

Stress and Mission

When workload takes its toll

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Stress is a common word in the language of the 21st century. Many people are suffering from stress and its side effects. It hardly needs defining because we have heard the word bandied about so often. Stress is really a physical, mental or emotional pressure which affects the way in which we function if it is allowed to remain unchecked. Kelly O'Donnell, a key writer and thinker on missionary member care has said 'Stress affects us all. It is an inevitable and normal part of life. Too much accumulated stress, though, will sideline even the most robust missionaries'. It is too much accumulated stress which causes a problem and on the mission field there are many stresses, including that of workload.

It should come as no surprise that stress is a major factor in the mission world. Anyone involved in mission is likely to have personal examples of times when they have been stressed and quite possibly will have come across people who found the stress too much, resulting in them returning home or even requiring long-term counselling or medication to help them de-stress. A common misconception about stress is that stress is a bad thing. Too much stress is obviously a negative thing, but for many people a little stress is helpful for them in terms of creativity and achievement. Likewise, when selecting a mission candidate it is fine to accept someone who may get stressed but what needs to be assessed is how stressed the individual gets and how they manage and cope with that stress. It is the coping ability that is key.

It is interesting to read the results of this survey. A number of the questions related to stress and it seems that the survey participants are well aware of the issue and are actually expecting to feel it at some point during their ministry. As it is often said, moulding expectations is a vital part in preparing a person for mission service – if expectations are grounded in reality, there is less distance to fall when things don't work well and people are more prepared to cope with the issues. It is hoped that if people are expecting to be stressed, they will think in advance of ways in which they may cope with such a situation, putting into place practical steps to reduce stress before it builds up.

77% of those surveyed felt that demands on their life would be conflicting and overwhelming. This does not surprise me as the students are taught about factors involved in cross-cultural mission. They learn about differences with other cultures and the difficulties of working in a cross-cultural team. During college life there is a conflict of time between study, community interaction, church involvement, maintaining a personal spiritual walk and so on. Thus they are already beginning to experience what conflicts they may face in the future. They also meet individuals who have already worked in mission and so their eyes are open to the dangers. I think that this is also reflected in the fact that 56% thought it quite likely that they would have an unmanageable amount of work to do. From my experience, it would be fair to say that owing to lack of human and other resources, mission partners are often expected to do more than one job. There also seems to be a personality trait that makes many of us perfectionists and, because of a desire to do the best for God, we probably make our roles bigger than they need to be! This is highlighted in the fact that 84% thought they would put too much pressure on themselves!! This seems a rather high percentage but may reflect that the students are aware of some of the dangers and during their study there is a tendency to want to strive for good results and hence put pressure on themselves. Thus current pressures may have affected this answer. It may also reflect the fact that part of the course is related to personal development and helping the student to become more self-aware. In

addition to individuals feeling that they put too much pressure on themselves, 57% felt it quite likely that others would have unrealistic expectations of them and again this can lead to stress where someone may feel that they are not 'up to scratch'. Is your best good enough for your manager? If the manager leads by an example of working long, hard hours and always striving for perfection, this will often cause the team member to try and match these characteristics, regardless of how necessary or healthy that may be. Likewise, 84% expressed some concern that they would not be able to live up to the expectations of their supporters. Whilst this may not be a stressor related to workload, it shows that people are very aware of their supporters and the fact that they would not be on the field without them. This naturally leads to a desire to do the best for them, to show a return on investment. But this kind of stress is not helpful, adding to the burden of performance when in fact it is only God who needs to be served.

61% felt it quite likely that there would be demands on their skills/gifts /experience for which they would be inadequate. This picks out the issue that, again owing to lack of personnel, individuals are often required to fulfil a role for which they have no experience or training. I can think of several examples, from my own experience, where someone has had to take on a role in this way, for example having to lead a field team because the leader has left and yet they have never led before or been trained to do it. This usually results in intense personal stress and often a dysfunctional team!

Alongside this result, 79% expressed some degree of concern that they would prove inadequate in terms of the necessary skills. I think that this reflects a general self-doubt that many people feel about whether they really have anything to offer. In the Christian world, to be self-confident is often viewed as being "all of self and none of God". It is deemed a trap for the arrogant and something to be avoided. As humans, many of us naturally play down our strengths. When training someone in C.V writing and interview preparation, I nearly always have to encourage people to make more of their achievements and successes and rarely need to ask someone to tone things down!

Another interesting result was that 78% expressed some level of concern that living under scrutiny would be a cause of stress. I thought that this result was a little high. Whilst people would naturally consider living in a different culture to be stressful, owing to the huge differences between cultures and being away from familiar support networks and so on, I would not have considered so many to have thought about the concept of being scrutinised by others (especially the local people). This is often something which only strikes you once you are in situ.

I have picked out a number of the results which I believe relate to stress on the mission field. It is true to say that there are many stressors, particularly relating to culture, being away from familiar support networks, safety, health issues and so on. But a notable stressor, as we have seen, is in people's expectations and the realities of heavy workload. As I have already mentioned, a serious problem in the mission world is a lack of people to fulfil the great vision of many organisations. There is a vast need for God throughout the world. Whilst this is a tremendous motivator for mission partners to do the most they can and the best that they can, the results show that this is a great concern and my experience and reading tells me that these concerns are well founded. There are too many people in stressful environments, away from home, with huge roles and inadequate preparation and training.

How can an individual help to reduce their stress? One key way is to ensure people take the holiday that they are entitled to. Annual leave and home assignments are provided for a reason – to enable people to take time out, rest, re-energise and re-focus. These times are important in allowing space from a busy workload. Managers should also lead by example: if you are chained to your desk, you cannot expect your team members to do differently.

Mission partners also need to try to maintain a healthy balance between family life, spiritual growth, church and work. This is not easy but it is vital. I don't believe that God calls mission partners to work so hard that they neglect their families. If this is an issue for people, then it is important that they try to find a mentor to whom they can be accountable and who can provide them with assistance in keeping the scales balanced.

Mission organisations have a huge role to play in ensuring that their mission partners do not get too stressed by workload. It is important first for organisations to have robust recruitment procedures which ensure, as much as possible, that the right people are being selected. It will be necessary for them to undergo psychological assessments by trained experts, to try to establish an individual's ability to cope with stress and tough decisions will need to be made to only select people who are thought able to do that. Likewise, people should only be selected who have the right skills and experience. Good recruitment practice says never to compromise on selection. Preparation and orientation is then key to helping people mould their expectations and be as well prepared as possible for the issues ahead of them.

It is also important for organisations to place people in roles that they are suitable for, leaving posts vacant if need be rather than forcing the wrong person into it. We have all heard of the square peg in the round hole. Or was it the round peg in the square hole? Anyway, the greatest danger for a mission organisation is to put someone into a job, because the job is there, when that person is not suitable. This is asking for trouble, not just for the organisation but in particular for that individual, to whom the organisation has a duty of care. Organisations also need to look to mentoring systems, member care and spiritual input to assist an individual in handling the stressors that they face daily.

There is an awful lot more that could be said here. It has been stressful trying to decide what to say when there is so much more that could be said! It is important for people going into mission to acknowledge that there will be stresses ahead of them and they need to be armed with strategies to fend these off when they arise. But organisations also need to accept that such stresses do occur and that they are best placed to try to eliminate them.

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