

Culture Stress / Shock

a) Introduction:

Every missionary experiences some measure of emotional stress as they begin to live in another country. At first, everything is new, exciting and interesting. But then the realities of living for a longer period of time in a place where you are a "foreigner" and in some instances made to feel like one begin to hit home. You don't have a return ticket.

b) Some of the symptoms:

Definition: "General symptoms occur such as loss of interest, homesickness, occasional disturbed sleep, loss of appetite and poor concentration. Fatigue is the commonest complaint." Marjory Foyle, Honourably Wounded, p.105.

- i) Intense and continual attention and thought about all the differences and what you left behind leading to depressive tendencies and the inability to concentrate upon your work and language study.
- ii) A critical, judgmental attitude towards life around you -- the way they eat, dress, talk, walk, smell, etc.
- iii) Abnormal emotional disturbance even at little things.
- iv) Impatience and anger in relating with the local people. You don't understand them, and all the feelings of being lost in this foreign country come crashing down on you. You begin to react angrily towards people who are difficult, eg. in government offices.
- v) Withdrawal. Instead of wanting to be with people especially the nationals, you withdraw to spend time by yourself and with your fellow-workers.
- vi) Physical & emotional tiredness. Created by the stress and inner tension coping with all the changes.
- vii) Guilt. For example, guilt at the staggering needs and situation of the people in contrast to your own background and well-being. Sometimes guilt leads (says Marjory Foyle) to other reactions:
 - * a sense of helplessness, eg. in regard to language acquisition,
 - * denial, i.e. blotting out the problem from one's mind,
 - * occasionally to making unwise plans, eg. asking friends back home to send lots of money to help the poor people; and
 - * disappointment or disillusionment, eg. making complaints towards mission leaders with sweeping generalisations, possibly threatening to go home. You found people on the home-front staff so obliging and helpful. But when you got to the field, you're treated as just one of many workers -- as no one special. Your dreams about being a missionary suddenly come face to face with some cold, hard facts of life. And you feel disappointed and let down, even betrayed.

Examples:

* People's cool attitudes. People aren't fussing over you and you feel not so important, whereas you saw yourself as coming to do amazing things for God.

* Feelings of disappointment with the mission leaders, i.e. they aren't the spiritual giants you imagined them to be.

c) Solutions:

i) Admit to yourself that you have a problem. You need to be honest with yourself. Realise that it has nothing to do with being a poor missionary or that you are emotionally or spiritually a lost cause! You have experienced a severing with all your past and now you are sensing LOSS. Feel the pain. Don't be ashamed of it!

ii) Admit to a close friend/confidant what you're going through. Be open about your problem. Talk these issues over in the early stages, NOT when they have become a huge problem. Ask your close missionary friend to stand with you in prayer. Tell him/her you need their love and encouragement. Pray with him/her.

iii) Be honest with God. Tell Him exactly what's going on inside. Ask God for help early so that you won't have excessive, abnormal reactions to the people around you. They will long remember the things you do and say in the early stages of your missionary life. And remember that you are also a member of God's family and the OM family and your behaviour will be judged by some as being representative of all Christians or OMers.

iv) Don't treat everything as a spiritual problem. Recognise your own emotional ups & downs. Don't see yourself as being "weak" because you are going through such a hard time.

v) Remember it won't last forever! While it may be hard to face for the immediate, you can look forward to the time when you like many before you will feel really at home in this new culture.

e) Delayed culture shock:

We need also to watch out for the possibility of "delayed culture shock" which comes about 6 months or so after arriving on the field. It may not be as sudden or as obvious but it has potentially even more unhealthy results, eg. unhappiness on the field leading sometimes to early return home. Again we need to follow the same principles as above.

Notes prepared by Graham Roberts, MTS, Nov.24, 1997