

Dangerous Profession

Drs Larry and Lois Dodds



When you made the choice to enter cross-cultural work, you actually were making a choice for a hazardous occupation. I don't know if you've thought about that, but it's true. To be in any kind of human services, any kind of ministry is in itself hazardous. And then when you make the choice to go into another culture or perhaps, multiple cultures, you really double and triple the hazards to which you are exposed. So for instance, when you made the choice that seemed rather glamorous in the beginning to go work and live somewhere and learn a different language, you might have been idealistic about it. But the reality is now you have entered spiritual warfare as well as all the normal human adjustments that going across cultures means.

When we went off to live in the jungle in Peru, Larry was this glamorous young physician, highly trained. His whole life goal had been to get there. But when we got there, it wasn't what we expected for me, or for him, or for our children. Maybe you've had that same kind of experience. Your whole life has been geared to getting there, but now that you are there, it's becoming really hazardous. In today's world the actual physical dangers of life, crime and terrorism, these are all very, very real stresses in your life when you work and live overseas.

We've been collecting data for about 25 years on the kinds of stresses that cross-cultural workers face. And we've collected this data in about 40 countries from many kinds of work—office work, or health work, or village work, or translation literacy. We collected it from a wide variety of people, from many countries, in many countries. What we discovered is that there are actual patterns that relate to this kind of cross-cultural stress.

Larry mentioned previously that the kinds of stresses we experience affect us in many, many ways. What we see are primarily four ways in which you might experience this stress. For instance, maybe you are the kind of person that when you get really overstressed, you're going to break down and cry. And your emotions get all out of whack. Maybe you are the kind of person who just can't think straight. You say, "I don't know what's wrong with me, doctor, I must be going crazy," but you're really not. It is just that your brain, your cognitive function, is impaired when you have high stress. Maybe you are the kind of person who when you are really overdone, over taxed, you get angry. So it comes out in your relationships. And then if you are like me, you don't say a thing, but inside your body is keeping track. Then I start getting back aches and head aches and neck aches. I won't tell you all the other kinds, but it really does affect us all in different way. What we have to learn is what particular symptom each of us develops. Because when Larry is overstressed, it affects him differently than what my triggers are. So I've come to understand, as I've learned more about myself, that when I am really just pushed too far, there are certain parts of my body that are going to respond first.

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In a way, they are my warning signal that says, “Hey, Lois, you’ve got to cut back; you know the pressure is mounting up, something’s got to give.” I’ve learned to respect those triggers in my own self and back up, which usually means revising my goals. I’m just not going to get it all done.

How we manifest our stress is really related to our personality type. Personality structure relates to our personal history. What we have to realize is that stress can be manifest in many ways. When we are cross-cultural workers and when we are in any kind of human services where our goal is to fix the problems in the world and to help people, we have work that is never ever done. Some people can measure when their day is done. But if you’re in ministry, your work is never done, so that means realistically, that demand upon you is constant. It remains very high.

When we lived in the Amazon, Larry was a physician on call 24-hours a day, 7-days a week. Well, at the end of 13 years that had taken a huge toll on him. He could no longer withstand the continual demands, all legitimate demands—babies dying, women haemorrhaging. Maybe in your situation, because you have a job that is never done, it is just very hard to complete. It is very hard to say when I’m going to stop, when I’m going to revise my goals and so on.

How do we know when stress is really having an impact on us? Again, we need to be students of ourselves and to understand how do I, as a person, symptomatize my stress. For some of us, it is going to mainly be emotional. Our emotions feel out of whack. Maybe we cry a lot. Maybe we withdraw because it hurts too much. For some other personalities the stress is going to go outward. Now this is especially true if you are a very extroverted person. Your stress is going to get displaced on to other people and your relationships are going to get out of whack. Some of us take the stress internally. We look okay on the outside. In fact we can look very, very, very good if we are very disciplined people. We can still do the job, but inside our bodies are really suffering.

I had the experience of needing five physicians to tell me my body was yelling stress. Because you see I was very cool and collected and very disciplined, but my body just was going into all sorts problems in Peru in our early years. It did take five physicians to get through to me that my body’s symptoms were the results of stress because I told myself, “I’m coping, I’m managing.” But my body, was my weak point.

Then for some other people, it is going to be your thinking process—I just can’t think, can’t remember, I’m confused. Many people, at this point ask, “Am I going crazy? How come my brain isn’t working?” So these are all different ways that our minds and bodies and emotions show that we are under stress. What you want to learn is what your own particular trigger point is.

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Maybe you have to go to the bathroom every half hour. Maybe you get a headache in some way. Train yourself to pay attention to what is triggering your stress, or what is manifesting stress. We call that a sort of trigger point.

The other thing is to learn what our threshold is because how much stress we can take is very individual. So what we want to recognize is if the stress mounts up, where is the threshold over which we aren't going to cope very well anymore and we lay down in terms of our functioning? We must recognize our personal trigger points and our personal threshold. And above all, I think what we have to learn, is that we can't judge other people by what our personal response is. Because they may vary tremendously in how they express their stress and how much they can tackle and so on.