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Saudi Arabia: Interview with Dr. Sean Truman – Adaptation as an Expatriate

Posted on July 19, 2010 by American Bedu

*It gives American Bedu the greatest pleasure to present readers with an exclusive interview with Dr. Sean Truman. In this interview, Dr. Sean Truman discusses his own experiences growing up as an expatriate and how these experiences not only shaped him into the man he is today, but how these experiences have led him to create an innovative and needful service to the expatriates in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.*



*Thank you, Sean, for allowing me this opportunity! I'd like to begin with a little bit of background about yourself. What is your nationality? Where were you born?*

I was born in the United States, and I am an American citizen.

*I understand that you grew up in Nairobi, Kenya. That's a long way from America! What was it like for you growing up outside of your home country? What did you see as the advantages and disadvantages?*

I left the United States when I was six, so almost all of my childhood memories are from Kenya. I grew up going to the International School of Kenya, so my friends came from Africa, Asia, North America, South America, the Middle East and Europe. I think that one of the most valuable things that I got from living in a multinational community was that I was surrounded by an incredible variety of languages, cultures, religions and perspectives. That experience changed the way that I think about the world. I am comfortable with people that are very different from me. I think that comfort comes from the way I was raised, and I think it has been really valuable.

For a lot of kids (and I was no exception) it is really hard moving back to your home country after being away for many years. I looked like I belonged, but I was, in fact, very different from most of the kids I went to school with when I got back to the United States. I missed being with people who thought of the world as being accessible as opposed to the world seeming exotic and foreign.

*What were some of the most common challenges you faced in adapting and adjusting to being an expatriate abroad? How were these challenges resolved?*



I was very young when we moved overseas, but I still have vivid memories of the first year that we lived abroad. I remember what it felt like to be in a street market and have people look at me because I stood out. I remember what it felt like to be in a sea of language and not being able to understand what was being said around me. The food was different. The smells were different. Everything felt different. Where I lived the earth was red, not black, which I remember thinking was totally odd. I remember going to a house with a zebra skin rug on the floor. I had

never seen a real zebra before.

Over time I acculturated. I think that my family adapted by being engaged; that meant that we spent a lot of time doing things that felt odd initially, but became more comfortable and enjoyable as we lived there longer. I was fortunate to have a family that traveled a lot. We took advantage of what the country had to offer both in terms of exploring the physical world, as well as by developing friendships with a wide range of people, both from Kenya and elsewhere. That exploration and the people we became friends with were the keys to adjusting and appreciating the experience of living where we did.

*When did you realize you were interested in pursuing a career in mental health? What factors contributed to your interest?*

When I was in college I became interested in Psychology. I was interested in clinical practice, and I was also very drawn to the ways in which complicated questions could be evaluated by doing empirical research. For a number of years I spent time working doing community based program development, clinical practice, teaching and research. More recently I have been more focused on clinical work and the development of the Truman Group, which as you know, provides mental health services to expatriates living overseas.

I really enjoy working with people, and I always have. My work as a Psychologist allows me to work with people in important ways every day. It has also been important to me to do work in the community that I am a part of. One of the nice things about what I do now with the Truman Group is that I can contribute to the international community. That work is really satisfying to me.

*What kind of practice do you have?*

In my practice in Saint Paul, I see individual adults, couples and adolescents.

*What made you, a busy and successful psychologist, decided to expand your services to the expatriate community? And, why did you select Saudi Arabia among the places to reach out to?*

One of the limitations of being a "traditional" psychologist is that we work in the places where we live. With video conferencing technology improving and high speed internet becoming more and more common, it has made it possible for us to connect to people all over the world. As I said earlier, given the way I grew up, I think of the international expatriate community as part of my own community. It was natural for me to think about ways that I might be a part of it, even if I am living in the United States. As for the decision to start working in Saudi Arabia, you know from people who have contributed to your blog that many expatriates find adjusting to life in the Kingdom a challenge. In addition to the stresses that are associated with a person leaving their home, family and familiar supports, entering a country that has strong cultural, moral and religious differences adds to the challenges for people to make the transition to that country.

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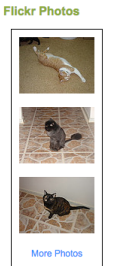
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Some expatriates may be under intense amount of stress but reluctant to contact a mental health provider. Or perhaps they feel there is a stigma attached to seeking mental health care. How do you address this audience?



It is common for people in small expatriate communities to feel like they are living in a fishbowl. Going to a psychologist is a personal and private decision, but if the community is small enough, it can be difficult to keep that decision private. I think that one of the most important things that the Truman Group offers expatriates is confidentiality. Care provided to clients is private. People can keep the visits to themselves, and no one will know about the consultation with a psychologist. Because the clinicians are not physically in the community, there is no chance that people will run into their psychologist inadvertently in the community.

People encounter life stress and problems all of the time. Usually these problems resolve when people get support from family and friends, and they do just fine. However, there are times when problems that start out as normal life stress grow, and unchecked these problems become impairing. That is when it is appropriate to get help and see someone with training to provide that help.

I know that people with both physical and emotional problems frequently avoid getting care that will help them. I always encourage people to consult with a clinician if they are worried about their health. Seeing a doctor does not make you weak. The vast majority of psychological problems are very responsive to psychotherapy. Depression, anxiety and marital problems as well as a host of other problems can be treated, and treated well. With professional care people recover far more quickly than they do if they simply wait or hope that the problem goes away.

*What can an expatriate expect in a session? How long is an average session? How often can an expatriate seek a consultation? What is the fee structure? Do you accept insurance?*

Getting care from the Truman Group is almost exactly the same experience as being seen by a clinician in the community. The only difference is that the clinician is present through Skype, which is encrypted, free and used routinely by many people living overseas. When people initially contact the Truman Group, I talk to them on the telephone and I have them describe the problems they are experiencing. Based on the issues they are coping with, I refer them to one of my colleagues with the appropriate experience and approach for that individual.

Sessions are approximately 50-60 minutes. The frequency of contact depends on a number of factors including the severity of the problems people are having, but usually people are seen once per week. The charge for a session is US \$135 per hour. We do not take insurance directly, but many insurance companies reimburse for mental health care, and we are glad to help clients facilitate that process.

*What kind of patients do you treat? What ailments or difficulties?*

We see people with a wide range of problems, including anxiety and depression, trauma, substance abuse, eating disorders, cultural adjustment, bereavement, marital problems, issues relating to physical health or diagnoses and parenting consultation among others.

*You are but one psychologist within the network you have created. How does an expatriate know which professional is the right one for their problem?*

It is my responsibility to link people to the appropriate professional. We have a number of mental health professionals on staff, and each of us has areas of particular expertise.

*I'd like to segue now to your advice for expatriates who may already be outside of their home country or contemplating taking a position abroad.*

*What are important factors for an expatriate and family to take into consideration when contemplating an opportunity abroad?*



People should not underestimate the difficulty of making a move away from their home country. Change is difficult, and moves to a new country and culture are demanding.

There are a number of steps that people can take to prepare for the move. First, be informed. Knowledge is power, and any major change will go better if the family is well prepared. That means that parents need to be particularly careful to let their children know what to expect. It is common for at least one member of the family to be reluctant about the move. Do not oversell the change. Recognize that individuals vary a great deal in the ways in which they cope with major changes in their lives. Children tend to adjust more quickly to moves, but this is not always the case. In general, younger children are faster to adapt.

I always tell people that they should use the "Rule of 90". It frequently takes at least 90 days to get over the most extreme sense of disorientation and confusion when you move to a new place or make a major life change. It is usually around the fourth month that individuals begin to find things that they like about their new life, and they get used to the sounds, smells and environment. After that, people get their lives moving in a more normal way. That said, the first year is full of major adjustments, and frequently it is not until the second full year of living in a new country that people (especially adults) begin to feel at home. Obviously, if a family has made many moves and is "expert" at these transitions, different rules apply.

*Is everyone really adaptable to be an expatriate?*

There are many ways to be an expatriate. I know of families that live as though they still are in their home country. They insulate themselves as completely as they can from their "foreign" experience. On the other hand, I know of families who try to integrate fully into their new environment. They learn the language and immerse themselves in the culture. Most people are somewhere in the middle on this continuum and each person has to find a balance that works for them. It is possible for most people to manage quite well in a foreign country if they know how to find things that are interesting, meaningful and fulfilling in their day to day life. That said, anyone who has lived as an expatriate has known families that simply cannot manage the transition. In general, these families were already having significant problems before they got to their new home, and they are simply not able to cope with the new stresses on the family. Many families can benefit from help as they make the transition. For families that make an overall smooth transition, there are often small bumps in the road that can be quickly addressed before they grow. For families that struggle more to adapt, professional help can really make the difference in the family happiness and adjustment process.

*In Saudi Arabia many expatriate families are separated as some positions are for a "single contract only" which prohibits the ability for a family to come and live together in the Kingdom. Or, some family members may not come to Saudi Arabia due to fear, children in established schools, or the career status and position of the other partner. What kind of problems do you typically see associated with separated families and how can these problems be minimized?*

loved ones. Losing immediate access to family members is very hard to manage. There are a number of things people can do to bolster themselves. First, set up a plan for regular visits. Make sure that even if the visits are spaced out that you have a way to know when you will see your family next. Second, work hard to have contact with family members, including small children. Talk on the telephone, and use Skype daily if possible. If there are young children at home, be sure to include them in the conversations, even if the talking is one sided. Third, both parts of the separated family need to be sure that they establish friendships and support around them, and they should do it consciously. Frequently single contract workers are in proximity to others in the same situation. There is support among people that are experiencing the same stress. Talk about it. Support others in the same situation and help each other get through the dark days.

*What are danger signals or symptoms of adjustment problems?*

Any time there is a significant and sustained change in a person's emotional state or behavior, there is reason to pay attention. By sustained, I mean that the changes take place over several weeks, as opposed to a day or two.

Specifically, if a person becomes withdrawn, or stops enjoying things that they used to enjoy, they should be attended to. Similarly, if a person starts to feel excessively sad, anxious or appears to be unable to control their emotions normally (crying, being excessively angry), consider getting in touch with someone who can help.

*What are the most common difficulties and challenges an expatriate may face due to culture shock?*

People in culture shock feel as though they are disconnected from their own lives, and are often emotionally distant from the people around them. They experience a sense of isolation, loss and sadness, and frequently spend a significant amount of time thinking and talking about the culture/location that they miss. This is a normal reaction to dramatic change. Usually this reaction gradually fades, and within several months people are back to normal. When people are in the throes of culture shock, they rarely are able to enjoy new experiences that are associated with living in the new place and culture.

*What factors increase the amount of culture shock an expatriate may experience and why?*

The more dramatic the cultural change, and the longer and more "entrenched" the person was in the previous place/culture, the greater the probability of culture shock. In essence, culture shock is the term that we use to describe the overall experience of managing many, many differences in day to day experience when you compare a person's old life with their new one. That means that the more similar the two experiences are (say moving from the Australia to New Zealand) as opposed to radically different (moving from San Francisco to Jeddah) the experience of culture shock will be different. That said, even moves that appear similar can cause people to feel disconnected and disoriented. As I said before, do not underestimate significant change. It is difficult and requires adjustment.



*Are some countries known for greater culture shock and therefore adjustment challenges than others? Why?*

Culture shock is not a characteristic of any one country; it is a characteristic of people adjusting to difference. People experience culture shock as the result of change. The more dramatic the change, the greater the probability that they experience culture shock. Dramatic differences in dress, religion, language, climate, food and a host of other factors all play into this experience. The more accommodation and change that the new place requires of a person, the higher the risk for culture shock.

*What are the five top tips towards having a positive well-being as an expatriate?*

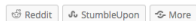
1. Intentionally embrace your new surroundings.
2. Be sure to stay connected to family and friends.
3. Find food, places and experiences that are new and pleasurable.
4. Work to extend yourself to make new friends.
5. Be sure to remember your own traditions, holidays and events.

*How can an expatriate reach you Sean with questions or to learn more about your services?*

People are welcome to email me at [struman@truman-group.com](mailto:struman@truman-group.com). They may also call my office at +1-651-964-0224. The URL for our website is <http://www.truman-group.com>.

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