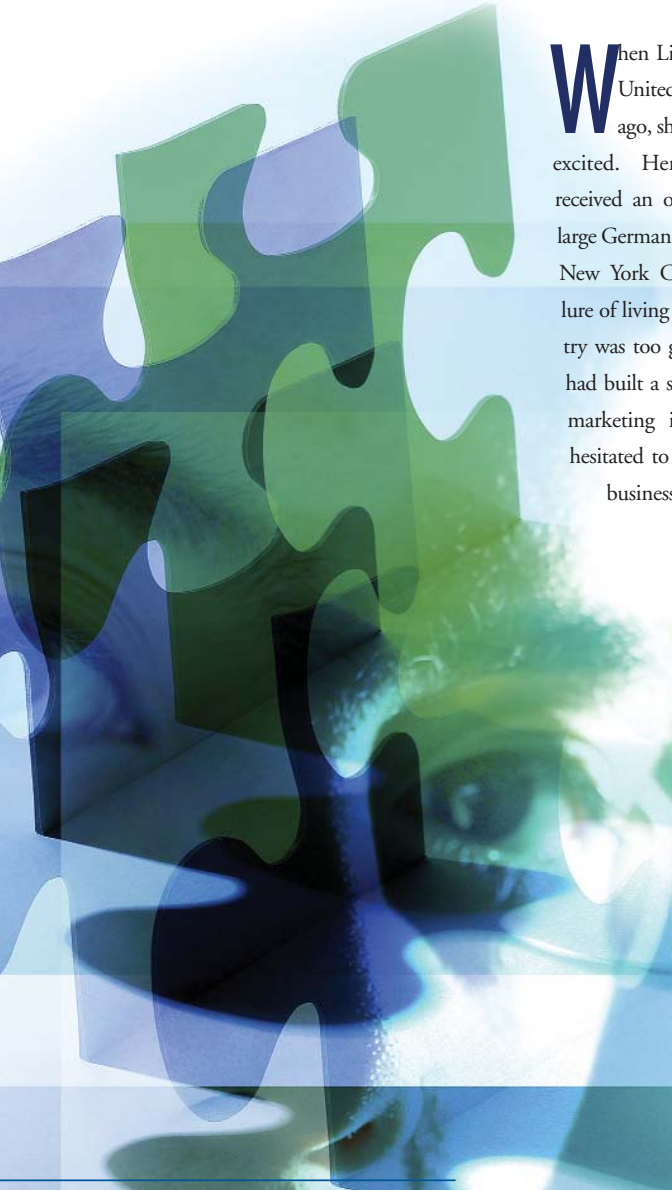


Connecting in a Strange World

By Gerti Schoen



When Lisa K. came to the United States three years ago, she was cautious but excited. Her husband had received an offer to work at a large German corporation in the New York City area, and the lure of living in a foreign country was too great to resist. She had built a successful career in marketing in Germany and hesitated to leave her thriving business behind, but at the same time

she was curious and optimistic about going to work in the famous New York advertising industry.

But Lisa was unlucky. Once they had moved, her countless applications remained mostly unanswered, and when one friendly human resources manager explained to her that she was lacking “New York experience”, her motivation hit rock bottom. Nostalgically, she remembered her busy days in Germany and the many contacts she had left behind. Two years after their relocation, she was still without work.

Although her husband’s income provided for the both of them, Lisa wanted to work. Getting a day job in a fast food restaurant or working a night shift as a bartender was not exactly what she had imagined, and one day she just gave up sending out resumes. “I feel useless here”, she said wearily. “It’s like you are running against a wall”.

Not having a job wasn’t the only problem. Lisa also started to feel

How Cultural Differences can lead to Depression and Loneliness

increasingly isolated. Without having a place to go to every day, the social environment that automatically comes with having a job was lacking. Not having any children of her own, she found herself being largely unable to connect with any of the families in their suburban neighborhood, who seemed to be mostly interested in family life and joint activities with other kids. “Even though it is easy to meet people in the grocery store or at a party, I find it extremely hard to build an actual relationship with other American women” she says. “They always seem to be too busy to squeeze time out of their overloaded schedules to just hang out with a girlfriend”.

Lisa’s story is far from being unique. German and other European expats often find themselves struggling to find likeminded friends, who are willing and able to take an afternoon to sit in a coffee house and just talk, instead of being squeezed into their lunch break on a Wednesday afternoon. Often they’ve had a large circle of friends and colleagues in their German hometown with a regular job and fixed working hours. They are not used the American way of having to work endless hours of overtime in order to make ends meet, and pre-

fer to go home at night to their families.

Many times friendships that were established are lost, when those new found friends move away from New York or go back to their home country.

Hence part of the dynamic is the great mobility of Americans and their inherent cultural ideal of individualism as opposed to the more

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gerti Schoen is a psychotherapist in New York City. She graduated from Washington Square Institute for Psychotherapy and Mental Health and the Training and Research Institute for Self Psychology in Manhattan, and is specialized in cultural and relationship issues. She was born in Germany and came to the U.S. in 1998. She maintains offices in Manhattan and Hoboken, NJ, where she offers individual and group sessions for expats.



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community oriented organization of the German or many other European societies. The oft quoted historian Alexis de Tocqueville wrote back in his 1835 study “Democracy in America” how individualism brings with it “a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends”.

While Germans form much of their social life around associations and communities – nowhere more typical than in the sports club or “Verein” – Americans organize their lives according to the principles of individualism and independence: they prefer going to the gym alone when they can fit it in their schedule rather than join a volleyball team that plays at a certain time. This trend was impressively described in Robert Putnam’s groundbreaking study “Bowling Alone”, where he observes more and more Americans going to the

“Depressive states are almost an inevitable part of the migrant’s adjustment.”

bowling alley by themselves rather than playing in an organized team. A newer study by the University of Arizona even found that most Americans have only two people to talk to about their private lives, and a quarter of the survey participants had no one at all. Chronically overworked and under financial pressure, with little energy left to socialize outside the immediate family, many Americans disengage from public life – although they thoroughly miss it.

Europeans feel the pain, too. Many immigrants struggle with visa problems, institutional differences, insufficient healthcare, communi-

cation problems, and are sometimes forced to take menial jobs and give up their previous economic and social lifestyle. “It is assumed that depressive states are almost inevitable part of the migrant’s adjustment during resettlement and acculturation”, cites a study by the Canadian psychiatrist Granville da Costa that deals with “Depression among Immigrants and Refugees”. “The reality is that depression may be evident not at the time of immigration, but only some years down the road”.

Although the mental health issues of immigrants are slowly coming into public awareness in the U.S., most centers for immigrants have to focus on the more pressing needs of poorer migrants for example from Central America, Africa and Asia who also need help navigating the new culture. Because of mutual cultural heritage, Europeans are often expected to adjust well and assimilate quicker than other populations. But that doesn’t mean that they don’t suffer from similar psychological pressures. “Stress and cultural issues affect upper income levels too”, says Ricarda Dowling, director of Communications at the Center for Multicultural Services in the Washington DC suburb Falls Church. Getting help for mental health issues still carries a certain stigma and shame in many communities”. Therefore, comprehensive and continuous mental health services for all immigrants are needed. **EAT**

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