

## Life on a lonely planet

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Like many expats, SAMANTHA SELINGER-MORRIS struggles with feelings of loss.

It's easy to write off expatriates' frequent complaints of culture clash as nothing more than whinging.

Maisie McDonald, who emigrated to Australia in the 1960s, helped boost this theory in the 2007 documentary *Ten-Pound Poms* when, to convey her utter disappointment with her new environment, she said: "In England, the birds twitter; in Australia, they squawk."

And an Irish friend of mine once admitted, somewhat sheepishly, that when pining for home, she and her husband deride Sydney for being "too sunny", this somehow making Australia less "serious" than their birthplace.

As esoteric as these comments seem, chances are the "my dad's bigger than your dad" approach to cultural critique - the denigration of an entire nation purely because one feels isolated - regularly plays out in the homes of the 25 per cent of Australians who were born overseas.

Clinical psychologist Dr Lissa Johnson has an expat fact sheet on her website to help tackle such relocation issues.

"It's not talked about very often but I know people often feel those around them don't know how difficult [expatriatism] is and what an enormous adjustment they're going through," Johnson says.

For some clients, missing their home country's flora and fauna, "and even things like the quality of the light or smell", are reflections of extreme anxiety and depression relating to a loss of social networks or sense of belonging and the absence of family and friends.

Extreme reactions to expat stress, she says, include binge-drinking and extramarital affairs, the latter used "as a way to get some sense of connection or well-being, or as a protest or an expression of anger".

When I mention my surprise that after moving to Sydney from Canada 13 years ago, I still struggle with a sense of missing out on years with family and being cleaved from my culture and history, Johnson says: "I have heard it described like being a book that's had the first few chapters ripped out."

My experience of seeking help for geography-based melancholy over the years has, more often than not, been humiliating. One psychologist recommended I read the poetry of Irish expat James Joyce, which did nothing more than remind me that history is packed with writers for whom moving away was a golden ticket to literary fame. And it's tricky to feel normal at being brought so low by immigration when peppy websites such as

expatinterviews.com list among the top-five hidden advantages of being an expat, "You can be the crazy/cool aunt or uncle in your family without having to endure prison, rehab or a stay in a mental institution."

Studies now show that foreigners are more vulnerable to stress and more prone to mental ailments, which feels like a vindication. Not to mention the website [expat-psychology.com](http://expat-psychology.com), created last year by a therapist from Amsterdam to help the growing number of expats around the world deal with their feelings of isolation.

Surry Hills clinical psychologist Dr Sarah Edelman, who often sees clients about this problem, goes so far as to say expat stress should be elevated to an official psychological syndrome because it is so common and its negative impact can be so severe.

But where to go from here? What should people like myself do; people who feel cheated out of vital experiences - in my case, the last few years of my father's life - by living away from "home"?

Johnson gives her clients an exercise in which they write down the impact their home culture has had on them and what that has taught them and the impact of their new culture.

"Immigration can be an opportunity to get a handle on your own conditioning and your own biases in the way you see yourself and the world," she says.

- The immense change of moving countries can cause stress to the immune system, sleep patterns and digestive tract. Relax your body with activities such as gardening, cooking or caring for pets.

#### Stress-busters

- Ask yourself what activities make you happy and focus on them.
- Avoid alcohol or drugs as a way of dealing with stress.
- When experiencing tension with a local partner because you feel they don't understand how important your culture is to you, ask yourself, "What are you afraid of losing that you are holding on to?"

Source: [expat-psychology.com](http://expat-psychology.com)