



## Culture Shock, Adjustment, and Ongoing Cultural Stress: Becoming a World Citizen

By Dr. Dottie Schulz

Because of the ever increasing number of migrants, refugees and stateless in our world and because of the number of highly self-selected persons who purposely relocate to foreign environs for possible financial rewards, a desire to escape from home, to seek adventure or because of a call to serve others in some way, the topic of culture shock is never irrelevant. Though the information in this paper would be helpful to all who choose to live cross-culturally, the following is written primarily to and for missionaries from Western cultures, many of whom go overseas as families, which often means children and/or as members of teams.<sup>1-2</sup> Adjustment to a foreign culture becomes a family and/or team affair. It is possible that no one in the family or team will be in the same phase of adjustment as another family/team member, calling on all to exercise patience and understanding with each other. Those who choose to live in a different culture are or will be filled with concerns.

The missionary family/team, faced with the task of adjusting to cultural values, role expectations and behavior patterns for which they have not been socialized, is the beginning of an often expected, but surprising transition. Generally speaking, the more a person is plunged into the social life of a new and 'exotic' culture, the greater the 'shock.' The stress and anxiety of culture shock are related to the loss of "familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse." These familiar signs and symbols are cues that include the thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life.<sup>3</sup> These recognizable cues are the things that make life comfortable in the home culture.

The stages for cultural adjustment, sometimes following an initial 'honeymoon' stage are 1) initial shock, 2) defensive retreat, 3) acknowledgement of circumstances, and 4) adaptation and change.<sup>4</sup>

**The first stage, initial shock,** is characterized by disintegration. Acculturation feels like an attack on the self. Missionaries, who willingly move from their home culture to a host culture begin to feel inferior and inadequate. They are no longer articulate adults and they must depend on others for help, yet they remain outsiders. They do not belong.

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<sup>1</sup> For those interested in helping refugees, migrants and stateless in their transition into their host cultures, please consult the book, *Strangers in the Kingdom: Ministering to Refugees, Migrants, and the Stateless* by Rupen Dad and Brent Hamoud, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Pirolo, Neal, *International Who Live Among Us: Doing World Missions at Home*, 2013

<sup>3</sup> Oberg, Kalvero, *Culture Shock and the Problem of Adjustment to a New Cultural Environment in Readings in Intercultural Communication*, Regional Council for International Education, June, 1972, p. 177.

<sup>4</sup> Oberg, Kalvero, *Culture Shock: Adjustment to a New Cultural Environment*, *Practical Anthropology*, 1958, 7, pp. 177-182.

During these initial stages of shock, the stressors affect missionaries at the intellectual, behavioral, emotional and physiological levels. This stress is cumulative and multiple. It is the closest to insanity some will ever feel. It is often difficult to explain to themselves and to others back home how very tired they feel at the end of the day and how dreaded the morning becomes. Some of the psychological and physiological symptoms experienced at this time are: <sup>5</sup>

- Fatigue
- Depression
- Low self-esteem
- Fatigue
- Irritability
- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Nervousness
- Anxiety
- Fatigue
- Feelings of paranoia
- Crying
- Fatigue
- Restlessness
- Insomnia
- Over -Sleeping
- Sadness; crying
- Fatigue
- Concern for cleanliness/dis-ease
- Excessive anger over delays
- Self-pity
- Vague physical symptoms
- **FATIGUE**

Other things to contend with in this new culture may be the climate, the food, the water, the noise, and smells. Travel and transportation can become a big issue. In third world countries, the threat of ill health for themselves or for their family, especially for their children brings added stress. For those headed to one of the 66 nations in which there is limited or no religious freedom and, in many poverty-ridden countries, there may be the threat of violence, robbery, home-invasions, kidnapping, IEDs and government instability. Determining *Who is safe* and *Where is safe*, can be worry-filled issues for newcomers.<sup>6</sup>

In this new culture *nothing* happens automatically. Nothing is routine. Everything missionaries attempt, requires lots of thinking beforehand. All of their assumptions about life are of no use. They were warned that life would become difficult, and they thought they knew what difficult was, but they didn't know it would be this difficult.

**The second stage, defensive retreat**, is characterized by withdrawal. This stage has been described as a time of culture fatigue, culture stress, anomie, conflict and uncertainty. Missionaries try to reintegrate or fit in, but in their beleaguered state, it is easier to communicate only with others on their own team or who are of their own nationality or with English speakers, who once lived abroad. An inordinate amount of time is spent on electronic devices, talking with family and people back home. There is a longing for familiar foods, often unavailable or exceedingly expensive. It feels more normal to try and maintain, as much as possible, their own culture - their own feelings of what home should be. It is during this stage of cultural similarities and differences, that missionaries are apt to reject the host culture. During this phase, there is a tendency to stereotype others, to make negative comments and judgmental evaluations of their hosts. Temporary retreat can ease tensions somewhat and give a reprieve to constant interactions that are uncomfortable, but this is also a stage when missionaries can get stuck. Language and culture learning can be put on hold. The "endgame for expatriates who fail to effectively cross cultures either go home early from their overseas

<sup>5</sup> Connie Befus in presentation at Mental Health and Missions Conference, Angola, IN, 2016

<sup>6</sup> Donald Grigorenko and Margaret Grigorenko, Chapter 2, *Experiencing Risk* in Dwight P. Baker & Robert J. Priest (Eds), *The Missionary Family: Witness, Concerns, Care*, 2014

assignment, or, more commonly, they stay on, with greatly diminished effectiveness, often doing themselves, their families, and their organizations irreparable harm.<sup>7</sup> This phase is most dangerous for those missionaries, who chose to serve in more difficult places. Inadvertently, they may put themselves and others on their team or missionaries already in country in danger.<sup>8</sup> It is important to listen to advice from more experienced missionaries or expats at this time.

What brought the missionary to this place cannot be undone. Bridges<sup>9</sup> called this moment, the neutral zone – a time of emptiness, disorientation and disintegration that can eventually lead to reintegration and renewal. The neutral zone or second stage of culture shock cannot be passed over or skipped. The way out is surrender: accept the culture, warts and all and begin again to learn the language of the host culture. As Borthwick<sup>10</sup> states, “Fasten ‘your’ seatbelt and just listen.”

Several factors seem directly to affect the degree of culture stress/shock sojourners experience. These factors are delineated in the following formula by Dye,<sup>11</sup> former Wycliffe translator in New Guinea:

$$\frac{\text{Involvement} * \text{Value Differences}}{\text{Acceptance} * \text{Communication}} * \text{Frustration} * \text{Temperament Differences} * \text{Unknown Factors} = \text{Culture Stress}$$

$$\frac{\text{Acceptance} * \text{Communication}}{\text{Involvement} * \text{Value Differences}} * \text{Emotional Security} * \text{Spiritual Resources} = \text{Culture Stress}$$

*Increasing the factor above the line will increase the stress, while increasing a factor below the line will reduce culture stress. The relative importance of each of these factors will vary with the individual.*

Missionaries would like to decrease their culture stress immediately (skip disorientation, dis-identification, disintegration and the neutral zone), but it seems they have to experience some higher stress (top of the equation above) before they can experience less. Real effort must be placed into accepting the culture and learning to communicate, which means long hours of language study and practice.

Accepting ‘what is’ also means missionaries need to take care of themselves. In order to maintain their emotional stability and refresh their spiritual resources, they need to decide that culture shock is *normal*. They need to ‘speak the truth in love’ to themselves, to their families and to their team. Every day, they have to remind themselves to be flexible, broadminded, accepting, tolerant, and long-suffering. They need to learn to be comfortable with the fact that they are the aliens in this culture, that God loves the alien and has a special place in his heart for them. He knows they are made of dust and has compassion for them.<sup>12</sup> It is time to practice patience and allow time for paradigm shifts. Since fatigue is such a big part of this transition, they

<sup>7</sup> Storti, Craig, *The Art of Crossing Cultures*, Second Edition, p.xvii, 2001

<sup>8</sup> Donald Grigorenko and Margaret Grigorenko, *Ibid*

<sup>9</sup> Bridges, William, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life’s Changes: Strategies for Coping with the Difficult, Painful, and Confusing Times in your Life*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 2004, Pps. 130-155

<sup>10</sup> Borthwick, Paul, *Western Christians in Global Mission*, 2012, p. 54.

<sup>11</sup> Dye, T.W., *Stress Producing Factors in Cultural Adjustment; Missiology: An International Review*, 1974, Volume 2, 61-67.

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 103

need to heed good advice concerning stress management: e.g., take time to rest and take time to laugh and have fun. A merry heart does good like a medicine.<sup>13</sup> They need to take time for Sabbath, to read and meditate on passages such as Hebrews 11:13-16 and I Peter 1:16, to spend time in quiet and prayer. Psalm 42 and other songs of lament are easily prayed and often fit the situation. It often helps to write personal laments as part of their worship and healing. It is important for the missionary to acknowledge God as the author of this 'culture shock' process of 'becoming all things to all men that they might save some.'<sup>14</sup>

**The third stage is an acknowledgment of circumstances.** During this stage missionaries attempt to make sense out of the differences and similarities between their home and host cultures. In the first and second stages of cultural adjustment, they felt inadequate and inferior; they may have experienced some feelings of anger, frustration and anxiety, but now in this third stage they accept that they are the ones who have to change. During this phase there can be feelings of ambiguity. Changes in identity, learning about and sometimes accepting different values, leads to feelings of disloyalty. Discoveries about the cracks in their own culture and in their theology can be disconcerting. It is important at this stage to continue to believe not only in God, but to believe God, and to remind themselves that their loyalty is to the Kingdom of God and that their true citizenship is in heaven; that it is more important to become conformed to the image of Christ,<sup>15</sup> than to stay stuck in old paradigms.

**The fourth stage is adaptation and change.** As a result of their hard work of accepting 'what is' and putting in a great deal of effort into language learning, missionaries begin to feel more trustful and loving. They can laugh at themselves and any faux pas they make. They begin to understand more about their hosts and to enjoy being with and to trust the nationals. They learn what makes their hosts happy or sad, what they think is funny and what makes them angry, what they value. Understanding the language helps the sojourner understand things that were once bewildering. They are less frustrated with their lives in this new place. Those missionaries, who choose to serve in dangerous places, "learn to manage risks by becoming very familiar with their context. They develop cultural competence, build close relationships in their communities and become fluent in the local language, learning the nuances of language and communication – including gestures, facial expressions, and their associate social implications," which diminishes some of the risk in their daily lives. All who manage to traverse the four stages of culture shock and to remain flexible with the ongoing cultural stress, which never ends, become less ethnocentric, chauvinistic and nationalistic. They become world citizens, who have a broader view of the world and those who dwell there.

P.S. The better missionaries adjust to their host culture, the more difficulties they encounter upon return to their home culture. "Culture shock is the expected confrontation with the unfamiliar. Reentry shock is the unexpected confrontation with the familiar,"<sup>16</sup> but that is another article.

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<sup>13</sup> Proverbs 17:22

<sup>14</sup> I Corinthians 9:22

<sup>15</sup> Romans 8:29

<sup>16</sup> Befus, Connie, Ibid