

Who is there for you when it all goes wrong?

One of the great things about being with an agency is that there are other people around to help you with the difficult things that can happen. But if you're on your own, who's there for you? It's vital for your own effectiveness – and possibly even your life - that you seek out people locally who will be willing to fill this role for you. Here are the main areas in which we recommend you look for help.

Orientation – who is going to show you around, explain the local culture, or help you understand how practical things like registering with the police or getting a work permit happen?

Emotional issues – we've already considered culture shock, but who is there to support you when you suffer from it, or get overworked or depressed? Who can you relax with?

Language learning – effective learning of the local language is an important means of getting your message across to local believers. Many people think they can get away with picking it up as they go along, but doing language school for at least a year will help you much more. But who is going to ensure that you follow through with it, and keep studying hard when the going gets tough?

Local accountability – an agency will provide a manager for you, but you might think you don't need one. So who will be there to make sure that your work is supervised, to prevent you making mistakes, and ensure that your objectives are achieved without you overworking?

Spiritual support – being a committed member of a local church is no less important when you're abroad than when you're at home. You need to find a context in which you can be nourished and can serve. Who is mentoring and developing you, or stopping you running off the rails?

Healthcare – What happens when you get sick? Who's there to take you to hospital or contact your insurance company? You have got insurance, haven't you? Insurance which covers you for emergency repatriation? If you haven't got insurance you may be denied medical treatment locally, or face a bill for five-figure sums.

Police/prison/kidnap – bad things happen to good people, and being on your own makes you even more vulnerable. If you're unjustly accused, who is going to stand bail for you? Who is going to intercede on your behalf? Who can corroborate your testimony? Can you rely on your embassy staff to help? Do they even know you're in the country? Visit your embassy and register your residence with them. If you're British, register with the FCO's information service so that you can get up to date news (<https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/UKGOVUK/subscriber/new>).

Emergency evacuation – if there is a major security issue, or a big natural disaster, who is going to help you get out? What plans do you have in place and on whom do they depend?

Colleagues who work in agencies, local pastors, NGO leaders and friends you have made can all be part of this varied mix. But be aware that they will feel more responsibility to their own people, and while they may be willing to help you, they might not have the capacity. This is one of the major risks you take when you go by yourself, so take care to make sure you build a local support base on whom you can depend.