

■ ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nanci Tangeman is an American writer who's had to build relationships in the UK, Uzbekistan and her current home, Amsterdam. She is the author of *40 Excuses to Get Together with the Girls*, which includes more than 300 activities to help women "get out of a rut" and spend more time with friends. For examples of those excuses and activities, and for more information about the book and associated workshops, visit nancitangeman.com. A perfect gift for girlfriends, the book is available worldwide at www.amazon.com.



Going it Alone?

By Nanci Tangeman

If you're a woman and you're an expat, you've seen the survey: More females are being sent on international assignments than ever before. According to Mercer Human Resource Consulting, companies in Asia-Pacific have 16 times more women on assignment than five years ago; North American companies have nearly four times the number.

Yes, it's natural and yes, it's about time. But there is an interesting side statistic that goes along with this study: Only 16% of these women are bringing a partner along with them. This compares with 57% of male expats who do.

So if you have a partner, you're more likely to have left him or her at home. You've probably come on assignment with no "trailing spouse" and no other family members at all (only 12% of the companies surveyed say they have female expats who are single parents.).

And even though the women who are picking up after their spouses or hurrying to deliver their children to the international school might scoff at this next statement - being a female expat, alone on assignment, can be hazardous to your health.

Hazardous because it can lead to social isolation.

Social isolation can be as bad as a sedentary lifestyle, a poor diet or high blood pressure when it comes to your health, according to John Cacioppo, PhD, professor at the University of Chicago. Some studies put the health risk factor of isolation as high as smoking. And what does a second culture lifestyle do (whether you're accompanied by a large family entourage or not)? It throws you straight into an environment that's probably isolated from the people around you.

That's not to say that if you're a woman who's moved overseas

you're lonely.

Or that you don't interact with your neighbors or local merchants. Or that you don't make lasting friendships when you're on assignment. But you do face a bigger risk of isolation: burying yourself in work, concentrating on online friendships or pursuits, or just checking out of social interaction.

Small steps back to society

Even if you are serious about making friends, or just connecting with the people around you, sometimes it's hard to know where to start. Here are a few small ways to make you feel connected (and they're useful for men, as well as women!).

Help! Let's face it, if you're gutsy enough to have moved overseas on your own, you probably have a pretty wide streak of "rugged individualism." Chances are, you're proud of your self-sufficiency: not asking for help or hiring it when you need it. But if you don't ask for help, you miss an opportunity to connect with the people around you. So ask for it. Go to neighbors for suggestions on trades people or even the correct way to bag your trash.

Hello! Get to know the local businesses. Even the most language-challenged of us can manage a "hello" in a shop or at a newstand. Say "hola," "goede middag" or "bom dia" every time you enter. Make contact. If you frequent the larger supermarkets or shop online because you can shop anonymously, save at least one purchase for a smaller business, where you have to ask for something (carrots, sunflowers, feminine hygiene products) in your adopted language (or at least you can point to them).

Howdy! Do not discount expat organizations. There's a balance between immersing yourself in a second culture and building a little Omaha/London/Quebec City around yourself.

But if you're not connecting, you're not connecting. You don't necessarily have to join a club that's based on your own nationality, but as an expat you automatically have something in common with other foreigners - from any country - and they are often easier to approach than your neighbors who might be very set in their own schedules.

Ouch! If you do venture out to a group function, don't make it a passive activity like listening to a lecture. Instead try to find some kind of group project. A day of rebuilding an orphanage with other expats may not be sexy, but when you're pounding nails (or thumbs) next to someone, there's plenty of time to talk and laugh or apply first aid.

Paper cuts! And if you get involved in a volunteer project, throw out the rules about contributing what you know best. You might be a seasoned marketing professional, but going home to

your computer to write a press release about a fundraiser is not going to make you any contacts. Volunteer to stuff envelopes in a group or make sandwiches at an event (beware of the dreaded 10k assignment, where you stand by yourself on a street corner, guiding runners for two hours - alone!).

See ya soon! When you venture out to any kind of event where you'll be meeting new people, play a little game with yourself. Don't leave until you've got a commitment for a future engagement. Take or make your opening. Did you meet someone who also likes films? Schedule a theatre date right away! Did someone mention a good coffee shop? Ask to meet up later. Maybe you'll get a "no, thanks" or even a no-show, still, take a deep breath and make the effort.

A future engagement lets you look ahead to something when you're headed back to your empty apartment.

Game over! Take special notice of the amount of time you spend in your electronic relationships - whether they're with people around the world or with a PlayStation. Why waste your emotions on a joystick or a webcam? There are plenty of live people out there waiting to meet you.

Look ma! And finally, try something you've never done before. Studies at the Ohio State University show that trying something new can release chemicals in your brain that actually motivate you to do more in your everyday life! An expat lifestyle is the perfect opportunity to experiment (hooking up your DVD player with a foreign language manual does not qualify as trying something new). Make sure it's something fun and fresh - and social: ice skating lessons in Amsterdam, sushi making in Manchester, oil painting in Rome.

Just because your body is far from home, doesn't mean your soul has to live in Antarctica. Know you're at risk and, like any preventive plan - do something about it!

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