

Self Care by Ah Kie Lim, PhD  
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### **Introduction**

It has been said that member care providers walk along side missionaries to help them to grow spiritually, expand their resilience and durability, maintain their physical and emotional health and build up and encourage them (Hay2007: 188). I firmly believe good member care should be provided by the missions' organization and sending churches so that, missionaries can thrive on the field. I also believe good self care is very crucial to the health and well being of the missionary. It is the responsibility of missionaries to provide wisely for their own well-being while they are on the field. Self-care is not an individual project of self-help. It is the care for the self as created in the image of God and valued by God for its own intrinsic worth (Anderson 2000: 8). Care for self will add to the missionary's success in ministry. It is not taking time away from their ministry. (Appendix A is included to help the reader to evaluate their self care plan).

Jesus went away to take rest even though the crowds were pressing in and there was so much to be done. He took the disciples with Him, knowing the need to rest in the midst of busyness. He did not feel guilty that He had to take time away (Mark 6:31). "By his example He taught the disciples to minister effectively over the long haul by taking care of their physical needs" (Goetz 2001:127). It is important for every missionary to have a work-life balance. There are tremendous needs on the mission field. Missionaries need to know what they can commit themselves to. They are in for the long haul and not a sprint run. Jesus set the example of taking time away in spite of the crowds pressing in to have Him touch them. How then can the missionary care for himself or herself? What areas should they be watching out for?

### **Maintaining Spiritual Vitality**

One can never underestimate the need to care for one's spiritual health on the mission field. Scripture is clear that we will face tough times and persecutions. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, authorities and powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12). "The Gospel confronts all cultures in some way, and it is often threatening to people's vested interests, beliefs, values, and traditions" (Holloway 2002:445-456). Theology and understanding God almost always get challenged in the light of suffering, difficulties, field experiences, etc.

A lot of cross-cultural missionaries find it hard to maintain their spiritual walk with God because ministry, family and life's demands often take priority. Although this may be expected, "busy cross-cultural workers do need reminding that their first priority must be feeding on the Word of God and prayer. If this is neglected all other ministries will be fruitless" (Dennett 1990:23). Parshall added that busyness in the life of a missionary should never be allowed to become an excuse for the neglect of one's personal growth and walk with God. Missionaries need to schedule time in their busyness for spiritual life retreats to maintain a successful devotional life (Parshall 1988:75-82). They need to form healthy spiritual habits, i.e. having regular daily time with the Lord in prayer and studying of the Word. Scheduled time away with the Lord for reflection and meditation helps them to maintain their spirit focus as well as their ministry. No amount of work can replace time with God.

God is the source of spiritual strength and cross-cultural missionaries must learn to strengthen themselves in the Lord. "Our relationship with Christ is fundamental to our well-being and work effectiveness (O'Donnell 2002:17). The Lord sometimes provides people to strengthen us in our time of need, as in the example of David with Jonathan (I Samuel 23:16). There will be times when missionaries need to learn to seek strength and refuge in the Lord. Work for the Lord is sometimes not an easy task, especially when

things become difficult or when there are persecutions or when one does not see any fruits after years of labor. It is in times like these that missionaries need to find their solace in God.

Lareau Lindquist suggested some practical steps for missionaries to maintain their spiritual vitality. According to Lindquist, for missionaries to maintain their spiritual vitality, they need to seek the Lord regularly as their primary source of strength and supply. They also need to build a Biblical theology of suffering, for without it they may run the risk of being consumed by the problems and pressures that come their way or worst, blaming God for the hard times they are facing. They need to learn to triumph through their pain and suffering in order to strengthen the faith that is in them. One needs to commit to trusting God . . . and then rely on His faithfulness in their journey as a missionary.

Jesus' ministry was grounded and rooted in His relationship with the Father. Before Jesus began His public ministry, He enjoyed an intimate relationship with His Father. And, He was committed to and formed deep relationships with the twelve disciples (Huggett 2002:210). It is crucial for missionaries to not miss out on their relationship with God. It is out of that relationship that one can give to others on the field.

### **Maintaining Physical Vitality**

Missionaries like others in caring professions are prone to burnt out. Some of these factors can be avoided when one learns to care for their physical body. Often the "excuse" missionaries' give is busyness. Jesus Himself knows about the busyness of ministry, yet He told His disciples to get some rest, knowing the need for physical restoration (Mark 6:31).

Here are some preventive physical care needs to be taught to missionaries who are on the field (Dodds 1993:10). Missionaries need to build up their reserves. They need to have a weekly, twenty-four hour day of rest regardless of how busy they are. They also need to take sufficient time away from ministry and take a vacation. Our human body was not designed to function non-stop. A tired body often finds it difficult to hear the voice of God. Having fun and recreation is a necessary ingredient for all missionaries. It is an emotional necessity. God created this world for us to have fun and take pleasure in it. Another way of taking care of our physical health is learning to eat balanced healthy food and drink a lot of water to increase our ability to assimilate protein in our body (Coffman 1997:121-143).

Participation in a fitness program or regular exercise needs to be encouraged to keep physically fit and stay healthy (Dipple 1997:223). There is nothing unspiritual in taking care of oneself. I believe missionaries need to be encouraged to go for a periodic health check to avoid unnecessary major illness. Early check ups can help detect sickness that can be treated easily. Basic health care knowledge will be useful especially for missionaries who are working in isolated areas.<sup>1</sup> Often major sickness can be avoided with early prevention.

A useful book for all missionaries, especially those who are working in remote areas, to have is, *Where There is No Doctor* by David Werner [in ?] 1993, East Sussex, United Kingdom: Mellon's Books. This book covers a wide range of things that affect the health of a villager i.e. diarrhea, flu, skin problems, etc. It also teaches cleanliness and maintenance of a healthy diet. *The Traveler's Good Health Guide: A Guide for Backpackers, Travelers, Volunteers, and Overseas Workers* by Ted Lankester, is helpful and provides tips on how to maintain good health. Missionaries need to be aware of how

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Indian cross-cultural workers face different health issues that are unique to the Indian context. Missionary Upholders Trust in partnership with Primary Health Care Center have put together a health care manual for the Indian cross-cultural workers in India, "Primary Health Care Manual" (Ramasamy 2007).

to prevent diarrhea and malaria; how to avoid road traffic accidents; and the reality of HIV and AIDS and its symptoms and treatments, to name a few.

One way missionaries can gage their physical health is to honestly ask themselves some questions to find out where they are at personally in their own health and be willing to make changes. Some of the questions they can ask themselves are:

1. How healthy do I feel?
2. What does healthy lifestyle mean to me?
3. What changes would I like to make?
4. What do I add, take away or replace? (Suggestion questions from Steve Mayer's Leadership letter, February 2012).

Below are some things to consider as missionaries learn to take care of themselves to ensure they last for the long haul.

**Healthy Physical Habits:**

1. Junk food: 5 or less servings per week
2. Eat fruits and vegetables
3. Sleep at least 7 hours per night and get proper rest.
4. Take less caffeine: 14 or less servings per week
5. Exercise: 3 or more times per week at least 20 minutes each time
6. Maintain spiritual discipline
7. Practice intentional self care. Learn at least one new relaxation technique.

**Healthy Work Habits:**

1. Set realistic expectations and goals
2. Limit the amount of time on "impossible" tasks each day.
3. Do the important things first so they will not become urgent and focus on essentials.
4. Learn to train and delegate

5. Set boundaries clearly

**Healthy Relational Habits:**

1. Develop honest and accountable relationships
2. Make time to play and have fun with people
3. Do not hold on to bitterness. Keep short accounts (Foyle 1987:214).

**Conclusion**

Missionaries must learn to create time and space for rest and restoration to maintain their physical and spiritual health. Each one's needs are different due to their personality and coping ability. It is also important for them to set realistic goals and to include in their schedule break time to regain strength in the midst of their busyness. For self care to be put into effect, I believe each person needs to know their limit and be honest with themselves how much they can and cannot do. It is the responsibility of each person to meet their own needs and form healthy habits as they seek to serve the Lord on the field. Jesus the Master care provider has shown the way in that He cared for Himself and rested whenever He saw the need to do so. As His disciples, how much more we need to follow our Master's path in caring for our physical and spiritual needs.

## Appendix A

### Self Care and Lifestyle Balance Inventory©

*Source: Headington Institute*

[www.headington-institute.org](http://www.headington-institute.org)

Please note that this scale is not a clinical diagnostic instrument and is provided for educational purposes. It merely examines some of the more effective physical, psychological and spiritual methods of staying balanced and preventing burnout. If you have any concerns about your state of emotional health, you should consult with a mental health professional.

**Instructions:** In the last month, how often has the following been true for you? For each question, write the number that best fits your experience on the line before the question.

1. I have at least one full day off work each week.

(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) Always

2. I take some time for myself to be quiet, think, meditate, write and/or pray.

(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) Daily

3. I work for less than ten hours a day.

(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) Daily

4. I do aerobic exercise (walking, running, swimming etc) for at least 25 minutes at a time.

(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Once a week / (3) Twice a week / (4) 3 or more times/week

5. I do something I find fun (e.g., play a game, go to a movie, read a book etc).

(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) Daily

6. I practice muscle relaxation, pilates, yoga, stretching, meditation or slow breathing techniques.

(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) Daily

7. I share how I am feeling with at least one friend or my partner.

(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) Daily

8. I sleep well and get at least seven hours of sleep a night.

(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) Daily

9. I am careful about what I eat and eat a balanced diet.

(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) Daily

10. I drink at least 1.5 liters of water (approx. 3 pints) a day.  
(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) Always
11. I laugh without malice or cynicism.  
(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) At least once a day
12. When I leave work at the end of the day I can disengage and leave the pressures of work behind.  
(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) Always
13. I listen to my body's signals and recognize when I am becoming tired, rundown and vulnerable to illness.  
(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) Always
14. There are people who care about me that I trust, to whom I can talk if I want.  
(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) Always
15. I do something I find creative or expressive (e.g., writing, cooking, gardening etc).  
(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) Daily
16. I feel I have the training and skills I need to do my job well.  
(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) Always
17. I set and maintain healthy boundaries for myself by standing up for myself, saying "no" when I need to, and not letting others take advantage of me.  
(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) Always
18. At work I take a brief break at least every two hours, and switch tasks regularly so that I don't become too drained.  
(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) Always
19. I spend time with groups of people I trust and to whom I feel close who are part of a community of meaning and purpose (e.g., a church group, a group of volunteers, work colleagues).  
(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) About once a week / (4) More than once a week
20. My ability to communicate with other is...  
(0) Very poor / (1) Poor / (2) Fair / (3) Good / (4) Excellent
21. I feel good about how I spend my time and energy in relation to what is really important to me in life

(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) Always

22. I believe in myself and generally give myself positive messages about my ability to accomplish my goals – even when I encounter difficulties

(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) Always

23. I set realistic goals for my life (both short term and long term) and work towards them consistently.

(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) Always

24. I take good vacations (at least one two-week vacation every year).

(0) Never / (1) Seldom / (2) Sometimes / (3) Often / (4) Every year

25. I drink alcohol, smoke, or use other recreational drugs

(0) Three or more times every day / (1) At least once every day / (2) Three to six times a week / (3) Less than three times a week / (4) Never

TOTAL SCORE: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Interpretation Guidelines**

**0-25:** A score in this range suggests that your self care skills and lifestyle balance strategies may be poor, and that you could possibly benefit from developing a plan to change your lifestyle and improve your self-care.

**26-50:** A score in this range suggests that your self care skills and lifestyle balance strategies may be poor to average, and that you could possibly benefit from developing a plan to improve your self-care.

**51-75:** A score in this range suggests that you may have moderately good self-care skills and lifestyle balance strategies in place.

**76-100:** A score in this range suggests that you may have good self-care skills and lifestyle balance strategies in place.

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