

# Stress by Ah Kie Lim, PhD

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## Introduction

Stress is commonly spoken of and experienced by everyone whether they are missionaries or people from the secular world. Much has been written about cross-cultural stress among missionaries whether single or married. It may arise from parenthood, team relationships, personality differences, different living lifestyle, and the list continues. What things cause a person stress? How can stress be reduced and managed?

Stress can be defined as any demand or change that the human system (mind, body, spirit) is required to meet and respond to. Stress is therefore, a part of normal life. Without challenges and physical demands, life would be boring. According to Anshel positive stress helps one to be productive and stay healthy. Positive stress can provide zest and enjoyment, as well as attentiveness. It can provide energy for meeting deadlines, exercising (such as lifting weights or jogging), entering new situations, adapting to new challenges, and achieving maximum performance (Anshel 2013). An optimum amount of stress may also stimulate, invigorates, and motivates us (Williams 2002:143). So we do need some amount of stress to help us be motivated to do and give our best. Therefore, stress can be a positive motivating force to move us forward.

Stress, however, becomes *distress* (or traumatic stress) when it lasts too long, occurs too often, or is too severe. It is also important to note that what is distressful for one person may not necessarily be distressful for another. Your individual perception (how threatened you feel and how much control you have over the circumstances) can affect the degree of distress you personally experience. In his discussion of stress, Hart wrote, "Stress could just as easily be called hurry sickness. Seldom does the disease of

over-stress in and of itself slow the victim down — not until the final blow is struck and the ulcer, stroke, or heart attack has occurred (Headington Institute: Hart 2013).”

## Causes of stress

I remember traversing the cross-cultural bridge when I joined the journey of being a missionary to the Philippines about 30 years ago. Back then we did not talk much about stress we just kept plowing until we saw fruits. This is not to say we did not experience stress. I often wondered if it is over stated in this present time; or if people didn't talk much about it then, but now it is being brought to the forefront. Regardless of how stress affects a person, stress is our daily companion.

Stress is a common factor in missionary whether a person is a cross-cultural missionary or working in his/her home country. Stress occurs at every level of life; however, being a cross-cultural missionary and living in a cross-cultural situation increases the stress level in a person's life, as they have to adapt to a different lifestyle, cultures and way of thinking which they are not familiar with. According to Loteskey, cultural stress is what missionaries experience as they move beyond understanding the culture to making it their own. The missionary begins to accept the customs, becoming comfortable, and at home with them (Koteskey 2013). As a result this causes a level of anxiety especially during the initial period of adjustment. Some missionaries handle change and stress better than others. Therefore, not everyone experiences stress in the same degree or exhibits the same symptoms when they are going through stress.

Dorothy Gish in her article “Sources of Missionary Stress” discovered that the top five sources of stress among cross-cultural missionaries are; having to confront others, cross-cultural communication, support maintenances, work overload, and establishing work priorities (Gish 1988:379-389). According to Coffman, one cause of stress could be

lack of commitment to take care of one's self when the cross-cultural missionary is on the field. Feelings of inadequacy, insecurity and inferiority; inaccurate view of one's capacity; unrealistic expectations can also be factors that lead to stress. For some cross-cultural missionaries the different temperament or personality types that cause relationships strains and conflicts on the teams can also lead to a great amount of stress (Coffman 1997:27-62). Koteshkey further added that having dissimilar temperaments or too much difference from the average personality in the culture where the missionary is serving could contribute to some of the cultural stress that one may experience (Koteshkey 2013). For example, if the missionary is an introvert but working in an extrovert culture, it could put stress upon the missionary because of the expectation of the culture placed upon the missionary to be outgoing. Working in multinational teams can contribute to cultural stress too because the missionary not only has to learn the local culture, but they also need to learn the culture of their team members.

Sue Eenigenburg who worked in the Middle East and Robynn Bliss in South Asia wrote about their journey as cross-cultural wives and mothers. They shared that expectations as wives and mothers living in a foreign land can be a major causes of stress and burnout among missionary wives and mothers. Expectations can come from self, spouse, co-workers, leaders, and community where one is serving. Trying to live and be like the locals where one is serving and having a high expectation on one's self is one of the main reasons why missionaries are stressed out during their first term field assignment (Eenigenburg and Bliss 2010). The fear of being asked to leave the country due to visa issues can also be another contributing factor to the stress of adjusting to a new country.

When stress is left untreated symptoms will begin to show. The person could begin to experience lack of interest in life and in relationships. They may go through spiritual dryness. Another symptom of stress is difficulty in sleeping which could lead to the person over-reacting to normal situations. Eventually they will not be able to perform

normal tasks as they become easily tired due to lack of sleep and relationship strains. If left unattended for a long period of time the person could go through depression and experience other physical symptoms like digestive problems, gall bladder trouble, etc (Coffman 1997:27-62).

### Steps to recovery

We cannot prevent stress from happening but it is important for one to recognize and detect the symptoms of stress early in order for help to be extended to the cross-cultural missionaries who are struggling with stress (see Appendix 1). It is equally important for them to understand what factors are causing the stress. If stress is not dealt with, it could lead to burnout. We can learn how to manage stress and decrease it to a level where we can live in stress without distress. The danger in helping people to handle stress is giving “pat” spiritual formulas to overcome stress. There is no one formula, quick fix or even perfect steps to recovery from stress.

“Individual and cultural differences mean that every person is different when it comes to exactly what helps them feel refreshed and less stressed. For example, some people like to go for walks or climb a mountain to help manage stress. Other people find this a very odd idea, and prefer to talk together or to play team sports. Because one of the best ways to avoid high stress or burnout is to have balance in your life – to have positive times to balance out the stressful aspects – it is important that you know what types of stress-management strategies might work for you (Headington Institute, 2013).” Barry Austin who founded the personnel development school in Youth With A Mission (YWAM) discussed some of the ways of coping with stress and burnout. He said one of the keys to overcoming stress for the cross-cultural missionary is to ensure that he/she develops an adequate support system. Cross-cultural missionaries need to have someone whom they can share their needs with and pray with. Cross-cultural missionaries need to make sure that they have sufficient time away from their work to relax and rejuvenate

themselves. They must also learn to develop a hobby and not just to focus on their ministry. They need to take care of themselves by getting plenty of exercise and adopt an attitude of emphasizing the positive and not always looking at the negative. Cross-cultural missionaries need to recognize their weak points and danger signals so that they will know when to slow down or stop. A positive self image and knowing who we are in Christ helps us to have healthy expectations of ourselves and a healthy view of others' expectations of us.

Lastly, one great way to deal with stress, to “de-stress”, is developing a good sense of humor. Cross-cultural missionaries must be able to laugh at themselves and their mistakes (Austin 1998:38). In my early days in YWAM, one of my good friends told me that if I wanted to survive and stay on the field, I must learn to cultivate a good sense of humor because I would need it. I took that advice seriously and it has helped me through many of the stressful situations and difficult times. I have learned not to take situations or myself too seriously.

## Conclusion

Not all stress is bad or harmful. Stress can be a stimulus for our growth. It can expand our vision, allowing us to go beyond our capability and in some ways help us to discover our hidden self. Some stress also helps us to stay focused on our work. I find stress challenges me to give my best to things that I never thought I could possibly accomplish. The enemy is not stress, but how we pace ourselves. It is crucial we know our limit, learn to say no, know who we are as a person, and have a healthy understanding of expectations (within and without) so that we can handle the daily challenges of stress, which we cannot avoid.

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## Appendix 1

### Personal Indicators of Stress

Glenn C. Taylor (1991) Missionary Health Institute

#### HEALTH INDICATORS

- Fatigue and chronic exhaustion
- Frequent and prolonged colds
- Headaches (tensions or migraines)
- Backache, muscle fatigue
- Sleep disturbances (insomnia, nightmares, excessive sleeping)
- Gastro-intestinal disorders
- Ulcers
- Hypertension
- Heart disease
- Vague viral-like symptoms
- Muscle or skeletal pain
- Sudden loss or gain of weight
- Flare-up of pre-existing medical problems
- Increased pre-menstrual tension
- Injuries from high risk behavior
- Excessive sweating and urination

#### BEHAVIOR INDICATORS

- Nervous behavior
- Extreme mood and behavioral changes
- Increased consumption of caffeine, tobacco, alcohol, drugs
- High risk taking behavior
- Increased propensity to violent and aggressive behavior
- Hyperactivity
- Change in sexual behavior and/or dysfunction
- Withdrawal from activity
- Over- or under-eating

#### EMOTIONAL ADJUSTMENT INDICATORS

- Emotional distancing
- Paranoia
- Depression, sadness, discouragement

- Smoldering resentment
- Decreased emotional control
- Martyrdom
- Fear of “Going Crazy”
- Increased amount of daydreaming/fantasy
- Constant sense of being “trapped”
- Undefined fears
- Inability to concentrate
- Regression

### **RELATIONSHIP INDICATORS**

- Isolation from or over-bonding with others
- General critical attitude
- Irritability, impatience, hatred
- Rebellion against authority
- Immoral behavior
- Increased interpersonal conflict
- Increased marital conflict or conflict with children
- Reversals of usual behavior
- Mistrust of friends and family
- Inability to make decisions
- Forgetfulness of appointments, deadlines, dates

### **ATTITUDE INDICATORS**

- Self-condemnation
- Sense of total inadequacy
- Frequent spells of brooding
- Boredom
- Sick sense of humor
- “Tragic sense of life” attitude
- Attitudes of self-righteousness
- Hypercritical of organizations and/or peers
- Demonstrations of despair
- Expressions of false guilt

### **SPIRITUAL/VALUE INDICATORS**

- Loss of faith
- Spiritual crisis
- Sudden and extreme changes in one’s values or beliefs

- Loss of hope, anticipation
- Blaming God
- Spiritualizing of problems that may be physical, emotional, etc.
- Withdrawal from or critical of one's faith community
- Movement to legalism, rigidity, critical attitude
- Movement into "cults" submissiveness and denial of responsibility