

Name: Pekka

Home country: Finland

Education: Social Services in Helsinki

Languages: Finnish, English

Intercultural relationship: Pekka was in a relationship with a man from Iraq

INTERCULTURAL FAMILY/COUPLE

Pekka met his partner online. His partner had moved to Finland from Iraq due to social and political situations in his country where romantic relationships between same-sex people are not accepted. People in these relationships can sometimes be persecuted by society, so Pekka's partner escaped to Finland.

The couple had been together for 3 years but unfortunately they broke up. Pekka believes that if they had been able to seek professional help, they could perhaps still be together. However, it was difficult to get proper professional support in English language for a multicultural same-sex couple. Moreover, Pekka assumes that their breakup had probably something to do with the fact that he was not able to fully understand his partner's choice of hiding their relationship from his family in Iraq. Being born and living in a country where freedom of choice and speech are perceived as given, Pekka does not care about others knowing his sexual orientation. Whereas for his partner, a disclosure of this information to his family could become fatal.

Pekka says that he met his partner during his first year in Finland, so it was easy to observe how he has been changing over time. Pekka remembers that in these 3 years together, his partner got accustomed to eating Finnish food and developed a new way of arguing. For instance, his partner was brought up in a family where saying "sorry" does not necessarily imply an intent to apologise. In contrast, as a Finn, Pekka tends to take "sorry" very seriously. Besides, it was difficult for his partner in question to apologize, as he believed he would demonstrate his weakness and put himself in a vulnerable position. However, the couple discussed this aspect together and his partner changed. He was not afraid of apologizing anymore if necessary, which Pekka considers to be a fundamental change that required effort from both of them.

Pekka's tip № 1: Same words in different cultures can carry different meanings. If you experience regular misunderstandings with your partner, discuss them together. It can be so that you or them take each other's requests and statements wrong.

If you feel that your couple relationship can benefit from getting professional help, seek it as soon as possible.

EMPLOYMENT

Pekka has worked as a security officer at the Helsinki airport for some time. Now, he is on study leave being employed at a retail store in Helsinki where he has no colleagues from abroad. He says, however, that situation at the airport was different. It was beneficial for employees there to have a multicultural background due to language skills being a big plus for communicating with clients.

Pekka does not believe in the power of sending out online applications, as he has never succeeded applying through online employment services. He is convinced that establishing a connection with a potential recruiter and meeting face to face increases one's chances of getting a job in Finland. That was how he got his retail job - he met a person working there during a lunch break at his previous workplace's cafeteria. They sat together at a table and that person told Pekka that the store was hiring new employees.

As for Pekka's partner, he started his professional path in Finland taking various language courses. After he started speaking more or less confidently, he got a job at a Finnish company where they speak mostly English and occasionally Finnish. He got to know the company at courses organised by one of the universities in Helsinki. Later, he got an internship at the company and then was hired. Pekka mentions that from his perspective, his partner has a good ear for Finnish and it is easier for him to understand rather than speak the language.

Pekka's tip № 2: Finnish labor market is very network-based, so find a way to meet face to face with as many people as possible and make sure you keep in contact.

RELATIONSHIPS AND NETWORKS

Pekka believes that it is difficult to make friends with Finnish people because they take friendship very seriously. For them, friendship is something one should get invested in and something one feels bad not dedicating enough time to. From his experience, Finnish people tend to avoid making friends entirely, so that they will not have to worry about being not good enough friends.

Pekka thinks that for his partner, it was not easy to make friendships with local people. He has friends in Helsinki now, but most of them are not Finnish. Pekka recommends getting to know Finnish people who have been traveling a lot, studied an international degree or are anyhow interested in other cultures, as they generally are more open to meeting foreign people.

Pekka's tip № 3: Attend cultural or travel events where you can meet Finns who are interested in getting to know foreign people.

FINNISH LANGUAGE

When they lived together, Pekka and his partner tried speaking Finnish at home but it usually worked only for a little while because their conversations sounded unnatural. They did not want to limit their communication and switched back to English quite soon.

Pekka finds passive listening to somebody's conversations in Finnish, following TV, or listening to the radio and music to be effective ways of learning languages. He also suggests speaking Finnish as much as possible regardless of one's level of vocabulary. For instance, being a native Finnish speaker, he always reacts positively when a foreigner speaks Finnish to him and supports their endeavours. He says that Finnish might be quite a rare language, which is not spoken widely all around the world, so one can see no point in learning it. However, speaking some Finnish allows a foreigner to feel a lot more independent and included in the Finnish society.

For those who cannot bear learning the language, Pekka suggests a psychological trick. It can be worth it to try faking that one likes the language and is interested in learning it. In this way, it can become subconsciously easier to make learning a habit, as it is perceived by the brain as something enjoyable.

Pekka's tip № 4: Try taking Finnish as an opportunity rather than a necessity, have an open mind and curiosity towards the language.