When Friends Leave

Forging close friendships with diverse individuals is one of the rewards of expat life. The hard part comes when we need to say goodbye.

By Dr. Lauren Muhlheim

My friend Debbie didn’t want to go. Over the past two years, she has seen several close friends leave Shanghai, and the last of the original group, Susan, was next. “I don’t want to go to another goodbye lunch. I can’t do it, it’s too sad.”

Much has been written about moving overseas. We’ve all read about the different stages of acculturation and culture shock, as well as the difficulties of repatriation. Loss has been written about what happens to those of us left behind when friends move on.

In my conversations with people over the years, I often hear that the emotional adjustments are more difficult for those left behind than the ones who are packing up and moving on.

Many agree that friendships are particularly important for women. Psychiatrist Jean Baker Miller believes that a woman’s sense of self is dependent upon her ability to maintain relationships. She wrote, “Eventually for many women, the threat of disruption of connection is perceived not as a loss of a relationship, but as something closer to a total loss of self.” in Toward a New Psychology of Women (1986).

Friends are valuable. They provide company, purpose, and a sense of belonging and self-worth. They help us through the tough times and are there to celebrate our triumphs. They also help us complete tasks. Research indicates that supportive relationships generally enhance physical and psychological well being.

Living in a foreign culture as we do, our friendships take on added importance. Most expatriate families leave their support systems behind when they come overseas. They may

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How should we cope?

Say goodbye

It’s very important to say goodbye to significant people in our lives. The goodbye lunch, though dreaded, is one way. It is a ritual that acknowledges the importance of the relationship and allows you to say, “Thank you for being an important person in my life. I will miss you.”

Express your feelings

Losses inevitably result in grief. It’s normal to feel sad and it’s far better to express those feelings than to keep them bottled inside. Writing a goodbye note and letting your friend know you’ll miss her is a good way to do this. Keeping a journal is another method.

Remain open to new friendships

It’s easy to say, “I already have a group. I don’t need any one else” when you’ve formed your circle of close friends. But try not to shut yourself off from making new ones. That wise friend of yours may be on the next container shipment out to Shanghai. It’s also great to have multiple groups of friends as an insurance policy. Similarly, keep connected to those whom you care about back home or even those from the past who now live elsewhere.

As she discussed her sadness over her friend leaving, Debbie added, “I just met a new family. My daughter has a friend and I met the mother and she seems very nice.” Reach out to new families who have arrived. It’s a good opportunity to help them out and there’s a better chance of them staying longer than you.

Take care of yourself

During times of change and stress, it’s more important to take good care of yourself through exercise, good nutrition, regular sleep and a little pampering. Research shows that engaging in pleasurable activities boosts a person’s mood while staying at home and moping sets one up for a cycle of depression.

The pain in saying goodbye is real... it means I’ve made really good friends, the kind that make me cry when they go.
How should we cope?

Use the support network
If you and the person who is leaving had a group of friends in common or were a part of particular community, it can be healing for those remaining friends to come together and support one another. If that’s not the case, it can still be helpful to share your feelings with someone who can be supportive. This will reduce feelings of isolation. Talk about your feelings of sadness. When others express feelings of sadness, express empathy and allow them to feel sad instead of trying to cheer them up. This can hinder the expression of feelings.

Stay in touch
As expatriates, we have a beautiful opportunity to make connections with a rich variety of people. The problem with so many relationships is that they can’t all be maintained. Consider yourself fortunate to have this kind of a problem! There are so many resources to help you stay in touch -- email, blogs, and social networking sites all keep us closer. Even though I haven’t seen some college roommates in ten years, I know every time I open up Facebook, I can see their smiling faces.

Rely on family members
When friendships are in flux, it can be a good time to pull more tightly with your family or spouse. Use them for support during times of transition.

A positive framework
We must accept that pain is part of life. If out of fear we don’t take risks, and if we shut ourselves off from opportunities, we will impoverish our lives. Friendships make our lives meaningful. It may be helpful to remember the proverb, “It’s better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.” I like to think that every friend who touches us lives on inside us.

Sisterhood of Friends
We’ve been living in Shanghai for seven years, so we’ve met a lot of friends and said goodbye to a lot of friends. Last summer, one of our closest friends left, and it had the biggest impact. Hyun Lee was a good friend and very much an older sister to me. We’d been friends for five years and the friendship grew stronger over the years.

Our families spent a lot of time together, We played games like Cranium, and even though her kids are teenagers and my kids are much younger, we all got along really well. Every Thanksgiving, a group of families would get together to celebrate, and every New Year we would go over and celebrate with Hyun and her family. But the last Thanksgiving was really different. I knew I could organize a gathering, but it just wasn’t the same. Hyun was the initiator and usually organized the gatherings, and after she left, we didn’t really meet up as a group anymore.

We’ve developed a different group of friends and now our church group has taken over, and we still have our local friends. We’ve met new families and have developed new friendships. Even though there are a lot of Koreans in Shanghai, there are fewer Korean Americans. It’s a shared cultural understanding that we miss sometimes. It was good for me to have someone like Hyun around, it was a very precious friendship. We still keep in touch, we call, email and plan to visit each other, but it’s not the same. I still miss her very much.

- by Laren Yoon

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