

The stay-at-home expatriate

Hello. My name is Ana and I am a Brazilian expatriate in Belgium. I returned to this country to start a life with my partner.

Little did I know how this process would unfold.

Here's to you, who went abroad for love. Or family. Or whatever other beautiful and strong reason that makes us fly away.

You move to a new country and you're full of hopes and expectations. However, they are not immediately fulfilled. Your papers are not yet in order. You can't speak the local language. You can't enroll in schools. You can't get a job.

What do you do? You stay home and try to enjoy the freedom, thinking of it as well-deserved vacations and that you'll soon figure things out.

Time passes and you're still forced to stay home. Bureaucratic procedures are slow and jobs are scarce. You freak out. You get bored to tears. You think you'll go crazy. You're afraid people think you're a lazy loser.

Don't despair! Sometimes the situation is out of our control and the best we can do is to stay positive and keep things in perspective.

I've been back in Belgium for a year now and my visa request is still pending. I haven't found work due to poor language skills (French and Dutch) and being a non-native English speaker (which apparently is a deal breaker for private language schools, even though I have a degree and years of classroom experience).

If you're independent and accustomed to taking care of yourself, this will be a challenge. However, it might also be a great opportunity to reflect and learn.

Sure I am blessed by having people supporting me financially and emotionally. I couldn't have thrived for a year without them. And I didn't get comfortable – I still look for jobs regularly and could finally start a Dutch intensive course.

Here is what kept me going this year:

Stay busy. Do your thing.

The number one thing I wanted to do with all my newly found free time was to focus on learning more, exploring my talents and options and experimenting new things. After the first few weeks of guiltless leisure, I started having a self-imposed routine. I wanted to use time wisely and feel productive.

I have never done so much despite being unemployed.

I wanted to figure out what I was supposed to do with my (professional) life. I had studied English at University and worked as a teacher for a few years. After that, I lived abroad as an au pair (live-in nanny) twice – in the USA and in Belgium.

I knew I was faced with a unique opportunity to restart.

I joined an ESL Teachers Association and attended lectures and workshops.

I volunteered for a Brazilian association that offered workshops for children in Portuguese.

I read blogs about entrepreneurship, living abroad, making a living off your talents and skills, creating, writing and more.

After much consideration I joined the [Amazing Biz and Life Academy](#). Leonie's courses, videos, blog, forums, e-books and meditations were the milestone for a wave of creativity that engulfed my lonely days. She is all about creating your own business and fully integrating family, love, self-care and spirituality in that sum.

I created a new blog and took the whole thing more seriously. I love writing and I realized it's what I do most naturally. The connections, comments, questions and suggestions after each post are really exciting and rewarding.

Stories are made to be told so that people get inspired, educated, entertained. I knew I had to share everything that I had learned living abroad, so I wrote an eBook about my experience being an au pair.

Since then I've been writing non-stop – on my own blog and on other websites – and playing with new ideas.

I am not where I want to be yet but I keep doing my thing and life will unfold itself. One day I might write for a living, who knows?

So... your thing might be cooking; gardening; taking beautiful photographs; painting; doing sports; fashion; teaching; writing stories or poetry; playing music; making fun videos; drawing; building things or inventing things or simply reading books.

Do it! It will keep your mind busy and happy. Develop your skills, learn more, practice more, share it with people around you, and consider the possibility of making a living off it. It might not happen immediately, but this might be the best thing you do for yourself before you take that first (necessary) job and don't have as much time in your hands.

Exercise and eat healthy

When you're home it's easy to sleep in and spend way too much time on the internet/tv or keep yourself busy with house chores. When you realize, the day has passed and you didn't even go outside.

Many times I've fallen into the trap: being lazy and comfort eating, which made me feel frustrated and weak. I gained weight and often felt uncomfortable in my own skin – that was the source of a lot of extra stress I didn't need.

Staying home takes a real toll on your self-esteem and confidence and you've got to keep your body + mind healthy and balanced. Going out for walks, runs or playing sports will not only keep you fit but sane.

A good walk in nature to breathe in some fresh air and get your blood flowing; a quick powerful run to break in some sweat; a fun dancing session; a yoga lesson. When you move often and combine it with natural, light food your body will have more energy and you'll also be more emotionally balanced.

Learn the language

It's one of the most important things to do in the new country we call home. Even if you don't have to, it's nice to make an effort to speak with the locals in their own language. I think it shows respect and interest in being part of the community.

But I have to tell you, learning Dutch and French has been quite a challenge. During my first year here I chose to learn French because I thought it would be more useful when I returned home (I never thought home would be Flanders one day). Then, I started learning Dutch and forgot all my French. Great.

Another problem I face is that everyone I know speaks perfect English and that has been our default language. It's hard to simply switch. But I try. And that is what we should do: try to learn and try to use what you've learned. Make an effort.

You will navigate the place with more ease, connect with people and feel less like an outsider.

Network, make new friends

Going out and meeting a bunch of new people can be overwhelming. Start slowly, go for a drink with a friend and meet his/her friends. Join a local Facebook group and attend events. Try CouchSurfing. Take classes.

Whatever works best for you.

Connecting with people will help you go through homesickness and you will less likely get lonely or depressed.

Loneliness is one of the worst parts of adaptation and expat life in general. You miss your family and friends from home, you feel like an outsider and you struggle to feel like you belong.

When you open up and build new connections though, you feel more accepted and welcomed; You get tips and advice from those who have lived there for a long time; You have company to go out and explore new places; You might have a shoulder to cry on and a pair of ears to listen to your worries;

It is important to build a new emotional and professional support system after leaving your previous one behind. But never forget to keep in touch with family and good friends from home.

Plan short trips

Even if you don't have a job yet and your budget is low, or if you have other priorities, travelling is essential.

You are in a whole new place, after all!

Go out and fall in love with it.

See its wonders and learn the most you can about it.

You don't have to go far or spend a lot. Explore a small town nearby. Eat their specialty. Climb a hill, hike, swim, sightsee, window shop, take pictures or just sit down and watch. Hop on a bus/train/your car and go somewhere you've never been before. It's energizing and helps you keep life in perspective.

I haven't left Belgium for a year but we drove around, biked around and walked around quite a bit. It reminds me that life is not only what's around me and in my head (paperwork, frustrated plans, lack of a job and money, language and culture difficulties, etc). It reminds me to take it easy and enjoy nice places, people and food.

Separate your worth from work

Since I was in University and got my first job I have always taken care of myself. So this year I have been struggling with something new: being supported by my boyfriend and his family.

I feel uncomfortable sometimes, like this is an unconceivable and unacceptable situation for me – a girl who has been independent and living abroad for years. I took a lot of pride in working, supporting myself and going after my dreams but suddenly I had no control over my situation and became somewhat unemployable (not fluent in Dutch or French and not a native English speaker).

I am sure I will overcome this situation by studying and improving my skills and also by exploring options and opportunities.

But this year was the longest I spent “doing nothing” and I can clearly see how it has impacted my confidence and sense of self-worth. Not having a job made me feel like a burden and sometimes useless. I felt bad when people asked what I did and was afraid of what they might think of me.

I felt frustrated about not making my own money and therefore not doing whatever I wanted with it – mostly travelling.

I felt like I had to have a routine, tasks, results, productivity and displays of success (an income).

I understood the way we are taught that what you do is a big part of who you are, but not before I obsessed about who I really am, since I didn't have a job.

I know a lot of people and in the middle of my crisis I realized that I have no clue what many of them do for a living. The best realization though, was that I doesn't matter what they do - they are who they are.

The lesson I am slowly learning is that my worth as a person is not tied to my job/career/income. Although I do want to (must) find a job that will help us build our life as a couple and eventually do work that I truly love and motivates me to get out of bed every morning.

Finally, be patient, be grateful and carry on!

You will eventually speak the language, find good work, have a nice group of friends and get your papers in order. It only takes time and effort and you should keep in mind the reasons and dreams that brought you here.

Useful links:

[Immigration Office - Belgium](#)

[VDAB](#) (Job Search in Flanders)

[Huis van het Nederlands](#) (Find a suitable Dutch course)

[Cohabitation in Belgium](#)

[Language Learning Tools](#)

[Life in Belgium Facebook Group](#)

*This is based on my experience and I only wish to share it in order to help those in the same situation.