

# **What Missionaries Ought to Know about Culture Stress**

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You feel tired, anxious, discouraged, isolated, angry, and homesick but cannot think of any reason why you should feel that way. You have been on the field for several years, but these feelings always seem to be there--increasing and decreasing. You wonder what could be causing them. It could be culture stress. You may say, "I know about culture shock, but what is culture stress?" What is the difference between culture stress and culture shock? What causes culture stress? What are its effects? What can be done about it? Can it be prevented? Let's consider some of these questions.

## **What is culture stress?**

Culture stress is the stress that occurs when you change to a different way of living in a new culture. It is what you experience as you move beyond understanding the culture to making it your own so that you accept the customs, becoming comfortable and at home with them. If you are trying to become a real part of the culture, to become bicultural, you are likely to experience culture stress as you assimilate some of the conventions to the point that they feel natural to you.

Of course, if you live in a "missionary ghetto," you may experience little culture stress. Early modern missionaries often lived in compounds, which were physically identifiable as missionary ghettos. Today, even though some missionaries live physically in a national community, they have primarily relationships with other missionaries. A missionary subculture may develop which becomes focused on itself and preoccupied with group concerns so that the missionaries experience little culture stress. Those trying to become an integral part of the national community are the ones who experience the greatest culture stress.

## **How is culture stress different from culture shock?**

As culture shock was originally defined (honeymoon, crisis, recovery, adjustment), culture stress was considered to be a part of it. However, the word "shock" connotes something sudden and short-lived. Thus, many people today think of culture shock as the crisis stage (confusion, disorientation, and lack of control) and the recovery stage (language and cultural cues more familiar). These stages begin when the new missionary leaves the enthusiastic, exciting, optimistic tourist mode, usually beginning in a few weeks, worsening for about six months, and basically ending within a year or two.

Culture stress is the adjustment stage in which people accept the new environment, adopting new ways of thinking and doing things so that they feel like they belong to the new culture. This takes years, and some missionaries never complete it. This may go on and on.

## **What causes culture stress?**

Many factors enter into the amount of culture stress one feels while living in another culture. Here are some of the major ones.

- Involvement. The more you become personally involved in the culture, the more culture stress you may feel. The tourist, the business person or someone from the diplomatic corps not committed to being the incarnation of Christ in that culture, may feel little culture stress.
- Values. The greater the differences in values between your home culture and your host culture, the greater the stress. Values of cleanliness, responsibility, and use of time may cause stress for years. Cultures may appear similar on the surface but have broad differences in deeper values.
- Communication. Learning the meanings of words and rules of grammar are only a small part of being able to communicate effectively. The whole way of thinking, the common knowledge base, and the use of non-verbals are necessary and come only with great familiarity with the culture.
- Temperament. The greater the difference in your personality and the average personality in the culture, the greater the stress. A reserved person may find it difficult to feel at home where most people are outgoing extroverts. An extrovert may never feel at ease in a reserved culture.
- Entry-re-entry. Most missionaries, unlike immigrants, live in two cultures and may never feel fully at home in either. Every few years they change their place of residence, never fully adapting to the culture they are in at the time.
- Children. The more your children internalize the values of your host culture and the more you realize that they will be quite different from you, the more stress you may feel.
- Multinational teams. Although effectiveness of the ministry may increase, working together in your mission with people from cultures other than your host culture often adds to the culture stress.

### **What are the results of culture stress?**

Many of the results of culture stress are the same as those of any other stress.

- Feelings of anxiety, confusion, disorientation, uncertainty, insecurity, and helplessness
- Fatigue, tiredness, lack of motivation, lethargy, lack of joy
- Illness (stress suppresses the immune system), concern about germs, fear of what might be in the food
- Disappointment, lack of fulfillment, discouragement, feeling hurt, feeling inadequate, feeling "out of it"
- Anger, irritability, contempt for the host culture, resentment (perhaps toward God), feelings of superiority or inferiority
- Rejection of the host culture, the mission board, even of God.
- Homesickness

- Etc.

Some people seem to believe that they can adapt to anything, even continual stress, without it hurting them. It just does not work that way. In the 1930s, stress researcher Hans Selye put rats under many different kinds of stress. He kept some in a refrigerator, others in an oven, made some swim for hours a day, injected others with chemicals, others with bacteria, etc. The results were almost always the same. The rats went through the same cycle. First was the alarm reaction in which resources were mobilized. Then came the resistance stage in which it seemed like an adequate adjustment had been made. But if the stressor was intense enough or long enough, sooner or later the stage of exhaustion occurred when the resources were depleted, and the rats collapsed. If the stressor continued, they died. You probably have seen people who seemed to be making an adequate adjustment, suddenly break down. Uninterrupted stress of enough intensity leads to exhaustion sooner or later in most individuals.

### **What can be done about culture stress?**

Much can be done to decrease culture stress and make it manageable.

- Recognition. Realize that culture stress is inevitable for those attempting to become at home in a host culture, and look at what factors cause you the most stress.
- Acceptance. Admit that the host culture is a valid way of life, a means of bringing Christ to the people who live in it.
- Communication. Beware of isolating yourself from everyone in your home culture, those with whom you can relax and be yourself, those with whom you can talk.
- Escape. You need daily, weekly, and annual respites. God made the Sabbath for people, so be sure you keep it. Reading, music, hikes, worship (not leading it), and vacations are necessary.
- Identity. Know who you are and what you will allow to be changed about you. Acculturation inherently involves changes in your personality, so determine the unchangeables.
- Activity. Since stress prepares you for fight or flight, and as a missionary you can probably do neither, you must have some physical activity to use that energy. Sports, an exercise plan, and active games with family or friends can reduce stress.
- Befriend a national family. Get close to a national family just for fun, not to learn or evangelize. Learn how to have fun in that culture.

### **Can culture stress be prevented?**

The answer to this is simple and short. No! Stress in general cannot be prevented—we all experience it in life. Trying to become at home in another culture is always a challenging venture. However, like other stress, it can be managed, decreased to a level with which you can live—stress without distress. The factors that help you cope with stress are summarized in the three enduring things mentioned by Paul at the end of 1 Corinthians 13.

- Faith. In addition to faith in God, faith in yourself as a person created in God's image and called into his service will help you cope.
- Hope. Rather than feeling helpless, having not only the hope of eternity with God, but also hope in your future, knowing that he has good plans for you, will help you cope.
- Love. Finally, having both God's love and the love of his people to give you support in the stressful situations you face daily, will help you cope.

Stress is a part of life, and everyone learns how to manage it or suffers the consequences. Remember that not everyone can become at home in two cultures, and it typically takes a very long time for those who do it successfully.

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