Hans Selye, M.D., while still an intern, began noticing in the 1920s, that his patients manifested many similar symptoms even though they suffered from a variety of ailments. He attributed these symptoms to his patients' bodies' attempts to respond to the stresses of being ill. He called this cluster of symptoms general adaptation syndrome (GAS). Selye wrote 30 books and around 1,500 articles on stress and problems related to stress. He spent 50 years of his life studying and teaching about the causes and consequences of stress.

Hamilton McCubbin, Ph.D. and Charles Figley, Ph.D. wrote extensively on family stress in the 1970s. They edited two books: Stress and the Family: Coping with Normative Transitions and Stress and the Family: Coping with Catastrophe. In these books they use the double ABCX model of Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response, built upon Reuben Hill’s single ABCX model of stress management. These books are now considered classics in the literature. This model now has three layers to it and is called The Family Resiliency Model.

Stress theory and the effects of stress have not gone unnoticed in the area of missionary care. Much has been written by member care experts. To name a few among those contributing to our knowledge of missionary stress are Karen Carr, Ph.D., Joan Carter, Ph.D., D. J. Gish, Ph.D, Lois Dodds, Ph.D., Larry Dodds, Ph.D., Dr. Marjory Foyle, Ken Gamble, M.D., Laura Mae Gardner, D. Min., Jeanne L. Jensma, Ph.D., Darlene Jerome, M.A., Ronald J. Koteskey, Erik Spruyt, M.A., Esther Schubert, M.D. and Jan Yeaman, Ph.D.

Stress theory is not new. This article applies family stress theory/resiliency model to the missionary family. It draws on the work of many others.

**Missionary Family Stress**

The family is made up of individuals who together form a system. The family system has been compared to a mobile. When one part of a mobile is touched, the entire mobile moves. Individual stress can affect the entire family. How a mobile is touched determines the degree of movement. If a mobile gets caught up in a strong wind, some pieces may fall to the floor or become so entangled with other mobile pieces, that someone may have to spend some time untangling or reattaching the pieces. The mobile may need to be readjusted so that balance is restored. Missionary families undergoing major stress may need a similar kind of help.

McCubbin and Patterson\(^1\) defined a family stressor as a life event (e.g. death, parenthood, international move) which impacts a family in such a way that there is the potential of producing a change in the family system. This change could occur in a number of different ways. Family boundaries might be affected or the family might change its goals. Stress could change the way the family interacts, and with whom the family interacts. A family’s value system could be affected. Like the mobile, each member is affected by the hardships that are directly related to the stressor.

Many things can cause a family to experience stress. Family stress can occur 1) because someone is added to the family; 2) because of loss of a family member; 3) because of disruption in the family; and 4) because of changes in family structure.\(^2\) Examples of stress

---


\(^2\) Ibid
would be 1) birth of a child; 2) death of a family member; 3) a family member caught up in
addiction; and 4) divorce.

Missionary families face different kinds and levels of stress. Depending on the origin of the
stress and the family resources, the stress will be subject to different interpretations. Stress
can come from within or from outside the family system; it can be mild to overwhelming, it
can affect the entire family or only a few members. It can be short lived or continuous and
constant. The stress can be random or something the family has been expecting for a number
of months. Stress can come from man-made or natural causes. Adjustment to the stressor
could take a short time or the stress may be long term.

Fictitious account based on many true stories:

Joe and Mary Zendeling and their 18 month old son, Joshua, arrived on the field six months
after their team arrived. The team is made up of three other couples and two singles. One of
the other couples had a three year old boy and both wives of the other couples were
expecting. Mary, Joe, and Joshua stayed with the couple, Zach and Beth and three year
Johnny, since the wives of the other two couples were experiencing morning sickness. The
first thing Joe did was take care of some bureaucratic matters. They already had a visa to the
country, one for which they had to wait an extra six months. That is why the team did not all
arrive at the same time. They had to register in the city as residents in order to receive
housing permits. It took the Zendelings six weeks to get housing permits.

The culture the team has chosen to work in requires its members to show total respect to
anyone older than him/herself and there is great reverence for tradition. There is little thinking
beyond the present. Thinking in terms of the future is almost non-existent. The single women
members of the team are allowed more freedom in what they are allowed to do within this
culture only because they are white and are different culturally. However, the women must
conform to the custom of wearing only long dresses. They cannot wear pants in public and
receive the respect of the nationals. Though the team lives in a third world country and the
rate of change is slow, there are high rise buildings, television, movies, and automobiles. The
infrastructure has a difficult time keeping up with change. City dwellers maintain very close
ties with the villages they came from. The rapid change that has occurred in the nation has
caused value changes to the point that there is an influx of unwed pregnancies, squatter
towns and street children

The city the team chose to live in has around a million people. The nation has a total
population of around 20 million and the country has not fully recovered from civil war. The
inflation rate was around 15%. There are probably around a million people in the country who
are HIV infected. The AIDS death rate has slowed somewhat, but it is still high. The cities are
filled with orphan street children who seem to be emaciated and who learned early how to
steal and get by. Many of these children are HIV infected. The organizations Feed the Children
and Nourish the Children from the United States are active in the area. They provide many
packages of Vita Meal. One package will feed one child for one month.

Electricity is erratic. It is on for several hours and then suddenly it is shut down. The water
situation is the same. Joe was in the shower one morning all soaped up and the water shut
down. A bucket full of water is placed in the bathroom for just such emergencies. Of course
the water is not heated. When the water is on it is important to keep buckets and pans filled
with water, because one never knows when water will be available again. For several months
the water only came on from 3 a.m. to 4 a.m. in the morning.

Everything was different to the Zendelings. When they were students at Famous Christian
College, they took a survey trip to the field. Both went on campaigns, took mission courses
and had special training from former missionaries who had additional mission degrees. They
were about as prepared for this work as they could be. All of the men and two of the married
women on the team have master’s degrees in missions.
Mary and the other women have learned how to barter for produce at the open market. After Joe and Mary moved into their own dwelling Mary went to the market. She brought home a live chicken. She killed it, plucked it, cleaned out its insides, cut it up and fried it. The rice she purchased was filled with bugs. It took many washings to get bug-free rice. It took Mary a whole day to fix one meal. She was exhausted and still had a kitchen to clean after the meal.

Since moving to this nation, one team couple’s house was robbed, so everyone hired guards for their dwellings. The Zendelings’ container from the states took 9 months to clear customs. They lived on a few borrowed items from the other missionaries who got their containers after four months. The Zendelings let their containers sit at a warehouse for months because they refused to pay huge bribes to get their things. The Zendelings still hired guards because they brought electronic equipment with them from the states. Email is their life line back to the states - to their family, their sponsoring church and their friends.

Before the team left the states they had decided to work with a certain people group. Before Joe and Mary arrived, however, the team decided to work with another people group. Joe and Mary didn’t get to be a part of that decision making process. Joe and Mary felt all the training they did to reach a people group influenced by Islam had been wasted. Joe and Mary wanted to work with the people group that was rejected by the rest of their teammates. Discussions did not go very well. In order to maintain the unity of the team, the Zendelings acquiesced to the team decision. Privately, they felt betrayed.

Shortly after Joe and Mary moved into their own house, they made some progress finding language teachers. Mary met a school teacher. This woman was willing to come to their home and help Mary learn the language of the people group they will be working with. The former school teacher also helped Mary find some reliable house hold help. She now has a cook. She doesn’t have to kill her own chickens anymore, but she had to spend considerable time with her new cook, teaching her hygienic methods of food care. She also has hired someone to help with washing clothes. Joe has two language teachers. He meets with one on Mondays and Wednesdays and with the other teacher on Tuesdays. On Thursday and Friday, he and his teammates (men) go to the villages to learn more about the culture of the people group they want to teach.

The team experienced culture shock together and the team continued to meet once a week to plan their work and to keep each other informed. The two single women on the team, one a nurse and one nutritionist, however, reported that they sometimes felt left out of the loop. One had received a marriage proposal from a young tribesman and wasn’t exactly sure how to handle it. She felt the men on the team should speak up when these kind of things happened, because they would be listened to more. At the same time the women were upset that gender issues loomed so large on the field. The single women have been able to regroup and within the first year, they had set up a mobile clinic. Before they left the states, they went through some intensive training to learn how to improve local agriculture. They also took a course in how to help the nationals improve their own health care. It has been difficult for the women to decide whether to try and improve health care first or help the nationals improve their agricultural methods. Improved food production would improve health and the standard of living, but immediate health needs seemed to override these concerns. More than two million people in poor countries die each year because they have not received immunizations that are taken for granted in the industrialized world. This country has its share of these deaths. The women plan to hold workshops with the national women in all the villages to teach them how to improve their own physical health and the health of their family members. Of vital importance is their teaching on the AIDS virus. Talking about sexuality is a taboo subject in this country, but it is more acceptable when Westerners teach on the subject. To stop the AIDS death rate and other sexually transmitted diseases, these topics need to be addressed. As part of this training, they will help the women learn to diagnose common illnesses, using the handbook on health care developed in Ghana as a guide. In the meantime, the single missionary women have planted a garden for themselves and they taught the other missionaries how to plant and care for their gardens. It is their hope that nationals will copy their methods and improve their health and economic conditions through modeling these methods.
The wives with children are mainly caring for their own children, keeping things in order and directing the work of nationals who are in their home everyday. Once the children turn five, the wives will be involved in home schooling. They also interact with language teachers and accompany their spouses to the villages on Sundays. They teach women and children as much as they can. Sometimes they are asked to help both national and team families when sickness strikes.

When one of the wives started having some difficulty with her pregnancy, the couple had to fly to a more westernized city in another country to get to a hospital where European doctors were available. It was recommended that the woman stay in the area. Some missionaries in this other country offered the couple assistance and the woman may stay in the apartments of this church if she wants. The couple is in a quandary about what to do. Should the husband stay with his wife or return and continue his work with the team? He could visit once a month. Or should he remain in the apartment with his wife. The wife’s mother wanted her to fly home. The sponsoring congregation stepped in and brought the couple home for the duration of the pregnancy. The other pregnant wife was able to fly a month before her due date to a nearby, more westernized country with a modern hospital for the birth of their daughter.

Application:

In the fictitious story of Joe and Mary Zendeling, their son Josh, and their teammates, one can see many normative transitions. A normative life transition is one that is expected and one that most families experience. There are about 13 normative life transitions. Joe, Mary and some of their teammates have experienced the following normative transitions. They have

1. left their family of origin;
2. obtained educational credentials;
3. decided on careers;
4. married or decided to remain single;
5. made decisions concerning children;
6. children have been born; and
7. they have made international moves, which can be considered normative since the moves were planned and prepared for.

Each has had to deal with his/her own psychosocial growth. The two single women may be grappling with more gender issues than any of the other teammates, however the men are dealing with gender issues because of their youth. Because they are young, they must show deference to any male older than themselves.

To add to the dimension of normative stress, we need to look at how the families and the two single young women are adapting to the environmental demands of their international move. Environmental demands are physical and cultural. We want to take a close look at the immediate physical context where the different team members interact with each other and with the nationals. We need to look at their dwellings, their physical work environment, transportation issues, and where and how they shop and possible schools for the children. When we look at the cultural aspects of environmental stress we think about how the institutions in a culture influence this missionary team. On the local level, how do the team members interact within their neighborhoods, with mass media, government agencies, and the transportation system? Looking at team’s situation on an even larger environmental context, how does the religious life of the nationals, the political system, and the economic organization of the country impact the team? Each part of the physical environment and each part of the cultural environment impacts every other part of the system, which in turn impacts the team. The team also impacts the culture and the physical environments. The team is a system, each family is a system, the neighborhood is a system, and so forth. Imagine one huge mobile made up of many smaller mobiles. What happens to one part of the mobile system impacts all the parts of the mobile system.
Some members of the team will be working in more than one environmental system. The men may interact in more systems than the wives, but not more than the single women. Cultures differ in value systems and behaviors. The culture demands of the home culture that dictates how the team members interact with each other may be totally different in the way they need to interact with each other when nationals are present.

Some protective factors that will help the team survive need to be noted. Resilience is the ability to tolerate just about anything if there is a good reason for doing so. Families and individuals who are resilient can maintain functioning in the face of hardship and stressful situations because they are like elastic. The ability to recover quickly from trauma or misfortune and manage a transition successfully is called buoyancy. Elasticity and buoyancy are necessary traits of resiliency. Elasticity and buoyancy can be expressed by individuals and families in the following ways:

1) they have the ability to communicate and problem solve;
2) they treat others as equals – there are no one-up or one-down relationships;
3) they are spiritual, accepting and find meaning in their circumstances;
4) they are flexible – able to do whatever it takes to get through a situation;
5) they seek the truth – whatever it is;
6) they maintain hope;
7) they are hardy, steeling themselves to endure whatever needs to be endured, reframing threats into challenges;
8) they maintain routines as much as possible in the face of challenges;
9) they have a support group and network of friends; and
10) they are physically healthy.

The level of culture stress the team is experiencing can be determined by the amount of exposure the team has to the host culture and the level of difference in values and temperament and the amount of frustration encountered. Dye came up with the following diagram to explain how culture stress works and how to determine the level of culture stress any one individual might be experiencing.

\[
\frac{(\text{Involvement} + \text{Value Differences} + \text{Frustration} + \text{Temperament Difference} + \text{Unknown Factors})}{\text{(Stress Acceptance} + \text{Emotional Security} + \text{Inner Spiritual Resources} + \text{Unknown Factor})} = \text{Amount of Culture}
\]

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

A lot of the stress the team has been experiencing can be called normative because it is expected and most people experience similar events. If we only look at the normative stress issues, we would tend to think our team is doing pretty well. Add to this stress, however the environmental stresses the team is facing and the stress begins to add up.

The team came to serve the national people. They must be involved with the nationals in order to serve them, but involvement in the culture increases their level of cultural stress. Conflicting values between the host and home cultures will be evident in everyday interactions. The team must adjust itself to accept as much as possible the values of the culture, except those values that are directly in opposition to their Christian values, but these changes will increase the team’s level of cultural stress. The amount of frustration the team experiences will determine how high their level of cultural stress will be. The frustration of

---

sometimes having running water and sometimes not, and sometimes having electricity and sometimes not can be very frustrating. The inconvenience of everyday living naturally increases the frustration level of the team. The women have received help. They have found cooks and women to help with the washing, but there is an added frustration of having someone of a different culture in your home all the time. There are the frustrations the men are facing in the villages learning the intricate patterns for showing respect, and the frustration of language learning. Unknown factors might be concerns about health or safety. The pregnancy problem caused a lot of stress and needing to go home for a while or having to go to another country to have a child brought not only frustration, but fears about the adequacy of care. Having a nurse on the team helped ease some of the anxieties different members of the team might experience.

Decreasing cultural stress levels occurs as the team accepts their circumstances and sees their situation as normal. The more they learn to communicate in the language of the nationals and with each other the better their adjustment. Learning the language increases the team’s involvement with the culture which increases stress, but once the language skills are available to each team member, the less the stress affects the team. The level of emotional security each team member experiences the better each team member is able to cope with the cultural stress. Team members who have brought no emotional baggage with them from their families of origin are better able to accept the culture and deal with culture stress. The greater each team member’s inner spiritual strength, the better each member is able to cope. A close relationship with God which includes an active prayer life and the daily reading of scripture, helps the team members cope. Unknown factors could be frequent email the team receives from extended family members, mission committee members and college friends. Social support helps the team endure the frustrations that come from living in a third world country. Other unknown factors could be lack of or presence of team cohesion. All of the factors have an influence on the level of cultural stress each team member experiences.

Considering the stresses missionaries encounter on the field makes choosing the right persons to go to the field vital. The right person has a tool box full of tools s/he can reach for once on the field. Missionaries need a close personal relationship with God and His Son, a strong theology of both the Old and New Testaments, a personal prayer life and discipline to study scripture regularly. S/he needs an understanding of mission principles. Other tools needed are biblical conflict resolution skills, if married, skills that will keep the marriage strong. Parenting skills are needed when children arrive. Missionaries must understand what makes a family a strong family. Being physically and psychologically healthy is crucial for the person, him/herself, for the other team members, and for the work. The church has the responsibility to select people for missions who are able to deal with complex and arduous cross cultural stress. Once the right persons are found, adequate training is necessary. Churches can strengthen their missionaries once they are on the field by bringing in consultants who can hold a marriage enrichment seminar or parenting workshop. If someone deeply spiritual were to visit once a year to work with the team and the families and singles, it would be a real blessing. Missionaries are always giving. Conducting a study, that delves deep into scripture once a year, is appreciated by mission teams.

So far we have been looking at normative stress. Stress has been classified as normative (because most families experience similar stresses and these stresses are expected and short term) or catastrophic (because it is unexpected and not always of short duration). What would happen to our team if the country where they are living experienced civil war, terrorism, a hurricane, a tornado, earthquake or a tsunami? What level of stress would the team experience if one of its members were killed, kidnapped, raped, or robbed at gun point? What would happen to members of the team if one of the families lost a child to disease or SIDS or if a child was born with a handicap or learning disability? This is not normative stress. This is catastrophic stress. Catastrophic stress leaves people with a sense of helplessness and loss.
The chart, developed by McCubbin and Figley\(^5\) demonstrates how different normative stress is from catastrophic stress.

**Figure 2:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Stress</th>
<th>Normative</th>
<th>Catastrophic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time to prepare</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>Little or none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of anticipation</td>
<td>Great</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous experience</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of Guidance</td>
<td>Many</td>
<td>Few, if any</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced by others</td>
<td>Universally</td>
<td>Infrequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time in &quot;crisis&quot;</td>
<td>None or little</td>
<td>Little to much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of control</td>
<td>Moderate to high</td>
<td>Little to none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of helplessness</td>
<td>Little to none</td>
<td>Moderate to High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of loss</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>Much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of disruption</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>Much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of destruction</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>Much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of dangerousness</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated emotional problems</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>Many</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated medical problems</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>Many</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What would help our team members if they were to experience catastrophic stress? To adjust to the memories that accompany catastrophic stress human beings need to be around other human beings who can offer support. Social support and family support are important. Churches need to respond to their missionaries who have experienced trauma, with care and love. In times of disaster missionaries can live on adrenalin for a period of time. Elders and mission committee members can help missionaries who are dealing with national disasters by

- calling their missionary frequently, asking them to respond in some detail about the disaster;
- asking Godly women in the congregation to call the single and married women, always inquiring about the children;
- if someone can go and help with logistics in a national disaster, that might be helpful. Follow the lead of the missionary; another person might feel like an extra burden;
- after the worst is over, send the team (everyone) to a debriefing session;
- after debriefing send the team on a vacation where they can experience some renewal and rest.

Elders and mission committees can help missionaries who are dealing with personal trauma by

- sending a therapist trained in trauma management to be with the person and the team as soon as possible;
- calling frequently out of care and concern;
- following up with a personal visit to assess the situation;
- providing whatever help may be needed.

Keeping missionaries whole on the mission field is the task of the local church, elders and mission committee.

A substantial number of missionaries find returning and readapting the toughest part of the missionary life cycle. Problems returnees seem to have the most difficulty with are 1) theological; 2) social (including psychological problems); 3) cultural; 4) educational; 5)

---

financial; and 6) professional. The home culture has changed and the missionary has changed. Missionaries have adapted to a foreign culture, their value systems have changed; they have learned new ways of looking at things. At the same time the home culture has changed. Missionary children are returning to their passport country, but feel more at home in their host country where they have spent the majority, if not all of their life. Reentry brings a whole new set of stresses to the missionary family.

Churches can help their missionary families by offering missionary families

- welcome home party
- psychological counseling
- physical examinations
  - medical
  - dental
- financial counseling
- career counseling
- reentry workshop
- paid vacation
- stylish wardrobe
- six month severance pay with insurance
- continued friendship

Soldiers returning from battle receive honor for serving their country. Christian soldiers are returning from battle and deserve honor. The other amenities can be seen as a sort of G.I. Bill for services rendered.

Whether stress is normative or catastrophic, environmental or cultural, missionaries need ongoing care. Care should have a life span emphasis (normative stress). Care needs to be proactive, attempting to prevent problems rather than reactive. Missionary care should be available at every stage of the missionary career cycle, from recruitment to retirement or career change.

---