



# Lost in transition

**Sandra Kimball** explores the nature of grief

We often think of grief as something that happens after a big event in our lives such as the death of a loved one or the end of a relationship. But there are many small things that can cause us grief, especially when we leave home to live in a new country. Many intangible losses can be tucked in amidst the excitement and benefits of living as a foreigner in a new place. These “hidden losses” occur when all the patterns of daily living are gone and with them the sense of security and competency that are vital to us all.

If you’re reading this, there are most likely losses you’ve experienced by shifting your life into a new culture. The losses can be big, such as losing contact with family and friends, or the lack of a certain lifestyle or status, or something smaller like no longer having access to your favorite creature comforts. What is left behind is the familiarity that gives a sense of place and even the comfort of hearing your own language spoken on the street.

Everybody loses things, and grief is a natural human reaction to loss. Grief is a label given to a very generic process consisting of multiple moods, but many times the word is used to label the feeling of being overwhelmed by loss. It is a feeling of incompleteness, of not having what we really want, or the loss of face or sense of identity. Everyone experiences grief, but we express it in different ways. Grief is a process that is normal and nothing to be embarrassed about. Traditionally, cultures deal with grief in different ways. In Asian countries, there are specific rituals that mark someone’s passing on a scheduled basis and sometimes stretch on for many years. This can be helpful when grief becomes a stubborn guest. Many people take a long time to say goodbye. And there is no right way to grieve.

Akiko and Ben came for counselling because they were having trouble communicating in their marriage. Their only child had died two years previous after a long illness. Akiko’s way of grieving was to keep her child’s memory alive by leaving his room the same and remembering his birthdays and special dates, while Ben’s grieving style was to move on and not talk about it. When they could come to terms with and appreciate their individual styles of grieving, the difficulty of communicating was lessened somewhat.

Hidden losses can also work in reverse and pop up when we return to our home country. When Lilly was a young child, she came with her family to Japan because of her father’s job. She attended Japanese school and became fluent in the language and comfortable in the culture. When she returned to Australia, she became an “invisible immigrant.” In other words, she looked

like your average Aussie teenager, but inside she had different beliefs, assumptions and values that she learned from her many years in Japan. After sorting out a sense of personal identity, unresolved grief is the second greatest challenge for children who have spent most or all of their childhood in a culture other than their own.

If grief goes unresolved, it can appear in other kinds of behavior like anger, anxiety and depression. Diane was a JET teacher who was leaving Japan after three years of a very fulfilling life experience. She came into counselling because she was experiencing panic attacks and having great difficulty sleeping. When she could acknowledge how deeply her experience here was imbedded in her sense of self, she began the process of saying goodbye to all she would miss about Japan, the good and the bad. When the anxiety and sadness lifted, she felt more ready to move back home again.

Examining what we feel, not how we feel, is the way to start dealing with unresolved grief. Experiencing a loss can cause a hairline fracture and our attempts to keep it together can intensify our grief. For foreigners, this can be a confusing paradox because there are both wonderful and exciting experiences on offer in a new culture.

Grief and loss touch all of us. When the volume of grief is turned up, it can be debilitating, but when the volume is low, there can be a sweet kind of sadness. Passing across borders always means leaving something behind. By paying attention to unresolved grief, a smooth transition is possible from one country to another, into a new relationship, or even a new sense of who we are. Giving some attention to what’s been left behind can clear a space for what lies ahead. **KTO**

*The people mentioned in this article are fictional. Any apparent similarity to actual people is incidental. For counselling services, contact Sandra Kimball at Counselling Services Kyoto ([www.internationalcounselling.com](http://www.internationalcounselling.com) or 075-762-6322) or check the website of International Mental Health Professionals Japan for foreign therapists in your area at [www.imhjp.co.jp](http://www.imhjp.co.jp)*

## RESOURCES

Mental Health Open Discussions are held the first Saturday of every month at the Kyoto International Community House. Topics vary and address issues concerning foreigners living in Japan. There is no charge for participation. KICH (Kokusai Koryu Kaikan) is a three-minute walk from Keage subway station. For further information, call KICH 075- 752-3511.