WorldJourney

Trailing Successfully

An Inside Look at Life as a Male Trailing Spouse

By Mark Ridlen

Life as a male trailing spouse presents some unique challenges. Here, from an expat who's 'over there, doing that,' are some wise insights and helpful advice on what it takes to succeed.

Today's working couples face a changing corporate landscape, which is causing more and more people to make decisions our parents and previous generations never considered. Recently, my family and I made just such a decision, one that will forever impact our roles, relationships and experiences.

Just over seven months ago, I became a "trailing spouse" when my wife accepted a promotion that committed our family to move internationally. This decision required a lot of thought on both our parts before we were ready to say "yes." Taking the assignment meant that I, who had always worked since before my wife and I had met, would have to leave my job as a National Bank Examiner. It also meant that I would assume a new role as a "stay at home" father of three young boys, Kyle, age 7, and Thomas and Tyler, age 5 (yes, they are twins!).

The decision to accept these significant changes to our family life came only after a great deal of hand wringing and many questions. Others contemplating such a choice should search deep within themselves to determine whether it is the right decision for them and their families. In our case, the decision-making process was long, and filled with difficult and sometimes unanswerable questions. Perhaps the most difficult questions were: What if I don't like being at home full-time? What will my career be upon my return to the work force? Will I have to start over, and prove myself all over again? Can I find another job that I'll enjoy as much as my previous one?

If you are facing a similar decision, you will have to consider questions about your future, your many roles - including spouse, father, and business professional - and perhaps more than I would have guessed, your social life. Some people will question your manhood. Others will wonder if you and your wife can maintain a successful relationship. Still others will simply be uncomfortable with you in your new role.

Here is a short list of the items you'll want to consider:

1. **Long-term career goals** (both your own and your spouse's), including career planning, retirement plans and other financial considerations.
2. **Family needs**, including familial responsibilities to parents or siblings who may need your emotional and economic support.
3. **Personal needs for fulfillment**. Since most Americans identify themselves by what they do, you may feel a large void in no longer having a career. And, since you no longer have a paying job, it may be difficult to explain to others what you "do", now that you are at home.

4. **Social acceptance**. Even in today's world people will question your decision to stay at home. Many will wonder whether you are really fulfilling your role as a husband, breadwinner, or even as a father, as some will believe this is not a good masculine role model for your children.

During your decision-making process, seek out as much help as possible. Potential reference points include your company's human resources and/or relocation divisions, personal acquaintances who have been though a similar situation, outside sources such as career counselors, professionals who are trained in social behavior, and support groups. I was even able to join a group in our new community called STUDS (Spouses Trailing Under Duress Successfully).

I have now been in my new "stay at home dad" role for over seven months, with the last five months spent in our new home in Belgium. Each day I am amazed at how much I learn about myself. Unfortunately, it is not always something good that I learn. The most significant concerns that I continue to face and continually seek to address are:

1. What effect will this have on my career upon my return to the work force; and
2. How can I maintain a positive self-image in my current role as a trailing spouse?

In addressing these concerns, I am constantly networking in order to create as many job options as possible. I am also exploring the possibility of returning to school for a post-graduate degree. In maintaining your own positive self-image, be realistic -- you will have bad days and even bad weeks. Life as a trailing spouse is not the vacation that many think. Maintaining the household and being at the call of your children can and will be trying. This is especially true with younger children. I have sought to participate in activities I enjoy to maintain my sanity.

You will also battle with the possibility of depression. The activities I use to maintain my self worth include a daily workout, coaching, keeping in touch with friends and work colleagues, and playing basketball and golf.

Here are some other ways I've found to maintain a positive outlook both for my benefit and my family's:

SET GOALS FOR YOURSELF AND YOUR FAMILY

Setting clear goals and expectations will make it much easier to accept the new facets of your life. Personal goals might include:

- Advancing your education;
- Becoming a volunteer;
- Learning more about your local community; and
- Learning a new hobby.

You should also consider getting a firm agreement from your spouse regarding the length of your commitment to be the trailing spouse.

Family goals, such as educational or cultural opportunities, should also be considered.

When setting my own goals, I considered what I needed to do for myself in order to enjoy my experience internationally, what choices could benefit and be shared with my family, and what opportunities I could pursue to enhance my future career.

SEEK OUT AND BECOME INVOLVED IN ACTIVITIES THAT YOU FIND REWARDING AND FULFILLING

My choices have included:

- Coaching my son's team in local youth sports.
- Volunteering in school and other family oriented activities.
- Improving my physical self (I joined a health club - great for sweating out those frustrations as well as some unwanted extra calories).
- Exploring local organizations for men in similar circumstances. The STUDS have organizations in other cities. You may also want to consider creating your own organization.
- Taking part in new experiences. Since I now live in Belgium, we are traveling and experiencing new places and customs as much as possible. Our trips have included local sites, London (a great city), and the Canary Islands. We are currently planning trips to Egypt, Paris, Switzerland, Italy and Holland.
- Lastly, seeking opportunities to enhance myself for resuming my career.

Attend as many activities as possible with your spouse. In addition to sharing experiences and responsibilities with your spouse, an additional benefit will be your acceptance by other trailing spouses -- specifically women who are fulfilling the traditional role as a trailing spouse. It was evident that many of the women in our new community were uncomfortable around me (a man in a woman's world) until they met my wife. In your role as a father and trailing spouse you will meet and make friends with a new group of people (most of them women), so it is important that you find a comfort level that allows you to be accepted within your new peer group. Even in today's changing world, many old traditions still exist. Many of the wives maintain regular activities such as coffees and special interest classes such as flower arranging. Of course, being a traditional male myself, most of the activities are of little interest to me. Thus, I have had to accept that in some ways I will not be accepted, nor do I always want to be, as I prefer to be one of the guys.

REWARD YOURSELF

Take time to reward yourself. You are giving up a significant part of your identity for the benefit of your entire family. Since now is not the time to be a martyr, spend the time and money to make your and your family's lives easier. Be sure to set aside time to enjoy activities and interests that are for your benefit and enjoyment. For example, I hired a house cleaner who also takes care of one item I never learned to do -- ironing. By hiring the cleaner, I have freed up time that I spend exploring local sites and culture, such as battlegrounds and breweries (maybe that is where those extra calories are coming from!). I also plan to improve my golf game as spring approaches. Unfortunately my golf game will not provide a future career for me. So, I will have to rely on traditional means of reentering the work force.

COMMUNICATE REGULARLY WITH FAMILY, FRIENDS AND WORK ASSOCIATES

Today's technology makes it easier than ever to keep in touch with home. These links are very beneficial in keeping you in tune with your past, both socially and professionally. An added benefit is that you can also build and expand your network, which should aid in making the transition back to your chosen career. I have been pleasantly surprised by the support given by my former employer (The Comptroller of the Currency), and from women, both those who are working and those who are spouses who stay at home. However, I have been disappointed to find that many men just can't seem to understand how you could quit a job and stay at home.

Most importantly, make communication with your spouse a priority. You will feel a surprising amount of stress with the changes in your life. It is important to work together in finding solutions to both real and perceived problems in your new and changing roles. Make sure that you and your spouse have clear expectations of each other's roles and responsibilities.

I have found it difficult when my wife travels or is required to spend long hours at work. These times seem to exaggerate the "role reversal," and add to my frustration of being in a role I never had anticipated. Many times this frustration leads to misunderstandings and resentment.

The transition to my new life as a trailing spouse has been more difficult than I had hoped, and further complicated by moving homes and living overseas. If you are following in my footsteps, you can expect to feel frustrated and down at times. Continue to focus on the positives, and enjoy the unique experience of spending extra time with your children, living in a new country and finding ways to improve yourself for the next chapter in your life.

The observations I've shared are just a few items for you to think about as you consider the challenging world of a trailing spouse. I continue to search for ways to make this experience easier and more beneficial for both my family and me. Each day is a new adventure, and I hope that each day you will find that your role as a trailing spouse is a happy and rewarding one.

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