



The Unspoken Toll Living in Shanghai Can Take on Your Relationship

It's the typical Shanghai love story. But not one you often read about. “We came over together for my husband's position,” one expat woman says. We'll call her Ann. “We were both enjoying all the things Shanghai has to offer. Then my husband started to hang out with a group of guys who seemed to have a proclivity for extramarital activities,” she goes on, “and my husband started to fool around.” They eventually divorced.

The taboo topic is rarely raised in public, but ask in private and everyone has a story. The challenges expat relationships face in Shanghai are so pervasive, they've formed a stereotype composite: infidelity, alcohol and drug abuse, isolation, anxiety and loss of identity for trailing spouses.

The struggles couples face when they move abroad are named over and over by psychologists, coaches and help line operators across the city. Ironically, it's often the families who outwardly have the most resources— top jobs and high incomes who encounter the greatest struggles at home in their relationships.

STRESS & RESENTMENT

“The most common problems among expat families are that both partners are going through adjustment and neither has the ability to provide emotional support for the other,” says clinical psychologist *Dr. Paul Wang*, Chair of the Department of Psychology at Shanghai United Family Hospital

“People who come here are very achievement oriented. They want to keep their level of performance but after they get here they feel a lot of things are out of their control.”

The person who is working becomes acutely stressed, is frequently required to travel and gets less time with family. “They need more emotional support than ever. Meanwhile, the trailing spouse is also adjusting to a new identity, perhaps facing questions of self-worth from leaving their job back home,” Dr. Wang explains.

In couples where both people are working, you often have two over- worked parties. “Over time, the couple starts to form resentments against each other,” says Wang, “which usually ends up as negative coping, such alcoholism, substance abuse and infidelity.

Life Coach *Ans Hoofst* says, “People who move here as a couple underestimate the challenges Shanghai expatriation brings to their relationship. They view it as a nice adventure but they haven't really considered what might happen to their relationship. I wish people talked beforehand about their expectations for each other.”

INFIDELITY & SHAME

“I sort of turned a blind eye because I didn't want to actually address the affair,” says Ann. “I didn't know how to find an English speaking marriage counselor with a similar cultural background, and part of it was my pride as well.”

The shame of an affair prevents many people from speaking up to anyone but an anonymous operator.

Shanghai's free English-language support hotline Lifeline founded in 2004, has heard countless stories. “Relationships is the number one topic that people call about,” “Many people who call about an affair can't even say the word. You can hear the shame in their voice. They say ‘it's the usual Shanghai scenario, I never thought this would happen to me.’”

There's so much shame in having a relationship problem because many of the people who are attracted to Shanghai are high performing.

Both partners are used to succeeding at things, so to acknowledge that you're struggling —it knocks down people's self confidence. It can be quite a shock when you thought your life was going well.

ISOLATION

Ann wants to share her story so that others don't feel so alone. “When I went through it, I thought, ‘Why am I the only one who's having all these challenges? Why aren't we having the best time? If everything's not perfect, it's hard to put your hand up. It's like being the slow kid in the back of the class,’” Ann reflects. “Everybody else is living the perceived happy life. Nobody posts the crap pictures on WeChat. Nobody is posting: ‘this is the day I couldn't get out of bed.’ Instead it's just ‘this is the Champagne lunch with all the ladies!’”

On top of the stress of maintaining an image of perfection to the outside world and navigating a high-octane job in a foreign city, the separation from family and friends back home can leave people feeling desperately alone.

Dr. Azin Nasseri, Chief of Psychology at ParkwayHealth, says many couples' lack of a support network drives them both to over-rely on one another and look for relationships outside of the marriage.

One woman who divorced after struggling for years to mend her marriage recounts: “It felt impossible to survive the downward spiral of our marriage when we felt so disconnected, lacking tools and people to help reconcile the problems. I remember thinking, ‘this is so unnatural, living as isolated expats,’” she reflects. “Far from our supportive communities,” during their time of strife, “we stood no chance.”

ADRIFT FROM OUR ETHICS

Some people misplace their moral compass when they first come to Shanghai. *Carrie Jones*, a therapist and Director of Counseling Services at Community Center Shanghai, explains, “cultural differences in what is acceptable here can lead to temptation. Lots of business tends to be done over long dinners with alcohol and female companions supplied. ‘Massage parlors’ are common. People tell me they can feel a bit anonymous to do things they wouldn’t normally do back home.”

This unmooring also leads to substance abuse, which inevitably affects relationships. “I see a lot of drinking and drug abuse,” says Lifeline's Horenko. “People will say ‘I’m just smoking marijuana’ but you hear they’re smoking all day, every day. Many of them are quite senior in the corporate world and they are very good at hiding these things. They have the financial resources where they can afford to do it.”

These behaviors are often tied to an overall sense of disconnection from social norms back home. Says Ann, the divorcee, “Many people feel they are living on borrowed time, in borrowed lives. Their kids go to a school they wouldn't normally be able to afford, they live in houses they wouldn't normally be able to afford. It's all a little bit surreal.”

OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH

While we might wish to blame all our relationship afflictions on Shanghai, experienced people agree that it is often just the spark that ignites existing issues. Ann reflects that “being in Shanghai was a catalyst and not a cause,” for her marriage troubles. “There are high probabilities that our marriage would not have lasted, but it wouldn't have ended for infidelity reasons.”

Says Jones, “Actually the challenges couples face here are the same as they would be anywhere—communication, busyness, different perspectives. Many marriages come here with cracks already in their foundation. Life here just serves to exacerbate these cracks.”

The silver lining for those willing to tackle transforming their relationship is a precious opportunity for growth. “Infidelity feels devastating, but while it is an extremely painful process to heal, relationships can survive it and come out even stronger than before,” says Jones.

Therapist Decker advises, “If there's an affair, get professional help soon. Search until you find a marriage therapist you're comfortable with.” She recommends the book *Not Just Friends* by Shirley Glass, which details infidelity recovery and “protecting your relationship while living in the real world. This is helpful even for faithful relationships.”

Of course the easiest way to address a problem is to prevent it. Don't wait until you're having a crisis. “Get help early if you're struggling,” urges Decker. “If your partner is not interested in counseling, go alone. You can make a surprising amount of progress in a short time.”

THE REAL WORK IS INTERNAL

“Usually by the time a couple sees me it's because someone got caught in an affair,” says Dr. Wang. But perhaps surprisingly, Dr. Wang says, “I don't address the affair. I address the core issue. People get stuck in the affair, in the alcohol issue, in the coping issue, but it doesn't really help the couple when we put a lot of focus on the coping.”

Usually, the reasons people are having these issues “is because internally they are not strong enough,” Wang explains. “This is usually related to the original family. I help the individual grow internally first. When they are okay with themselves, they can start to have empathy and understand one another.”

Dr. Wang guides patients to examine their relationship with their own parents. “How did they make you feel as a child? Unprocessed emotions come out at times of stress,” he says. “It's important to accept our emotions like sadness and anger, which we've

been taught to reject as kids. We are told: you have to be happy or strong. I work on empowering people to recognise and express their negative emotions.”

Those who remain in their home community have “a support system that may help them to escape, so they don't ever face their internal traumas. Moving abroad and leaving that safety net is actually an opportunity,” he says.

Not all people take it. “Some people don't want to deal with internal reflection. They repatriate back home. If they are able to go through it, they find themselves happier. They realize they never really accepted themselves and that's why they externalised

onto the other person. If they are able to allow their inner self to grow, usually the family is able to grow together.”

PRACTICAL STEPS

There's more good news for courageous, proactive couples. Beyond the therapist's couch, we can take action to not just survive but thrive in our relationships.

Prioritise & Schedule

Italian expat Alessandra says she and her husband work hard to keep their relationship healthy and fun. “Every Saturday we dedicate to the two of us. In summer we take two vacations: one with the whole family and one only for us,” she says. “We both work and my husband is often abroad so we know perfectly well that we don't have much time together. ‘Don't waste time’ is our mantra, which helps prevent bad moods and useless fights.”

“Be very intentional about prioritising your relationship,” says Carrie Jones. “Make time for each other even if it means sacrificing time at the office. Don't fall into the trap of saying ‘we're just going to work really hard for these two to three years and then we'll focus on the relationship later.’ It doesn't usually play out that way.”

Communicate

Bring your conversation to the next level. Marriage specialist Dr. Nasser says, “The couple's ability to communicate is of paramount importance.”

Carrie Jones says, “be intentional about knowing your partner's world. What are his or her current stressors, dreams, accomplishments and fears? Regularly and meaningfully express appreciation for what your partner does. Be fully present when you are together, not distracted by the phone or computer.”

Life coach Hoofstede teaches couples how to talk with greater clarity. “Don't roll your eyes or sigh or just give hints. Many women expect their partner to read their minds but they can't, so you have to spell it out, say it in words.”

Expat wife Nikki advises, “Always try to talk about problems so that you can understand where the other person is coming from. Try to laugh about the crazy problems which can come up. As long as you're laughing, anything can be overcome.”

Build Community and Mutual Interests

Create a new community here with the right kind of people who will support your union. Decker advises people to maintain old friendships and also to connect with other families through school, faith communities, neighbours and common interest groups.

“View Shanghai as a chance to reboot, or revisit an area of interest,” advises Horenko. She recommends volunteering, as well as resources such as IPWS, Mentor Walks, Shanghai Expat Association and Shanghai Mamas.

Happy expat mom Alessandra says, “Sharing our passions is key and Shanghai really helps. We are both foodies who love wine, music and traveling. Here we can try restaurants from all over the world and travel around Asia.”

“Remember to be a team, remember your old shared interests or develop new ones together,” says Hooft.

Your relationship's health and happiness here is worthy work, not a destiny to be taken for granted. Cherish your time abroad as a shared adventure. Bring your humour, your brave introspection and your dedication to growing, together.



