

Preparing Missionary Couples for Cultural Stress

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Culture stress can make or break a marriage. My husband and I had a solid foundation for our marriage and went to minister overseas after eight good years of marriage and three children. I would have never imagined that I would find myself daydreaming about leaving him. With the language and cultural differences, the stress of dealing with ministry in and out of our home, keeping up with laundry, and cooking and cleaning for our family of six, I was ready for a trip to Hawaii—without him and the kids. I felt tempted to charge my trip to his account and let him take care of the bill, the kids, and the laundry. I wasn't sure if I even wanted to come back. Even the most stable marriages are severely strained in the context of cross-cultural living. Leaving the comfort of one's home and built-in support system opens up a marriage relationship to new levels of stress. It is not that the marriage is necessarily failing before moving overseas.

However, without the usual support systems (which may go unnoticed in the home country), normal stresses can cause greater damage. Issues do not change when cultures do. Therefore, it is extremely important for couples to be aware of the marital issues they face in their own culture and to begin to address those before moving overseas. Missionary marriages are not that different from other marriages. They have the same stressors. However, they also encounter unusual ones. Leslie Andrews lists some of the distinctive stressors missionaries face: ...many missionaries face some unique stressors. Among these are such things as cross-cultural living and communication in a second language; social and geographical isolation; political unrest; communication and conflict with co-workers, friends and family; work obligations and roles; and limitations of time and resources. (2004, 265)

So not only do missionaries have unique stressors, they must also deal with them in an alien environment. In fact, it may be hard for missionaries to distinguish between what is culture stress and what are normal stressors they simply must deal with in a foreign country. For example, say someone breaks into your home while you are on the mission field. Although this can happen to a couple in their home country, when it happens in a foreign country you have to deal with it in a different language, with different laws, and with paperwork which you may not fully understand. The stressor is the same. The process of dealing with it produces culture stress because it is alien. So even with normal stressors, there is an element of culture stress involved.

STRESSORS MISSIONARY COUPLES MAY FACE ON THE FIELD

Below are some of the more common stressors missionary couples may face while on the mission field.

1. Lack of privacy. Many missionary couples may feel a lack of privacy. They may feel like they are living in a fish bowl since people are always watching them.

2. Public displays of affection. In many cultures, it is inappropriate for couples to engage in public displays of affection. When a couple is used to holding hands or sitting close to show their love for each other, there can be some adjustment to learning how to show they care without as much physical touch in public. Couples must learn to be culturally sensitive as well as sensitive to their relationship and their needs.

3. Time spent together. In missions, sometimes the husband and wife are together more often in their new culture than they are used to; this can cause stress on the relationship. In their home country, the husband may have been on the job from nine a.m. to five p.m. and only home in the evenings. Now, he may be home more often.

4. Competition in language. National friends would ask my husband and me, “Who is better at the language?” We would often say the other; however, being in the same class and interacting with the same friends, we each secretly wanted to be better than the other. I could accept correction in my pronunciation and grammar from everyone except my husband. If he corrected me, I would get extremely defensive. We both learned the language. We also learned not to compete, but to complete each other.

5. Competition in ministry. Sometimes my husband would visit friends and interact with men in coffee shops and parks. I would be home with the children, trying to keep up with housework. Because he was committed to partnering with me in ministry, he helped with household chores and stayed with the children at times so that I could visit and minister to women in the neighborhood. We had to be prepared to bless and encourage each other in ministry.

6. Physical distress. Culture stress produces not only emotional and relational distress, but also evidences itself physically. Men often have an increase in sexual drive in order to cope with stress. Women tend to have a decrease in sexual drive as they adjust to a new culture and want more rest. During stressful times, when my husband was thinking about romance, I was thinking about sleep. There are other physical problems as well: exhaustion, headaches, and stomach problems. Throughout the first six months in our new country, at least one person in our family was sick as we dealt with heat, flies, and strange amoebas.

7. Emotional issues. There are also emotional issues which can result in more physical symptoms. Andrews details some of the emotional and physical outcomes: “Although many of these stressors are external stressors, they often result in feelings of lack of appreciation, depression, lack of self-confidence, low self-esteem, being overwhelmed, exhaustion, and fatigue. These feelings become internalized stressors in and of themselves” (2004, 265). Looking back, it is easy to recognize that all of these symptoms were present when I was planning to leave my husband. At the time, however, I did not associate any of what I felt with culture stress.

8. Feeling pressure. There is also a difference in who feels the most pressure during culture stress. According to Andrews,

Conflict within missionary families appears to be very similar to that present in non-missionary families. Interestingly, however, there appears to be a gender difference in the perception of stress. Missionary mothers report more stress than fathers, and missionary daughters report more stress than missionary sons. (2004, 266)

Although men and women both go through culture stress, it is the women who bear the most during culture stress.

9. Treatment of spouse. Culture stress also can affect how spouses treat each other.

Marguerite Kraft writes of one missionary wife who described the way her husband was acting toward her due to the culture stress he was experiencing at the time:

At times, my husband was insensitive, harsh, and demanding, especially after he started getting involved in ministry and I was still coping with adjustments and culture shock and trying to keep the kids from knowing that I was having such a difficult time. (2003, 53)

I remember treating my husband quite callously as I expected too much from a fellow culture stress sufferer. In our first home overseas, he went to the store with a long list of needed supplies; however, after several hours he came back with only a mop and a bucket. As I started to complain, he explained about the heat, climbing the hilly streets, and being unable to communicate in the different shops. I soon changed my attitude and became thankful for the two items we had!

Some wives are fearful that as their husbands interact with the culture, they will become more like the husbands in their new culture and adopt their lifestyle. Marti Smith shares the story of one missionary wife who was fearful of the cultural effects on her marriage:

“Because of the distance between men and women, I had this unspoken fear that it would affect Trent and our marriage!” In other words, Vivian could picture her life becoming more and more separate from her husband’s as he attempted to identify with and build relationships with men who had little interest in their wives’ lives. “What was that going to do to our relationship? Was he going to abandon me or stop valuing our relationship in order to be more local?” (2004, 201-202)

Husbands need to be aware of these stresses on their wives; similarly, wives need to be aware of the pressures their husbands are facing. Both are struggling, but in different areas, in different ways, at different times, and with varying degrees of intensity.

10. Spending time together. Missionary couples may find that it is much harder to spend time together. They are busy adapting to the culture, learning the language, and engaging in ministry. This pressure of prioritizing and using time well is vital for both husbands and wives.

11. Expectations of roles. Missionary couples feel their role expectations are not as clearly defined overseas as they were in their home countries. In the States, if my husband was home, he was available to help me. Overseas, when he worked from home, he was physically present, but unavailable. Some chores he could help with, others he could not due to cultural norms. Our roles had to change in order to adapt to our new culture and our partnering roles in

ministry.

12. Environment. A new environment brings its own stresses to bear on married couples. Smaller apartments, fewer conveniences, thievery, no childcare, and less time as a couple all combine to create and increase culture stress. One missionary couple noted a marked increase in a cycle of anger and frustration as they related to each other.

BEING PROACTIVE IN FACING THE STRESSORS

Husbands and wives are both working through culture stress. As a result, they often have little reserve energy to help their spouse. Mark Deckard has counseled many missionary couples and observed, “If they haven’t learned how to handle stress and pull toward each other to support one another, they often end up isolating, each trying to deal with it on their own.”

Although short-term experience in missions has helped some missionary couples better deal with culture stress, it has not eliminated it. To be better prepared for culture shock, couples should know that culture stress will indeed put stress on their marriage relationship. Culture stress will hit couples individually, at different times and in different ways. Couples should proactively communicate about culture stress, rather than simply react to their circumstances. Below are several steps couples can take to face these challenges:

1. Before leaving, couples should discuss their roles and expectations of each other. They need to think through several different scenarios to prepare themselves for language pressures, children’s schooling, and other issues. What if one advances more quickly than the other in language learning? How will they balance ministry to the family and to nationals? How will they address cultural differences?

2. Before leaving, couples should take time to learn all they can about culture stress, the country, the people, and the environment to which they are moving. See the twenty-five questions below.

3. Before new couples arrive on the mission field, teams already on the field should do what they can to help the new couple prepare. Team members should let the couple know what to expect and answer any questions they have. Once a new couple arrives, a mentoring couple should be prepared to walk with them through culture stress. Having a more experienced couple coach a newer couple could make all the difference in their marriage and their ministry. More experienced missionaries should encourage new couples to reduce what tensions they can. Myron Loss supports reducing stress when he points out, “Avoid childbirth anytime near cross-cultural transition. One survey respondent emphatically said, ‘To minimize stress, I wouldn’t have a baby during my first year—during language study’” (1983, 95).

4. While on the field, couples should find outlets to deal with culture stress. In many countries, this requires creativity, especially for women. It is often easier for men to get regular exercise and to meet people. Women might need to find a gym just for women or find a hotel where they can unwind. Wise husbands will make sure their wives get away from home for

occasional breaks. Wise wives will encourage their husbands to find their outlets as well.

5. When facing culture stress, couples need to turn to scripture. Marjory Foyle believes that patterns of culture shock may differ and that it is helpful to depend upon meaningful scripture to give us hope. When the pressure is on and couples are tempted to fight, she encourages them to do so wisely and in a timely manner: “Maybe you do sometimes quarrel with your spouse. Shelve the issue while you settle in, and concentrate on mutual support” (1987, 108).

WEIGHING THE PROS AND CONS

As potential missionary couples think about the culture stress they will face and become aware of the dangers they will encounter as their marriage is assaulted in cross-cultural ministry, they might be tempted to count the cost as too high and stay in their home country. Other couples think they are already prepared for culture stress. They think they can handle it, and as a result do not put in the time necessary to deal with it effectively once they are in the midst of culture stress. Deckard points out that some missionary couples can be overconfident when it comes to facing culture stress:

They hear about culture shock, believe it will happen, but approach it as “we’re in love and happy together, so we can weather any storm.” That is usually true in one sense, but they end up struggling much more than planned because, in their naïve idealism, they don’t take the potential struggle seriously enough until they are well into being bogged down by it.

However, for couples who are not overconfident, who determine to prepare for culture stress and commit to ministering together cross-culturally, there are some positive effects of going through culture stress.

One outcome is a stronger relationship for having gone through painful times and having shared difficult experiences together. Couples learn through working together that they make a good team. As a couple, they have a greater understanding and compassion for each other. They pray more for each other and have learned to appreciate and capitalize on their differences. Couples who make it through culture stress are reminded how much they need each other. They set aside time to be with each other. They also become more creative as they work together to meet their goals.

As couples handle culture stress and labor together, they can deepen their relationship and develop a stronger sense of oneness. Missionaries wanting to prepare their marriages for the effects of culture stress must read about it, pray about it, and determine to work through it together. An underlying foundation is a commitment to spiritual growth by both the husband and the wife. Each must pursue a deeper relationship with God individually and together.

There is no way to escape culture stress. For couples who faithfully communicate with each other and develop a plan for dealing with culture stress before they leave and after arrival overseas, they can be encouraged that although they encounter difficulties, their marriage and love for each other can grow.

By God’s grace, I didn’t leave my husband and go to Hawaii. We continue on, and this year we

celebrate twenty-two years of ministry and thirty years of marriage. Because we have persevered through culture stress, life experiences, successes, and failures, we have grown individually and together. We are determined to continue to build our relationship with each other and with God. And one day we might just take a vacation in Hawaii ...together.

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25 QUESTIONS AND IDEAS FOR MARRIED COUPLES TO DISCUSS BEFORE GOING OVERSEAS

Many cultural stressors face the missionary couple preparing to move overseas. To be better prepared, couples should develop a step-by-step plan for how they will handle various stresses which may come up. In the months prior to leaving, the couple should set aside some time each week to work through one or more of the questions below. Ideally, couples will have worked through all the questions by the time they move overseas. This scheduled weekly time should continue after arriving in their new country.

1. What marital issues are you dealing with now? How can you work on these before moving overseas?
2. What is your plan if one advances more quickly than the other in language learning? How will you help each other?
3. What can the husband do to make the wife feel loved and respected? What can the wife do to show respect and love?
4. How do you hope to balance ministry to your family and to nationals?
5. How will you address and decide about adapting to cultural differences? What cultural differences are you aware of at this point in time?
6. Each spouse should read one book on culture stress and share what he or she learned.

7. What do you know about the country, the people, and the environment to which you are moving? What are the best resources to use? Each person should examine one resource.
8. After researching your new country, share what you learned.
9. Are you praying together about your upcoming move? What are the things you know you will be facing? What might be unexpected? Pray about them.
10. What is your plan—include specific steps—for how to handle these different stresses together?
11. What are your expectations of language study?
12. What are your and your team's expectations of each other? Have you communicated with your team about expectations? If not, do so.
13. What changes are you expecting concerning your roles?
14. What are your current frustrations?
15. What are the biggest concerns each of you has about your future ministry?
16. Each person share ten ideas to show actively listening skills. Apply them.
17. Practice verbalizing your feelings by sharing one thought, one feeling, and one conviction.
18. Schedule a weekly time to continue to meet together after arriving in your new country.
19. What is your vision? Write out a vision statement for your family as well as your ministry among nationals.
20. What are some ministry goals you each have? How can you help each other accomplish them?
21. How often are you going to take breaks? When is your weekly day off? Plan at least three one-day getaways the first year.
22. Plan out the coming year's vacations and mark them on the calendar. Where are you going?
23. Call or write team members with any questions you have. Ask the team if they have any questions for you.
24. Is there a mentoring couple prepared to walk with you through culture stress? Write down what you would want from them and let them share what they expect from you. Go over it

together.

25. As you face many new tensions, what can you do to reduce the number of tensions you already have?

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