



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. Less 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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include family, friends, babysitters, medical specialists, counselors, business contacts and virtually anyone we would normally turn to for assistance. As a result, expatriate families tend to reach out to each other for support. As strangers in a strange land, our bonds are even tighter.

We strongly depend on these friendships for support but because expatriates are so transient, we must also deal with their loss. According to *Third Culture Kids*, a widely read book by David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken about growing up "among worlds," expatriates have different ways of dealing with the transient nature of friendships while living overseas. Some jump quickly into relationships while others are more cautious. Frequent painful goodbyes make some unwilling to risk emotional involvement and subsequent sense of loss.

To protect ourselves from this pain, *Third Culture Kids* outlines three types of maladaptive coping styles. Some may consciously avoid developing close friendships to avoid the pain of grief when their friends leave. These people end up with a pain of loneliness even greater than the one they are running from.

A second protective response is the "quick release," or letting go of friends too soon. They may stop calling, visiting or spending time with their friend and act as if the friend is already gone well in advance of their departure.

A third response is refusing to feel the pain. Some people don't acknowledge the hurt feelings they have to others or even themselves. Here are some better ways of coping with the loss:

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's 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. Those best friends 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.

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One or Many

In my second year in Shanghai, I developed a circle of international woman friends, mothers from my younger daughter's preschool class at Soong Ching Ling Kindergarten. The school program was half-day and we bonded over long afternoons entertaining small children. Lunches became evenings out, evenings became girlfriend getaways, and the collective friendships became the hearth in a cold climate. The class was called Toddler B, and that's how we referred to ourselves.

That was five years ago, and since then a few of us from Toddler B moved away, but the fabric of the group remained taut until last spring, with one farewell too many. Never mind that Lori Carbonneau was my bosom-buddy, my go-to friend whose door was open on Sunday afternoons when our husbands were on business trips. She was

the one who clogged my phone with text messages and with whom I felt out of touch if we hadn't talked in four hours. With her, our supportive group of women lost critical mass, so in that season, we didn't just say goodbye to Lori, we said goodbye to an era. And for a while, the ground turned under my feet.

But it's ok. Transitions are never easy, that's for sure, and I, for one, am sick of them, but I've learned that as familiar pathways end, new ones begin, leading to a small handful of lovely, undiscovered spaces. I've also learned that real friendships endure. And I can't wait to say hello again to Lori and others to whom I've said, or will say, goodbye.

- by Kate Lilienthal

Transitions are never easy...but I've learned that as familiar pathways end, new ones begin...

Irreplaceable

I'm a very loyal person. I don't like being told that when old friends leave, I'll make new ones. I reserve a part of my heart for the "leavers" and they can't be replaced. The pain in saying goodbye is real, but it's positive. It means I've made really good friends, the kind that make me cry when they go.

This year I have three friends leaving – one French, one American and one German. It's easiest to say goodbye to my German friend because we speak the same language and share the same culture, we can keep in touch more easily. Also, we can expect to see each other in Germany. But all three of these women are the ones who keep me from getting lost in Shanghai,

and when something's wrong, they know it and will find and comfort me.

It's not that I expect to keep in touch on a regular basis. That's too much to ask. What I wish is that I will always know where the other person is in the world. And we will see each other someday in Asia, or Europe or America.

When we come back to China in September, it will be really important to have structure. I'm setting that up now – a new yoga studio and teaching projects. So it's not about replacing people, it's about organizing my time so that the holes aren't so gaping.

- by Christiane Gorkisch

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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, "Tis 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.



Hyun Lee and Lauren Yoon

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 Lauren Yoon

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