Coping with Cultural Stress *by Albert Shim (Cambodia Intern Pre-arrival Reader)*

*No matter how adept we might be at crossing cultures, no one is immune to the stress that comes with cross-cultural work and ministry. Even the simplest of tasks like paying bills and getting groceries can be frustrating, anxiety-provoking, all-day consuming events! The relentless stress affects us in ways that we are often either unable to articulate or unaware of entirely. But the effects are very real and the mechanisms we use to manage that stress can be powerful indicators of how well we are adapting to our host culture. We believe it is critically important (1) to understand that you will be under immense stress, (2) to proactively develop healthy coping mechanisms to manage that stress and (3) to be equipped to quickly recognize and diagnose those unhealthy escape mechanisms that work to insulate us from our host culture.*

**The Inevitability of Stress**

I’ll begin with this extended quote from Jim Cottrill published on his blog *Finding Direction* in 2012 and let it speak for itself:

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\* I was just reading about stress levels in missionary life. Now, you may have heard of the Holmes-Rahe Scale, which is one way health professionals measure stress in people’s lives. The idea is that a certain number of life events can build up the level of stress until it gets dangerous. Some of these might be the death of a family member, a child leaving home, trouble with the boss, change in social activities, a vacation, or marriage.

I’m not going to analyze the pros and cons of the scale, but it does say something about our lives and our ability to cope and react to change.

Back in 1999, Drs. Lois and Larry Dodds (of Heartstream Resources) were studying the levels of stress on the mission field, using a modified version of the Holmes-Rahe Scale. In Holmes and Rahe’s original study, they found that if you reached a level of 200 on the scale in a year, the cumulative stress would have consequences for some time to come. In fact, they found that 50% of those who reached this level were hospitalized within two years. The reasons included heart attack, diabetes, cancer, and other severe illness.

If ever the level reached 300, the person was almost certain to end up in the hospital within two years. So frankly, you don’t want to have that much change and transition in your life.

So, the Dodds wanted to find out what the typical missionary went through. As you might have guessed, the news wasn’t good.

The typical missionary had not just peaking levels above 300 – they had sustained levels over 300 – year after year. The typical missionary, in fact, had double that level – 600 on the scale!

Admittedly, the missionaries in the original study were Americans in Latin America, so we’re not in the category.

The other bad news was that missionaries in their first term had levels that peaked at 900.

These numbers are truly mind-boggling. \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

My wife Tina and I certainly found this to be the case during our first term here in Cambodia. The simplest task that once took about ten seconds through the wonder of online banking and bill pay, now took over an hour. We would drive across town in our sixteen year-old car, over pothole riddled roads, at times in monsoonal downpours and flooded streets, fearing flat tires (we had nine in a stretch of just a few months) or engine trouble (we’ve had our engine rebuilt twice so far...unsuccessfully), avoiding the cops (we were once pulled over four times in two days), doing our best not to sideswipe a moto, a tuk tuk, a food cart, a pedestrian or a cow in the chaos of Phnom Penh traffic, with a two-year old in the back seat crying for more milk, only to find that the office had closed early that day for rea- sons we could not fully ascertain because we had only gotten through the first twenty consonants in language class and the handwritten sign seemed to include a few vowels.

Now this is a most basic task that had nothing to do with building trust relationships, ministry, or communication of any significant depth; there is just no deep emotional engagement involved with paying the electric bill...except for maybe the anxiety associated with doing it all over again next month!

So, throw in the demands of parenting and marriage (if applicable), developing friendships and community, finding your role in ministry and your place with a new team, trying to participate in your host culture with the language ability of an 18 month old, adjusting to new customs and cultural norms (you know, anything associated with *real life*) all in a foreign context, isolated from your closest friends and family, far from those places of beauty or familiarity you now realize were sacred to you, separated from those things you found affirmation in back home and those things in which you suddenly realize you staked much too much of your identity in, and oh by the way, is this water safe to drink?

If your experience is like ours (and every other missionary we’ve ever met!), then you will face an immense amount of stress as you navigate life in your new host culture. And often and perhaps surprisingly, the further you assimilate into your host culture, the louder the dissonance, the greater the clash of values and norms. For this reason, shorter-term interns are often protected to some degree, as the newness and sense of adventure often, but not always, tend to dominate their experience. Still, it is important for everyone to recognize the symptoms of cultural stress. Commonly recognized manifestations include: • Anxiety and insecurity • Fatigue and frequent physical illness • Joylessness and disappointment • Purposelessness and discouragement • Anger, irritability and contempt for host culture • Dissatisfaction with team or organization • Extreme homesickness

**Coping with Stress**

Now whether or not we are conscious of the coping mechanisms we use to mitigate the stress in our lives, and whether or not we even recognize them as such, the truth is that we all have coping mechanisms, constructive or destructive. We simply cannot sustain such significant degrees of stress and inner turmoil for long, so we inevitably and effortlessly employ coping mechanisms, healthy or unhealthy, but especially those we have spent the last several years of our life cultivating.

And it’s critical to have the self-awareness and sensitivity to not only recognize the *symptoms* of the inner turmoil (noted above) but also the medications and anesthetics we are prone to abuse.

**Unhealthy Escape Mechanisms**

Perfectly legitimate escape mechanisms become unhealthy when they become marked by *excess*. It is the excessive use of some of the following that may be a signal to us that we may be struggling with significant cultural stress.

*Excessive Use of the Internet, Social Media, and Visual Entertainment Media*. This was the case for me. The amount of time I spent surfing the internet during those first few months of my first term was astounding. But I needed some form of escape, some *world* apart from the one that was so difficult to engage. I surfed every sports and news website I could find. I was never so informed about U.S. politics as during those first few months in Cambodia! But it was my way of shutting down.

Others tend to immerse themselves in social media: Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, or the social network *du jour*. Again, it must be said that there is nothing at all wrong with being wired and staying connected. These tools are actually a wonderful gift. But are you on chat or Facebook *all the time*? If there is no level of disengagement with your home culture, there is necessarily and correspondingly no level of engagement with your host culture. The same can be said of other forms of visual entertainment media. Netflix anyone? If you’ve just re-watched *Lost* in its entirety this past week, it may be a sign that you are medicating *something*.

*Excessive Use of Alcohol or Tobacco*. If you are a volunteer intern, you will have signed a statement agreeing to refrain from alcohol and tobacco during your term. There is some wisdom here, particularly in our context where alcohol use equals alcohol abuse and has cultural associations that are unbecoming for a Christian.

For longer-term missionaries however, the judicious and moderate use of alcohol can be a gift, for the pleasure and levity it brings among those whose conscience is not bound. But again, a perfectly legitimate coping mechanism becomes an unhealthy means of escape when used in excess. Anecdotally, an experienced missionary once observed that on the field she often finds both men and women drinking much more than they did at home, whether it be in the number of drinks consumed or in the types of drinks consumed (beer to hard liquor). Either way, there always seems to be a progression. Again, has a pattern of *excess* become the norm?

*Sexual Fantasy, Pornography, and Inappropriate Intimacy.* This is a powerful one for both men and women and one that is not subject to the criteria of *excess* as there is no such thing as legitimate, moderate use. And it’s one that we must bring to light particularly given our context here in Southeast Asia. Suffice it to say that if the use of pornography, erotic literature or any other means of sexual fantasy has become a pattern in your life for managing stress, sexual or otherwise, the struggle is likely to become even more intense in a cross-cultural environment.

In addition, the challenging and unique circumstances of cross-cultural ministry actually provide opportunities for emotionally intimate relationships to develop through counseling, discipleship, and the offer of empathy and consolation when “no one else understands.” Inappropriate emotional intimacy, that can and will turn physical, is a very real danger. That may seem dramatic, but it is the moment we feel we are immune (“I would never do that!”), that is the moment we move one step closer to falling in that area. Remember you will be away from your typical accountability structures, away from your safest relationships back home and thrust into an environment where accessibility and anonymity are the rule.

If you are prone to these forms of temptation (and our assumption is that this is true of us all), then honesty and accountability are so critical. There is grace. Lots of it.

These are just a few examples. We could mention vulnerabilities toward eating disorders, workaholism and so on. Our comforters are legion.

A first step then is to acknowledge the intense stress we face (it is a simple reality not a sign of failure), but it is just as important to be equipped to diagnose problem behaviors as signs that we may be struggling more than we realize. And it’s OK to struggle! It is not a sign of weakness; it’s a sign that you’re real and alive and just like the rest of us. So we urge you, even now as you may still be in the “honeymoon phase” with your new culture, to develop safe, honest, accountable relationships to help you in your journey.

**Healthy Coping Disciplines**

I prefer the phrase coping *disciplines* over coping *mechanisms* because it implies pro-active, intentional commitments.

*Rest*. Now much more than simply a discipline to commend, this is a command to obey: keep the Sabbath holy! But of course, much more than even a command to obey, it is a gracious invitation to accept: rest.

Sabbath keeping is much than a *refraining-from*, it is an *engaging-in*. What are we to engage in? Worship. Before the Sabbath was ever a law, it was an invitation for all of God’s creation to recognize the Lordship of the Creator-King. Sabbath is about worship, not strictly rest. It is about rest insofar as that rest is about worship. And our good and wise Creator, the knower of all of our weakness and vulnerabilities, well, he knows our frame. And he knows we *need* worship-rest. One benefit of being on the field is that you will understand this need perhaps more acutely than ever before. Commit to sabbath rest and cultivate this discipline even before you hit the field.

*Retreat*. Retreat is different from escape. Escape is an anesthetic. It numbs the pain, the stress and the emotional turmoil, without proper self-examination, prayer or surrender. Escape can and does relieve stress and is even to be commended in measured doses. A movie, a mystery novel, and social media can all help in constructive ways. Again, it is the excess we must guard against.

Retreat however is intentional, active, ruthless even. It does not numb the stress and the pain, it confronts it. And it confronts it in the healthiest way possible through disciplined self-examination, confession, and prayer. To need to retreat is not a sign of failure, although it is a sign of surrender: it is admitting that we are overwhelmed (which is perfectly acceptable!) and weak (no problem there either!), and in need of our Father. We believe in the importance of personal, family and team retreats and encourage you to commit to the disciplines of retreat, solitude, self-examination, and prayer.

*Community*. Community is critical to our well-being in *any* context, but especially in cross-cultural work. We are created for community. I think it’s fair to call community a discipline because it does take an intentional, ongoing commitment to engage and participate in community: to know and be known, to love and be loved, to inconvenience and be inconvenienced, to forgive and to receive forgiveness.

Now this community, as put-together as they may like to be perceived, is of course flawed, sinful and neck-deep in that same crucible of stress you are! But there is grace, beauty even. You’ll find that you are not alone, that your struggles are not unique, and that there are others who understand in ways that some of your closest friends back home will never be able to.

It has been said that those who love community tend to destroy it, while those who love people build community wherever they go. Discipline yourself to love *this* limping community (not the stained-glass community you imagine you had back home), because we need one another more profoundly than we know.

*Healthy Habits and Hobbies*. What is it that gives you pleasure? Reading or music? Writing or art? Whatever it is, now is *not* the time to go on an extended fast! You will need these outlets more than ever before. Moving to the field doesn’t have to mean parting with parts of who are you, so please pack your guitar, load up that Kindle, or even bring a box of novels if Paperwhite is not your thing.

One practice that has been helpful for me personally is physical exercise. It’s not easy to get to the gym with a full schedule and young children, but I never regret when I do. If this is your thing, please ask about gym memberships (we even have CrossFit now!) or find a pick-up game of your choice: these are not frivolous requests and can be worked into your “ministry” schedule as a commitment to self-care.

**From Surviving to Thriving**

Our heart is to see you thrive, and really to see you thrive in a context that promises stress, threatens isolation and invites struggle. Now, thriving is not the absence of trouble or stress or struggle. We began by saying that was inevitable. It is the discipline of surrender and dependence that makes joy possible even in the midst of joy-crushing circumstances.

We have seen too many of us fight nobly just to survive in this environment and we hope that this brief article is just the beginning and not the end: the beginning of honest self-examination, the beginning of conversations with others along the way, and the beginning of disciplined commitments to self-care.

And as always, as I hope has been made clear throughout, there is grace; a grace to thrive. It is possible! But ultimately it will not be because of our insight, discipline or cultural adeptness. It will be because of the all-sufficient, ever-present grace of our Lord Jesus working in us to produce fruit so beautiful and sweet and delicious, that it will have to be said, that *must* be of the Spirit of God!

Reflection Questions

1. Do you think you are a pre- or post-griever? How might knowing this help you cope with the various emotions associated with goodbyes?

2.How do you generally respond to the disappointment of unmet expectations? What are some expectations that you have for your internship?

3. What coping mechanisms do you currently use to manage stress? What healthy coping mechanisms do you hope you will have the opportunity to use in Cambodia? What potentially unhealthy escape mechanisms will you be wary about?

Prayer Points

1. Pray for meaningful goodbyes and for the friends and family you’ll be leaving behind.

2. Pray for insight into some of the expectations you’ll be bringing with you to the field and for the grace to hold to them loosely.

3. Pray that God would help you cope with the inevitable cultural stress in healthy, productive ways.

For Further Reading

One book that has been very helpful for many of us is *Expectations and Burnout* by Sue Eenigenburg and Robynn Bliss. Although it is written with women in mind, the principles apply equally to both men and women.

Another helpful book is Paul David Tripp’s *Dangerous Calling*. It is written for those in pastoral ministry but the principles can be applied to those called to ministry here on the mission field as well. Both are probably more helpful for those serving for longer terms.