

Seeking a New Place to Live

by J. Camphill

There may come a time when you realize that where you live doesn't work out, and there are no good options available in your area. It may be that you live in an industrialized area and need to find a place with cleaner air, or you live in a wet climate and the mold and pollen are too big a problem. Or you need a warmer climate.

Some people pack up their car and head off, hoping to find a better life somewhere else. We get a number of such seekers every year here in Arizona, and I was one myself years ago. Most seekers stay each place for a couple of days before moving on, others decide to stay and seriously look for a house to rent or buy, or for land to build on. Most just sleep in their car, while some have a tolerable tent or even some sort of RV.

Visiting EI communities can be a treasure trove of information, and it is generally much easier to move to a place that already has EIs living there. Make sure to talk to a number of the local EIs — some may be unduly negative about a place that you may actually enjoy living in, or try to sell you on a place that is not for you.

You can get much important information that is not available from any other source — like availability of organic food, how to get a haircut, or the availability of trades people who are willing to use safer building methods. Or maybe there is a hog farm in the area or a new power plant is being planned.

If you can visit some of the houses, you might learn about how to fix one up to be safer, or even how to build a new one. And how much it will all cost. Just walking into a safe house, and feeling what it is like, can be an amazing experience, when every “normal” place makes you sick.

Traveling around may also help you better think about whether moving to another part of the country is for you — where you may be far away from family and friends, who may be helping you now. Try to be realistic about whether your present support system is one you can continue to count on, and whether it is worth it to stay where you are.

Be realistic about whether you can be on your own, or if you need a person to help you with daily chores, etc. It is amazing how well we can cope when we have to, and do without a lot of conveniences that many people think they have to have, but there are also limits. Do not expect an EI community to pick up the slack for you

— they have their own problems and are sick, too. Sometimes it is possible to hire local shoppers and housecleaners, but there can be problems doing that.

Many people move to the southwest deserts of the United States for the dry, warm climate, but it is not for everybody. Some people feel better in cooler or more humid climates. Some folk do better in Montana or upstate New York or Florida. Some people do best at certain elevations. If you have never lived above sea level, it can be an adjustment to move up to the mountains. On the other hand, some people who live in a wet, moldy climate may feel younger and more energetic getting away from the mold.

Some people do better in cities, where there are fewer trees and other vegetation they are allergic to. Some people do best living on a lake or by the ocean. Travel around and see what works. It is best to try each place in different seasons, as climate and pollens can vary dramatically throughout the year.

Another thing to consider is that if you are a city person, can you see yourself living in a rural area? Some can't; others, like myself, find that a small town of a thousand people is great after having lived in three cities, each with more than a million people in them. Try to think about what is important — if you are from a big city, how often do you really go to the theatre or a museum, or all the other things only available there? Are they worth your health, if you feel better somewhere else? Maybe your attachment to the big city is just because it is familiar to you, as it was to me?

It is difficult to evaluate how you feel in a new area while living in your car. There are constant exposures from life on the road — the stinky restrooms, grocery stores and gas stations. And even after you leave, some of those stinky chemicals still hang in your clothes. You simply may never feel your best while on the road, you'd have to live in a new place to really know what it feels like. Sometimes you simply have to take a leap of faith when deciding on where to stay.

Many of us get a grace period of about a year before getting sensitized to the local vegetation. No place is perfect, even the coldest tundra and the driest stone desert produce possible irritants.

Some of the seekers keep moving, barely stopping anywhere, hoping unrealistically to simply drive to a place and suddenly feel good. It may not happen that way. We call these folks “runners”.

There is a shortage of safer housing, especially affordable safer housing. Much of what is available is not very good, and the prices are high as there will always be people desperate enough to pay the high premium prices demanded. And it *is* a

risky business to put money into fixing up a house to rent out to EIs; it may take a long time before the house is good enough for someone to rent it.

Don't expect any place to be perfect. If it is, either the price is very high, or it's already sold or rented out without needing any advertising. It often pays to ask around what may become available soon, rather than rely on what is advertised. And be realistic, maybe if you slept on a cot on the porch for the first summer, while working on the place, it may work out. However, you may also become more sensitized over time.

Many people move to an area and start with something usable, but which still gives them symptoms. As long as it's better than what they came from and the symptoms are not too bad, it's an improvement. Then they can better look around for something more permanent, or work on improving what they've got. Maybe live in one part of the house, while fixing up the rest little by little. Some people create a safe room by removing the carpet and everything else in it, and then line the floor, walls and ceiling with aluminum foil, Denny foil or Tu-Tuff.

People driving around are usually welcomed by the local EI community. But remember that they have their own lives and may also be more sensitive than yourself. Inviting a stranger to stay in one's home is a dicey proposition, so actual hospitality is less than one might expect. Expect few invitations.

One of the problems is that people who are new to this life are usually not safe to be around, especially in close quarters. When you visit people, expect to be greeted outside and not invited inside, at least for awhile.

People who live on the road will have a hard time being truly "clean". All it might take is wearing clothes that three months ago were washed in a machine owned by someone who uses toxic laundry products. Or you may still be wearing the same clothes you wore on that two-minute visit to a convenience store or a public rest room. Even if you change your clothes, the stuff is still hanging in your hair. If someone offers to let you use their bathroom to take a shower, it may be more than a polite offer of some comfort.

It takes amazingly little to trigger a reaction in a very sensitive person, and there are always people more sensitive than you! This can be very difficult to understand, especially by someone who has never truly lived a chemically free life, but think they have. When I lived in the MCS-camp in Seagoville, outside Dallas, we had so many newcomers who were absolutely convinced that they were so clean. I heard many lectures about their use of baking soda in their laundry, etc. etc. But we could still smell chemicals on them. Eventually they all got cleaned up. It is hard to really know whether one is clean enough, without

feedback from another EI. EIs are just like normies — nobody likes to be told they stink.

The problem here is called “masking”, which is the phenomena that when we are constantly exposed to a problematic substance, our sense of smell learns to tune it out. Our symptoms may also become less, but we rarely become symptom free without fully cleaning up. And we can rarely smell ourselves.

I remember having a neighbor who was extremely sensitive to all kinds of things, but she was using a sun screen that made most of us sick. She was so masked that she couldn't smell it at all. Of course, she never felt good herself, either. I have even met one EI who used fabric softener. She was addicted to it and would feel sick if she didn't wear clothes with it!

In a few cases, the EI is so loaded up with chemicals in their body that it comes out of their pores when they sweat, at a rate that makes other people sick. I remember one woman who stunk so strongly of pharmaceutical products that I had to stay fifty feet away. In those cases, there isn't much to do while traveling, except keep a polite distance from people. In the EI world, it's perfectly acceptable to talk while standing far apart from one another.

Another problem when visiting other EIs is that we are all different. It is not the same thing that trigger our worst symptoms. While almost all EIs can agree that fragrances, cigarettes, fabric softener and pesticides are absolute no-no's, there are many differences, too.

The biggest dividing line is probably sensitivity to electromagnetic fields (EHS/ES). Such a person may not be able to be in a house when a computer is on — and the owner may not be willing to be without her link to the outside world for several days.

Alternatively, if the hostess is electrically sensitive, there will always be the concern whether the guest will turn on something that is a problem — perhaps a radio or a hair dryer.

Cooking methods are another common tension point. Some people cannot stand any sort of cooking odors, while others cannot eat any meat that has not been fried in a pan or seasoned with fragrant spices.

Whenever there is someone else in your house that you do not know very well, there is always the concern that something will be brought inside that should not have been. It happens so frequently, even with the best intentions. Even EIs are

subject to the “it’s only a little bit” thinking, if it is not one of our personal triggers.

There are many, many other possible problems here, but needless to say, many EIs will be very careful who they will trust inside their private space, which they have worked very hard to make safe. It takes very little to stink up an enclosed space, and many people will get sick for days from an exposure.

Most EI homes are of modest size, as they cost more to build or fix up than a regular house, and EIs tend not to have a lot of money. If they did to start with, the doctors and other practitioners will have taken their share. There often isn’t a spare guest bedroom available, and even if there is one, it may be used for things that are not quite safe yet. Many EI homes have some place to put things like incoming mail or other stuff that we need to deal with, but which is not safe enough.

A much more delicate issue that many prefer not to talk about — some even deny exist — is that many of us get traumatized by the experience of losing our homes and normal lives; by the mistreatment we often receive from ignorant and arrogant physicians; and from the tension with our friends and families, who may even have abandoned us in our time of greatest need for help and understanding. Those are very stressful experiences, not unlike fighting a guerilla war, where we never know from which direction the next attack will arrive. It is no wonder that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is common among EIs. An EI with full-blown PTSD is difficult to be around, and it requires a stable, safe environment to get out of it again. Precisely what is not available to a person looking for a safe place to live.

There isn’t much to do about it when fear takes over and the diesel truck you see downwind and a mile away makes you feel sick. Even if you know intellectually that it can’t possibly be a problem, the prehistoric part of your brain isn’t listening. And in most cases, the exposure issue isn’t clear cut at all — EIs really are truly amazingly sensitive to stuff that “normal people” hardly even notice.

Many EIs have a low tolerance for stress. Some of us are even allergic to our own stress hormones, so stress can make us sick. Many of us feel best with a lot of quiet time by ourselves, and will be stressed if we do not get enough of it, which is difficult with a house guest. (For a great description of this mechanism, see *The Highly Sensitive Person*, by Elaine Aron, a psychologist.)

So, if you are cruising around looking for a better place to move to, expect to receive lots of friendly advice about the local conditions, but very few invitations to stay in a spare bedroom. A more realistic request is to ask to camp in

someone's yard or driveway for a night or two. And don't feel rejected if you're told about a nice campground in the area.