteer?

For managers and administrators:

- Does your organization already do any of the above?
- Which of these suggestions might be helpful and feasible in your context, and which are less so?
- What else might help accomplish the three aims listed above?



When staff travel

When staff members travel regularly, there are additional ways that organizations can support employees and their families. Here are just a couple of relatively low-cost suggestions:

- Help the employee and their family stay connected by covering the cost of phone calls to immediate family members when employees are traveling, and/or make it standard practice to cover the cost of internet access in locations that allow for it. This will enable employees to connect more easily to friends and family via personal email and Skype.
- Encourage the staff member to take a personal day off after international trips to rest and reconnect with family before returning to the office.

To think and discuss...

For families:

- If your loved one travels regularly, what helps you feel supported by his/her organization?
- What else might help?

For managers and administrators:

- How does your organization support the families of employees who travel regularly?
- What else might help?

Expatriates

In light of the pressures and disruptions that come with an international move, it is especially important that organizations are attentive to the needs of expatriate partners and families. The estimated cost of posting an employee abroad usually runs at two to five times the employee's annual salary, and the number one reason expatriates return prematurely from an international posting is family adjustment issues.¹⁹ Organizations will benefit if they can keep their seasoned and experienced personnel from departing prematurely.

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

*The "Family Matters!" (2008) Survey of more than 650 family members of expatriates in 62 countries*²⁰

When asked to rate the top reasons why a move fails, the percentage of respondents who rated the following as "very important" were:

- 70% marital breakdown
- 67% child's education
- 66% spousal or partner resistance to move
- 56% spousal or partner career concerns



Before Departure

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

The “Family Matters!” (2008) Survey ²¹

- 64% of respondents received no cross-cultural workshops or any other predeparture training
- 76% reported that the organization did not communicate with anyone other than the employee about the upcoming move

- Examine organizational policies regarding international postings. Are people routinely posted for only one or two years? Why? Is there a way to minimize the frequency of relocations?
- Research on the experiences of army families suggests that the best predictor of family adaptation to living abroad was the extent to which “family expectation meshed with actual experience.”²² It is well worth organizations investing some time in helping shape realistic expectations and answering questions! Some ways that they could do this include:
 - Conduct an HR briefing that includes partners to talk about topics such as current needs, available support services, benefits, where and how to access financial counsel, etc.;
 - Provide cross-cultural workshop and/or other predeparture training;
 - If families have children, it’s particularly important to provide information on schooling options and relevant organizational policies.
- Be as flexible as possible in organizing start and finish dates, especially for families with children who may want to relocate according to the academic calendar.

Upon arrival and during the assignment

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

The “Family Matters!” (2008) Survey ²³

When asked to rate what should be included in an organization’s relocation policy to help families settle in, the percentage who rated the following as “very important” were:

- 66% assurances of a contact at the destination
- 65% assistance for moving procedures for family if employee sent ahead
- 64% funding for look-see visits
- 64% school search funding
- 57% language training
- 56% spouse involved in preliminary discussions of any relocation



- 46% strict procedures for financial reimbursements
- 44% health assessments for the entire family
- 42% translation services
- 40% family/spousal associations
- 40% cross-cultural training provided for entire family
- 38% career counseling for accompanying spouse

- These results suggest that families want “first and foremost, assurances of a contact at the new destination to help families settle in and who the spouse can direct questions to.”²⁴ The importance of an arrival contact/mentor should not be underestimated. Organizations could consider recruiting socially adept partners of existing expatriates for this role and either compensate them or recognize them officially as volunteers. That contact could provide assistance with some or all of the following:
 - Guidance to local grocery stores, furniture stores, etc.;
 - Locating churches and other faith communities;
 - Local activities (including associations, sports clubs, sightseeing, and other events);
 - Insight into some cultural do’s and don’ts;
 - Embassy contacts;
 - Introductions to other families.
- Provide a list of helpful local resources, including: utility companies; driver licensing bureaus; libraries; newspapers; grocery stores; religious organizations; child care; schools; physicians; mental health professionals; hospitals; emergency numbers; security plan or manual; and spouse networks or other associations.
- Allow some paid time off for employee to help the family get settled – even a couple of days on the front end can help. Research suggests that the speed of accomplishing certain settling-in tasks is related to better outcomes (especially unpacking all boxes, and organizing the kitchen and furniture).²⁵
- Provide an in-organization contact that spouses can talk to about things like paperwork, insurance, medical benefits, and housing issues.
- Include the partner in any language training.
- Try to restrict extended travel by employee during the first three months of posting to help the family to settle in as a unit.
- Organize social events that involve national and international staff and families.
- Encourage families to have clear communication plans and to be knowledgeable about disaster plans in settings where their children and loved ones spend time when not at home (e.g., office, schools). Of course, this presupposes that an organization has clear security, disaster, evacuation, and other critical incident stress policies in place.
- Provide financial support for spousal home leave, and for children’s education costs abroad.



- Be flexible with home leave and R&R time in ways that will allow employees and family to attend big family events back home (e.g., graduations, funerals, weddings, etc.).

Reentry

Organizations should not ignore reentry support. It's widely acknowledged that reentry can be tougher than the initial move. Organizations should consider providing returning expatriates with some of the same types of support and information they made available to employees and families upon departure. This could include training on reverse culture shock before leaving the field post, financial consultations, making reconnection contacts available to family members, and minimizing the employee's travel during the first couple of months after returning "home."

To think and discuss...

For families:

- What has the organization done to help ease the strain of an international relocation? (Think about all the different stages of a posting abroad.)
- What else would you have found helpful/would you find helpful now?

For managers and administrators:

- How does your organization support the families of employees who relocate internationally?
- What other policies or practices might help?



PART NINE | *In Conclusion*

We hope you've enjoyed reading this module as much as we enjoyed writing it! Family and humanitarian work are two topics dear to our hearts, and we've been delighted to spend some time thinking about how to help them fit together better.

If we could have one wish for this module, it's that you've been inspired to invest some time, effort, and imagination in thriving as an individual, a couple, and a family. Most especially, we hope that you've been inspired to talk with those near and dear to you about these issues, and to listen to their thoughts. For, as Rollo May said, "Communication leads to community, that is, to understanding, intimacy, and mutual valuing."²⁶ And community, well, what is life without community?

Do you have feedback or suggestions for us on this module? We'd love to hear from you – you can email the Institute at info@headington-institute.org. And wherever you are, we wish you all the best. May you, and your family, thrive.

Lisa McKay and Bree Hulme



STUDY TEXT RESOURCES

This module provides an introduction to the topic of support for the families and children of humanitarian workers. It is intended to provide you with some basic information, relevant questions, and to guide you towards additional resources. Some relevant resources are highlighted throughout the module. These and other websites and books are listed below.

If you would like more information, or if you wish to speak to a mental health professional or desire a professional referral, please contact the Headington Institute at info@headington-institute.org or phone (626) 229 9336.

On the Internet

Family and relationships

[APA Help Center resource list for Family & Relationships](#)

The American Psychological Association's list of links to resources on everything from anxiety to finances to communication tips for parents.

[Family Relationships Online](#)

Australian site designed to provide access to information about family relationship issues, ranging from building better relationships to dispute resolution.

[The Center for the Study of Long Distance Relationships](#)

Dedicated to providing resources for couples in long distance relationships and for therapists and researchers who work with separated couples.

Expatriates

[Families in Global Transition](#)

Provides strategic resources for expatriate families and individuals.

[The Interchange Institute](#)

Nonprofit research organization whose mission is to promote dialogue and facilitate understanding between people who move to a new country and their new communities.

[Expat Expert](#)

Designed to assist expatriate families living and working overseas – and returning home one day.

[Expat Women](#)

Designed to help all women living overseas.

Books

Family and relationships

- *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, by J. Gottman and N. Silver (2000).
- *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families*, by S.R. Covey (1997).
- *The Long-Distance Relationship Survival Guide*, by C. Bell and K. Brauer Bell (2006).



Expatriates

- *The Expert Expatriate: Revised Edition*, by M. Brayer Hess and P. Linderman (2007).
- *A Moveable Marriage: Relocate your relationship without breaking it*, by R. Pascoe (2003).
- *A Portable Identity: A woman's guide to maintaining a sense of self while moving overseas*, by D. Bryson and C. Hoge (2005).
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