

Understanding Stress

Drs. Larry and Lois Dodds



Stress is a problem for cross-cultural workers. Some of the reasons are, as you think in your own experience, another language, another culture. Things don't work the way they used to at home. Picking up on cultural cues, customs of the people are so different. The living situation is different. So there's a lot going on that creates a demand of energy just to adapt. And that's basically the definition of stress—anything that requires energy to adapt.

Now, is stress really bad? No, because without some stress, we wouldn't do anything. So a certain amount of stress is good, and we all know this from our own personal experience. How many of us have waited until the last minute to get a job done counting on the extra energy that comes from that stress to get the job done. However, we can't continue to live that way. We'll just get used up because we are drawing on that energy all of the time. And we can really get ourselves into difficulty.

So what we'd like to talk about is overstress, when there is just too much of it.

Often times the amount of stress we have is created by our perception of the event. If we look at something as really difficult or hard, it becomes very stressful. For example, just think of this situation: you are on your way to an appointment. You don't know how long it will take, so you allow yourself an extra half hour to get there. The weather is wonderful and you are driving along and you know you have time to spare. You had a good breakfast. You and your wife are really getting along well right now. And then you have a flat tire. You can deal with that. You get out, change the tire. You know you have time to spare. You had a good breakfast and your wife told you she loved you when you went out the door. So, life is good. However, if you know that you are going to be late and you are not sure where the place is. It's raining and your wife said something kind of sharp when you went out the door, and then you have a flat tire. How is that? The events are the same, but the stress from it is created by our perception of what is really going on, so that's one piece of it.

Another thing is that stress is experienced in degrees. We all know that. For example, if you've had a good night's sleep and something happens, you just kind of pass it over. However, if it happens at the end of day and you are frazzled, and the kids have been on you, and this is just the last straw, it really creates a problem. It is the same event, but it is experienced in degrees according to our situation.

One of the really big principles in stress is that stress is additive and cumulative. There is insufficient time for recovery. In other words, the effects of stress added on to prior stress, gets added on to the previous one, unless there is sufficient time for the effects to go away. These effects can be physical. So these are some important things to know about stress, but also within these, there are also some clues as to how you can deal with it.

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For example the perception of it: If you've dealt with stressful things before this same situation—changing tires—you know you can change a tire in a certain amount of time and you get on with it. Sometimes we have to change our interpretation of the perception. For example, in the military, they train under live fire, so that they get used to hearing bullets and other things going off over their heads. So when they are actually in it, it is not as stressful compared to having it happening the first time. Stress can come from a lot of different things. Lots of time in cross-cultural situations, there are too many things going on. Too many demands—like people coming and asking for help. Sometimes because of choices we make, the pace of life can be very fast.

Physical environment can be very difficult: very cold, very dusty, very smelly. I remember when we were living in South America that the people would pile up the garbage for three weeks on the street corner. And somebody would throw a match and it would smolder. This thick, acrid smoke would go through the neighborhood for weeks. There was nothing you could do about it, but it's stressful. Noise—living in major cities. Lois was staying with some friends in Tai Wan on one of the floors very high up, but the horns were honking twenty-four hours a day and just echoing up those concrete canyons.

So a lot of things going on and sometimes, isolation, can be a very stressful thing. You may be the only family that speaks your language in the area where you work. There are a lot of internal things to past family issues that haven't been dealt with. Legitimate needs aren't being filled. And life scripts—the kind of scripts that tell you how you are supposed to behave, how we're supposed to think, how we're supposed to do things. Sometimes that doesn't really work with the situation that you find yourself. And a common thing for many cross-cultural workers is being a perfectionist. Being perfectionistic is very stressful. It makes large demands. So we will talk more in another program about some of these things and how you deal with it.

Stress is one thing, but over-stress is something to be managed. You don't get rid of it, you manage it. And you can take control in this. One thing I would like to say is that we can all handle a lot of stress if we balance it off with resources. Appropriate resources can help balance off the impact of stress on our lives.