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## Baby Blues and the Expat Mom

How being far from home is a challenge in the postpartum period



Having a baby can be hard enough without being halfway around the world. PHOTO: ISTOCK PHOTO

By **MACKENZIE KASSAB**

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0 COMMENTS

My daughter was four weeks old when I conceded that something wasn't right. On our fifth-floor balcony, fiery bougainvillea framed the view to Beirut below. Inside the apartment, I was desperate for the fresh air beyond our living room walls. But a decisive boundary was in place: the glass door to the outside world stood as a prison guard.

Six years earlier I had followed love and a man I barely knew to Lebanon, a place I'd spent exactly nine days of vacation. I was seduced by the adventure, predicting a whirlwind romance that would lend a few exciting pages to the story of my life. It instead came to define a classic tale of love, marriage, and parenthood. An overwhelming sense of dread was now jeopardizing my happy ending.

I had never heard of post-partum anxiety, and it would take me several days of internet research to reach a self-diagnosis. I just knew that my specific, paralyzing fear – that I would trip over the balcony doorframe and watch my baby hurdle across the sky and onto the sidewalk – seemed beyond the scope of typical new-mom worries.

Beirut is a base for journalists who chronicle war from the frontline, and mental health issues like post-traumatic stress disorder are not unheard of in the expat community. Sympathetic friends were quick

to recommend local professionals for my increasing anxiety. That morning, unable to move beyond my self-imposed border, things reached a tipping point.

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And so I stood at the phone, twisting its cord with one hand and cradling a fussy newborn with the other.

“Allô?” answered a distracted therapist.

“Hello,” I whimpered, unraveling. “Are you taking new patients?” She couldn’t hear me over the baby’s high-pitched

screams, so I repeated myself.

“It’s July, dear,” she said, as if that were explanation enough. She told me to call back in a month, when her summer holiday was over. The line went dead.

To American therapists, hanging up on a tearful new mother is a question of ethics. But this wasn’t America, and the few other phone calls I made were met with similar results.

Postpartum anxiety and depression aren’t novel concepts in most of the world, but living far from home can make a new mother even more vulnerable to their effects. One woman I met in a Facebook expat group – who asked that her name not be used – lived in Kansas before relocating to Malaysia, where her first year of marriage and pregnancy played out. Though she had only visited the country once, she joined her Malaysian Indian boyfriend when he returned home to help his family through a financial crisis. Wedding plans were fast-tracked for visa purposes.

Their son is now eight months old, and she worries that symptoms of depression, anxiety disorders and bi-polar disorder – which she suspects runs, undiagnosed, in her family – are emerging. But, this mother says, “I also worry that I’m just struggling with a decision to move so far away without much of a support network.”

It’s a feeling familiar to another mother, a native New Yorker working in Senegal with an international NGO, who also asked that her name be omitted. When asked about her mental health concerns 17 months into motherhood, she says, “Does a relationship crisis count as a mental health issue? Also loneliness, a sense of isolation.” Shell-shocked in the “aftermath of becoming new parents,” she and her partner (also an expat) felt unequipped to offer each other the support they both needed. Emotional distance gave way to intense clashes over parenting styles.

The nonprofit American Pregnancy Association estimates that up to 80 percent of new mothers suffer from “baby blues,” a mild form of depression. Symptoms like sadness, anxiety, insomnia, weepiness and irritability can be alleviated by talking with a trusted person, going outside, or asking for help with daily routines, the group suggests.

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For an expat, it's not as easy as it sounds. Emily Boland is a clinical coordinator and licensed clinical social worker at Truman Group, one of several remote-therapy clinics cropping up in the U.S. that specialize in psychological care for Americans abroad. Many of their clinicians have been, or still are, expats. "I don't think we see folks specifically for what's happening as an expat, but more for the limitations of living in a foreign country," says Ms. Boland, who lives in Madrid, Spain. But "being in their location has decreased their supports, made it difficult to access care, or affected their regular capacity for self-soothing," she says.

In other words, tried-and-true coping mechanisms don't always function thousands of miles from home; security issues can prevent stress-relieving jogs and hour-long calls to family become victim to time zones. If the baby blues start to spiral out of control, expats are at an even greater disadvantage. Couple anxiety or depression with communication difficulties, cultural differences, and geographical obstacles, and the barriers to getting help can feel insurmountable.

The mother in Malaysia says she'd like to talk to someone, but she's in a small northwestern city and access to good clinical care is limited. "The only help is at a psychiatric hospital, and attitudes about mental health here lean towards attitudes in the United States decades ago," she explains. Postpartum depression is still a taboo topic in remote areas. "This makes me very wary of what kind of help I would receive from local professionals."

In Senegal, the other mother sought professional help from a therapist, another expat living nearby. Things were going well until that therapist moved back to the States. Then, Skype counseling seemed like a viable option. "I don't find it's that different," she says of the level of care she's getting through virtual sessions. But the convenience of at-home therapy is both a blessing and a curse. Going to a therapist's office was an excuse to get out of the house, which helped curb her feelings of isolation.

I was lucky: When friends in Beirut saw me struggling, they rallied around, bringing falafel sandwiches and neighborhood gossip by for lunch. They listened intently, offering shoulders for the baby and me to cry on. This was as close to therapy as I was going to get. As my daughter grew sturdier and more independent, and I became more confident, we inched closer to the glass door. This morning, we sat together on the balcony watching pigeons fly by.



*MacKenzie Kassab is a freelance writer and the former editor of Time Out Beirut. Though she's currently based in Lebanon, her days as an expat are numbered.*

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