



How to marry a foreigner

Sandra Kimball examines the unique intricacies of international marriage in Japan

of the time you also wed a different concept of family. This means having to cope with new ways of celebrating holidays, unfamiliar foods, and many times, clashing predetermined social roles and gender stereotypes. Forcing your partner to conform to a predetermined social role or gender stereotype that is a cultural expectation can cause a deep rift in the relationship.

I'd be a millionaire if I collected each time I've heard the opening remark, "We were fine until the children came along" in a counselling session. Raising children is an important issue for each parent. People revert to their childhood to find a model for parenting, and when their upbringings took place in different countries and cultures, the models may not only be different but conflicting. Not to mention what having children can do to your sex life.

In this regard, sexuality in general in Japan calls special attention to itself. In a 2006 research study made at the University of Chicago, Japan came last in a 29-country study of sexual satisfaction, with just 25.7 percent of the couples expressing happiness. Japan also rated dead last in a 41-nation 2005 report on sexual frequency made by condom manufacturer Durex, with people having on average just 45 sexual contacts yearly compared to a global average of 103.

Each partner in a couple tends to take for granted that her/his way of communicating is universal, obvious, clear and correct – and assumes the other has understood. The ability to see the world as one's partner sees it, to understand life from the other's vantage point, to empathize with this other point of view, to allow for it and meet it halfway may be the true secret to making it through the rough waters in an international marriage.

We are inclined to overvalue our uniqueness. So if you are contemplating an international marriage or are already in the boat but find yourself in choppy conditions, talk to as many people as possible who have been rowing down the international marriage river before you. Ask them how they found a way to keep both partners on board and enjoying the view. And may you have happy rowing. **KTO**

In general, marriage is on the decline in Japan. But whether from true love or a misguided exotic notion, international marriage is a growing trend. Unfortunately, it's not all smooth sailing. About one-half of international marriages end in divorce. In many cases, the problems are no different from what all couples experience, but more often, the difficulties are exacerbated by a clash of cultural values. Values indicate what matters, what is seen as good and bad, right and wrong, true and false, important and unimportant. Values tell us much about who we are, what we believe in, and how we will evaluate behavior. Differing values in an international marriage can cause deep stress when making the important decisions in life such as where to live, what to do, and with whom to do it.

By the very nature of the union, somebody in an international marriage is the foreigner and has to learn to live and function in a new country. This spouse will experience to some degree the loss of home and the feeling of familiarity and security that gives one a sense of identity. It also means leaving behind loved ones and supportive friends and family in exchange for others who will be different and who will forever regard you as different, or not quite one of them. It can lead to a sense of isolation and double identity.

Families are not something you shed upon marrying, but usually something you acquire more of. In an international marriage, not only do you get a set of foreign in-laws, but most

LETTERS

I'm interested in aroma therapy and similar sorts of "healing" remedies, but I was wondering if they actually have any value as mental-health treatments. If so, are there any that you might recommend?

SALLY, BY EMAIL

Aromatherapy utilizes volatile liquid plant materials, including essential oils and other aromatic compounds of plants, to relax our bodies or stimulate its function, especially our senses. Its healing actions are quite physiological and they can stimulate the limbic system and emotional centers of the brain. Aromatherapy is one of many alternative and complimentary techniques that have been successfully used as a positive mental health treatment. In Japan, the use of acupuncture, a natural diet, herbal remedies, and shiatsu massage were the standard of care for over 3,000 years. I encourage you to explore what works best for you, but in general, be cautious of extravagant health claims made for any form of healing remedy.

I'm having trouble sleeping. Is there anything besides counting sheep and sleeping pills that might help?

DAVID FLAVIN, BY EMAIL

There are many treatments to help coordinate your mind and body for a restful sleep. As you explore, keep in mind that treating insomnia is deeply personal and in order to be successful, you have to find what works best for you. Don't be afraid to ask for help. There are many behavioral approaches to insomnia that are neither time consuming nor costly and are so much more beneficial for your long-term health than any sleep medication could ever be. Be open to trying one or a combination of several such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), light therapy, progressive muscle relaxation, directed imagery, journal writing, acupuncture and/or meditation.

For counselling and psychotherapy, contact Sandra Kimball, Counselling Services Kyoto 075-762-6322 or www.internationalcounselling.com.