The specific counseling needs of Christian workers living and working in a cross-cultural setting are not completely dissimilar to problems faced by the general Christian population. The normal stressors of life, however, are amplified and multiplied when living and ministering overseas in a cross-cultural setting. The effect on the spiritual and emotional wellness of a person should be taken into account when considering the counseling needs of missionaries.

Modern mission strategists continue to focus on engaging unreached people groups. Most unreached peoples are in remote areas of the world where the missionary is likely to be isolated from other expatriates or colleagues. Often, no other Christian believers live near the missionary family. This situation can lead to isolation, loneliness and discouragement.

The Christian counselor must consider the fact that cross-cultural workers face the challenge of learning to relate to self, others, and God without the support system on which they relied in their home culture. Keith Williams, pioneer member care consultant with IMB, compares this challenge with the race described in Hebrews 12:1-3:

For the cross-cultural worker, this may be interpreted as striving for the integrated life of faith and holiness that will make him effective in his service to God and to the people to whom he is called. To do this, we are told that we must engage in the dual process of throwing off or laying aside “everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles...” We may interpret “everything that hinders” as the emotional baggage, personality quirks, deeply rooted core values, and unhealthy behavior that the missionary may bring to the mission field with him. In addition, he often finds that temptations and recurrent patterns of sin do very easily entangle and jeopardize his effectiveness in ministry and even his career. These two constellations of issues generally become the central focus of counseling on the field.

Many missionaries have higher than average biblical knowledge, but lack the ability to apply this knowledge to their own life situations in a cross-cultural overseas environment. The workers might not see the connection between the Bible’s practical advice and their emotional or behavioral reactions. They might need help to refute erroneous thinking with biblical truth.

Some missionaries also have trouble living out the truth of their identity in Christ. The role of the counselor is to help the missionary identify the hindrances and sin that can impede effective ministry and discover how to remove these hindrances and entanglements to be ready to serve effectively as a useful vessel. (2 Timothy 2:21)

Before assuming that the missionary needs to hear a specific scripture, the counselor might initially ask, “What biblical truths apply to this situation?” This question will allow the Holy Spirit to work as the missionary is reminded to apply the biblical truth he or she already knows.
Often, when counseling missionaries on the field, time or resources are insufficient for the counselor to get to the root of an issue which is likely to resurface in the future. For example, one counselee experienced a form of group counseling through healing prayer with a group of well-meaning people in her host country. This experience was perceived as helpful in the short-term as she experienced the warmth and support of other believers. In the succeeding months, however, she experienced a deepening depression that became debilitating. The prayer time had surfaced memories of childhood sexual abuse that the counselee had never processed. The missionary experienced depression as a result of flashbacks and intrusive memories of the abuse, which prompted her to ask for help. She was able to grow to a new level of spiritual and emotional maturity over the succeeding years. If help had not been available through her organization’s provision of ongoing counseling on the field, the end of the story might have been very different with the missionary likely returning home.

Meeting the counseling needs of overseas workers can be challenging. The cost and logistics of traveling to a place where on-site counseling can be provided is often prohibitive. Only a few organizations provide onsite counseling and/or a place of respite for missionaries. Sometimes the best or only solution might be a counseling session via Skype or telephone.

Even from a distance, the counselor can help the worker discover and maximize resources available on the field. The counselor can help the worker to pursue and maintain a vibrant personal relationship with God through the regular practice of spiritual disciplines, including sufficient time for worship, study, prayer and rest. Interpersonal resources could include establishing a relationship with a mentor/discipler, accountability partners, church family (whatever that looks like in their missions setting), supportive relationships in their host country, and relationships in their home country that can be maintained through electronic communication. Books and other materials can also be helpful. In some cases, the worker should be encouraged to utilize sabbatical time in their home country (sometimes called stateside assignment, furlough or home leave) to do more in-depth counseling.

Often counselors will comment that missionary clients who have returned to their home country appear to be the healthiest people with whom they have worked. The counselor needs to remember that the stress of cross-cultural living will have dissipated for a time while the worker is back where living is easier surrounded by loved ones, church family and friends. Upon return to the field, however, the stress will resume as will the temptation to return to the negative ways of dealing with it. This situation makes it extremely important that the counselor understand the context in which the person works and what means he or she has used to try to deal with the stress while in the cross-cultural context.

**Counseling needs before arriving on the field**

Every missionary must go through several stages during their journey to and from the field. The counselor should be aware of the different challenges faced in each stage.

*Preparation and Screening*
Church leaders or sending agencies need to consider the spiritual and emotional health of the prospective worker before sending them to the field. Recently we consulted with a church on their screening process as they considered sending a couple they believed was called to cross-cultural missions. The screening process surfaced anger issues, marital issues, pornography use, and unresolved family of origin issues. If the church had sent this couple with no screening and preparation, what would have been the effect on this family? What might have been the effect on the testimony of the team overseas that they anticipated joining?

The spiritual, mental and emotional preparation of the missionary is of utmost importance. Two essential parts of this preparation include a strong, abiding relationship with Jesus Christ and an ability and willingness to acknowledge and process the strong emotions that cross-cultural adaptation and stress will provoke in healthy biblical ways.⁸

Abiding in Christ also means abiding in His Word. (John 8:31; John 15:7, 10; 1 John 2:24; 2 John 1:9) No matter how well-prepared the candidate for cross-cultural service might be, if the person lacks strong character and personal wellness based on an abiding relationship with Christ, the worker will not thrive on the field.

The challenges that face missionaries in cross-cultural ministry and daily life demand a serious look at the person’s spiritual maturity. Cross-cultural stress magnifies and amplifies both emotional and spiritual problems that can short-circuit a career unless resolved ahead of time. A counselor or spiritual mentor can walk with individuals through their history of spiritual and emotional wellness to ensure there are no unresolved issues that might erupt later under the stress of cross-cultural living.

Areas to address in screening include the following: unconfessed/unresolved previous or current sin; family of origin issues; unresolved abuse (sexual, physical, verbal or emotional); trauma; unresolved grief; emotional wellness issues such as depression or anxiety; history of eating disorders; marital health issues; children’s developmental concerns (including preteen and teen readiness for transition) and many more. A comprehensive written history can help a skilled interviewer gather this information. If there are any areas of concern, a counselor could be requested to follow up with one or more sessions.

It is more loving and also a more efficient use of resources to provide the necessary screening before the worker moves to the overseas setting rather than waiting until there is a crisis. This approach can help avoid the need to find counseling resources overseas or having to return the family to their home country for care.

**Orientation and Preparing for Transition to a New Culture**

Many organizations provide orientation to prepare the missionary family for cross-cultural living and ministry. During this optimum time of learning, a counselor can help the family prepare for healthy transition to the new host culture. Part of this preparation includes anticipating crisis management and children’s and family concerns that will be affected by overseas adjustment. Refining practical tools for maintaining spiritual and emotional wellness can make all the difference in the staying power of the worker. The counselor can help the missionary develop realistic expectations of the difficulties that will be encountered during the initial adjustment to life overseas.
A counselor can also meet with the worker during orientation to debrief the effects of the transition experienced to that point. Stressors that are already mounting can include leaving a secure job, leaving the church home, separating from extended family and friends, selling a house and possessions, moving to an intermediate transition point before going overseas or other changes in routines and schedules that affect the entire family. Debriefing these experiences and normalizing the process of meeting with a counselor during or immediately following orientation can help the worker to be more willing to reach out for help when debriefing or counseling is needed in the future.

**Counseling Needs of First-Term Missionaries**

The first term of service overseas is a time of constant adjustment to everything new and to the grief from having left the comfortable and familiar. Cross-cultural workers at this stage need to understand their reactions to the stressors and formulate a biblical plan of response that will be effective in addressing these adjustment and grief issues.\(^9\)

*The Reality of Cross-Cultural Stress and Culture Shock*

*Cross-cultural stress* is the result of change overload as one tries to learn a “new normal” of expectations within the new culture. This stress continues as long as the person is adjusting to the new culture.\(^10\)

*Culture shock* occurs when the individual cannot effectively process the stress of change overload and could become immobilized or unable to cope with intense feelings of distress. At that point the person’s spiritual resources and dependence on God are put to the test. The stress of living and ministering in a culture different from the person’s home culture causes otherwise small stressors to appear huge. What might seem a simple, minor inconvenience in one’s own culture can become the “camel that breaks the straw’s back” for the missionary suffering from cultural shock (misquoted metaphor intentional).

Most people who move overseas for long-term service experience culture shock early in their adjustment. When the worker is unprepared for the rigors of cross-cultural adjustment and culture shock, the results can be devastating. Even in organizations that do the best screening and preparation, some workers are incapacitated by culture shock and return home prematurely. The difference between the one who leaves and the one who perseveres seems to be realistic expectations, personal fluidity (flexibility might still be too rigid) and the ability to call on the resources God has provided for these times of stress.

*Control issues*

Many workers experience the feeling of everything being out of their control in the new culture. A person who has normally been confident suddenly feels unable to make decisions. The inability to communicate in the language causes life to feel restrictive (“I only know how to order a ham and cheese sandwich”) or complicated (“I don’t know how to tell the doctor what is wrong with me”). Missionaries often need help exploring what parts of their environment are within their ability to change and what parts are beyond their control.

Counselors can encourage workers to be careful about making life changing decisions in the midst of culture shock or difficult adjustment periods. Often workers resign during a
period of interpersonal conflict or due to a family illness at home. Many of them later regret this decision. Counselors can help missionaries experiencing adversity to gain a biblical perspective of such trials as God’s way of producing perseverance and character. (James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:6-7)

**Counseling Needs That Arise on the Field for Missionaries at Any Stage**

Stress is not only a concern for new missionaries. The multiple life challenges that come with living overseas can lead many missionaries to experience stress overload, leaving them more vulnerable to spiritual attacks and physical illnesses. Missionaries need to be reassured that their reactions to stress are normal. At the same time, they sometimes need help identifying healthy, biblical ways to respond to stress.

Some life events are positive (such as the birth of a baby), creating *eustress*. Other events are negative and create the kind of stress that is more commonly recognized *distress.* Both *eustress* and *distress*, can wear on the missionary’s health. Missionaries need to be reminded of the need to make adjustments, to deepen their walk with Christ, to take care of themselves as they minister to others and to seek help when needed. (Galatians 6:2)

**Spiritual Disciplines**

An important key to maintaining spiritual and emotional health on the field is the development of a routine of spiritual disciplines that can strengthen the relationship and dependence on God and help the missionary thrive spiritually in the midst of cross-cultural chaos. Ray Hicks, veteran member care consultant in the Middle East, observed a “spiritual dryness” that develops when the cross-cultural worker allows time with God to be squeezed out, as characterized by the following:

- Lack of a consistent and established prayer and devotional lifestyle
- Lack of fellowship with other believers
- Absence of corporate and personal praise and worship time
- Lack of an adequate prayer support base around the world for the specific needs and challenges of personnel
- Lack of spiritual preparation for the spiritual warfare present on the field
- Inability to prioritize life because work and ministry begin to take on more importance than “being with God”

Missionaries also can be some of the worst offenders of the fourth commandment. Although they are likely to be faithful observers of weekly corporate worship, an unrealistic work ethic might cause them to neglect the element of rest that is a part of the Sabbath.

Missionaries who are near or already experiencing burnout often need help understanding and embracing their limitations. Accepting human limitations is a part of spiritual maturity. Failure to accept one’s limitations will lead to a life that is out of balance. Jesus set an example of a regular life rhythm of solitude, rest, prayer, and fasting, interspersed with ministry, teaching, healing, and dealing with people. The work of the missionary will be
empty and fruitless if the relationship with God is not so powerful that it permeates every aspect of the missionary’s life and work.

**Interpersonal relationships**

One problem that often blindsides cross-cultural workers is the fact that the most difficult interpersonal relationships might not be with the nationals in the host culture, but with their own family and other missionaries. Two people under cross-cultural stress can have personality clashes that might not be so pronounced in a less stressful context. The missionary might need to learn to employ a biblical response to confrontation, conflict and forgiveness.¹⁴ (Matthew 18:15-35; Colossians 3:12-15)

**Anger**

A history of using sinful anger to cope with stress can be a major problem in the overseas context. One counselee had a father who had a problem with rage and had acted against him in anger when he was a child and teen. Under cross-cultural stress, this man began to act in the same way toward his wife. The focus of counseling was to help him realize that while he had been sinned against, he now was responsible for learning to express his anger in constructive and loving ways rather than destructive and sinful ways. He needed to learn to be angry without sinning. (Ephesians 4:26) Over twenty-five years later, this missionary is still an effective worker on the field with a healthy marriage.

**Marriage**

Marital dynamics may change on the field as couples spend more time together and become more dependent on one another. In some cases, spouses become the only human source of comfort, companionship and communication. This reality can lead to an unhealthy withdrawal from the culture or cocooning that will keep both spouses from developing friendships with nationals.

In other cases, the wife might be at home with small children while the husband has sufficient social interaction in ministry and desires peace and quiet when he comes home. Meanwhile, the wife has not spoken to an adult all day and can feel depleted and discouraged. This situation could be a recipe for disaster if they are not willing to put aside selfish desires, listen to each other’s needs, and selflessly express love to one another.

The marital relationship must be a priority for both husband and wife. Nothing is as sad as seeing a couple who followed God’s will and left their home country to preach the gospel to the nations now returning defeated and seeking divorce. The counselor can help missionary husbands and wives learn to operate within healthy boundaries according to their biblical roles by asking good questions to identify the attitudes and actions that are out of balance. This approach will help the couple restore a growing, vibrant relationship.
**Singleness**

Single workers have special needs and challenges. They sometimes experience a sense of isolation and loneliness. They may feel unsupported by other expatriate married coworkers or families. It is important for a single worker to establish a sense of family. One of Satan’s lies to singles is, “You are all alone and nobody cares.” In the midst of cross-cultural stress, it can be easy to lose perspective and forget God’s promise that he will provide for the worker who is seeking to pursue his will by going overseas.

All missionaries, especially singles, should be encouraged to find “cultural informants” among trusted national believers and/or veteran workers who can help them learn the appropriate ways to relate to the opposite sex, appropriate ministry roles for a single, and areas of danger and vulnerability. For example, in many cultures, it is unusual for a single woman to live alone. She may be seen as sexually available because she is unprotected by a family. If no one brings her under their protection she may be vulnerable to unwanted attention and even assault. One counselee nearly experienced sexual assault as she walked from a friend’s house to her house after dark. She had been told to avoid walking alone after dark, but had developed enough of a sense of security that she felt safe to do so. Her supervisor had not told her that women alone on the street after dark were assumed to be prostitutes.

**Unresolved issues**

Cross-cultural stress or critical incidents can cause unresolved issues to surface on the field if these were not addressed at the preparation and screening stage. The natural inclination (temptation) will be to resort to unhealthy and sinful attitudes or behaviors such as avoiding the stress by escapism, reverting to previous sinful ways of coping, blowing up in anger or distancing themselves from others. The outward behavior is a manifestation of inward struggles.

Sometimes the individual might think the issue has been addressed, but it could still surface again at another level. For example, the person might have had authority issues with his father as a teenager. He thought he had forgiven his father, but now he is experiencing similar anger toward his supervisor. This condition could also be seen in supervisors who have repeated difficulties relating to their supervisees. If the conflict is addressed only superficially, it will resurface.

**Ongoing Family Matters**

Missionaries often struggle between the needs of two sets of family—spouses and children accompanying them to the field and other family members left behind in their home country. Children of cross-cultural workers become Third Culture Kids (TCKs) with their own special needs. “A third culture kid is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside their parents’ culture. The third culture kid builds relationships to all the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the third culture kid’s life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of the same background, other TCKs.”

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Parenting courses common in the home culture through churches and other organizations are scarce overseas. The parents might need special help understanding how best to help their children at different stages of development. The children may need counseling for various developmental problems and other struggles.

Workers also might need help dealing with issues that arise from being far from family in the home culture. Adult children often struggle with decisions regarding aging parents. Parents of college age young adults might see their children having difficulties adjusting to life in the parents’ home culture and need help understanding how to parent from a distance. Grief over the death of parents and other family members can also be complicated by the distance and inability to travel home for serious illness and funerals. Many missionaries resign and go back to their home country during this “sandwich generation” stage when young adult children and elderly parents are struggling in various ways. They are faced with the difficulty of reconciling their call to missions with the needs of their family.

**The Pervasive Problem of Pornography**

Pornography is the most insidious weapon Satan is using today to bring down many good Christian workers. It is such a pervasive problem in our society today that new missionary applicants should not be asked, “Have you ever viewed pornography?” but rather, “When was the last time you viewed pornography?” This problem is not limited to males. The use of pornography is also increasing among women. The implication is clear—a serious problem in the general Christian population exists and must be addressed deliberately.

Missionaries who have struggled with pornography in their home culture will be confronted with the same temptations overseas, and, in many places, to an even greater degree. The pervasiveness of sexual content in all forms of communication media and the easy access to all forms of pornography is even greater in many cultures than it is in the United States. Cross-cultural workers need to have gained victory in this area for a significant length of time with strong safeguards in place and a specific plan for maintaining their sexual purity before entering the battlefield of cross-cultural ministry. Otherwise, the likelihood of falling back into old patterns is increased because of the magnifying factor of culture stress.

Christian counselors should recognize the addictive nature of pornography and work with the cross-cultural worker to break the bonds of this sin. The individual should be encouraged to write a sexual purity strategy that focuses on both external and internal elements. *External elements* include safeguards such as internet filters, placement of the computer in an open area visible to others, and reporting to accountability partners. *Internal elements* are more important, focusing on the spiritual disciplines (including Bible study and Scripture memory), awareness of personal thoughts and feelings, emotional connectedness with others, and an understanding of addiction (specifically sexual addiction).17

**Counseling Needs of Missionaries Upon Reentry**

Many missionaries have trouble reentering their home culture. This reaction is sometimes referred to as reverse culture shock. Adapting to the changes that occurred while the cross-cultural worker was overseas can cause change overload similar to that reaction
experienced overseas. Reconciling differences in the cultures, such as the materialism of the first world as opposed to the poverty and suffering of third world cultures, can create dissonance. For TCKs who have lived most of their lives overseas, the parents’ home culture is a new culture. They are not experiencing reverse culture shock, but primary culture shock. Parents and TCKs might feel out of sync with the sending church because they have seen a different level of commitment and stewardship in believers who have had to make a more tangible sacrifice to follow Jesus Christ.

One missionary returning from a two-year assignment reported that her parents did not want to hear about her “little adventure” and expected her to return to the status quo she had left. They were unwilling to acknowledge the growth and change that had occurred in her after having spent two years living and working among an unreached people group. She needed a safe place to debrief and express the emotions related to reentry.

**Debriefing is Essential**

Missionaries need time to unpack their stories. As the missionaries exit the field and reenter the home culture, some of them may find it sufficient to have a counselor who provides an extended time of listening empathetically and asking good clarifying questions. This service is especially important if the person will not be returning to the field, whether by their own choice or due to circumstances beyond their control.

Others may have lived through traumatic events that are foreign to the local pastor or biblical counselor such as war, government detention and interrogation, being expelled from one’s adopted country and culture, kidnapping and hostage situations, violent crimes (either against the individual or witnessed by the individual and against someone else), personal injury, the unexpected death of a love one or national friend, theft at gunpoint, natural disasters or other on-going crises such as hunger, poverty and disease. Political instability in many countries can leave the family with the stress of possibly having to leave on very short notice. As cross-cultural workers are moving to engage the edges of lostness, it stands to reason that they will be in areas where they and their families are exposed to constant threats.\(^\text{18}\)

Any of these scenarios could be the cause of multiple losses and the resulting grief. For example, upon being expelled from the country of service, the missionary will feel immense grief after having invested so much time and energy learning the language and customs of the host culture and building relationships, and then having to leave friends and surrogate family that the missionary might never see again—in addition possibly to having lost all their family’s personal belongings. Individuals who have experienced any crisis needs the opportunity to debrief and share both their story and the emotions provoked by the incident.

Missionaries are sometimes reluctant to share their hearts since others rarely take time to listen and empathize. In spite of the fact that the counselor might not have a common experience, this condition does not preclude an opportunity to minister effectively to the cross-cultural missionary. This issue cannot, however, be covered in one fifty-minute appointment. The counselor should allow the missionaries ample time to debrief, providing a safe place for them to open up and share their stories. In doing so, the counselor should be quick to listen and slow to speak. (James 1:19) Even without having a common experience, the counselor can “rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.” (Romans 12:15)
Member care consultants can also benefit from debriefing. Counselors in the home culture can minister to these field-based counselors who often carry secondary trauma. Counselors in the home culture can also provide supervision for field-based counselors, offering insight and input for difficult cases.

CONCLUSION

It is important to understand that living and ministering overseas in a cross-cultural context magnifies the effects of the stressors that come with everyday living. It is not, however, a requirement that the counselor must have lived in a cross-cultural setting to minister effectively to cross-cultural workers. The counselor can help the missionary build, rebuild or maintain personal wellness based on an abiding relationship with Christ that grows from abiding in his Word. That, we pray, will lead to longer, more effective and more fruitful ministries.

Selected Bibliography


Larry and Susan Gay have spent the last 34 years working cross-culturally and/or ministering to cross-cultural workers. Susan is currently Member Care Consultant to the Personnel Selection Team and Larry is Personnel Development Consultant with the IMB. They have three adult sons who grew up overseas, one daughter-by marriage and three grandchildren.

Christian workers living and working in a cross-cultural setting include missionaries, humanitarian aid workers, non-governmental agency (NGO) workers and other expatriate Christians. “Missionaries” will be used as a synonym for expatriate Christian workers or cross-cultural Christian workers.

Counselors working with cross-cultural workers may include pastors and professional Christian counselors as well as Christian lay counselors. Some of these counselors live and work overseas, while others might provide counseling for cross-cultural workers while on short-term trips, through electronic means or while the worker is on leave or upon return to their home culture. “Counselor” in this article refers to all these.

For the purpose of this article “member care consultants” are counselors provided by the sending agency to serve field personnel.

The International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention (IMB).

Keith Williams, A Model for Using Spiritual Direction as a Component of Missionary Member Care in the Pacific Rim Region of the International Mission Board. (Louisville: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005), 1.


Duane Hammack, Member Care and Personal Wellness, PowerPoint presentation. As member care consultant with IMB, Hammack has referred to these two essential parts of preparation in his presentations to prospective missionaries.

A distinction should be made between “reaction” and “response.” Although the dictionary uses each of the words in the definition of the other, there is a subtle difference in the two definitions. Reaction implies an immediate or sudden action or attitude after something happens or something is said. Response implies a more measured action that might be different from the immediate reaction after something happens or is said. A measured response might require more time and thought than an immediate reaction. This distinction is important in helping the missionary formulate a biblical response to cross-cultural stress and culture shock.

“Health” in this context includes physical, emotional and spiritual health (body, mind and spirit).


International Training Partners offers five-day, biblically-based workshops on Sharpening Your Interpersonal Skills (SYIS). For more information see http://itpartners.org/, (accessed August 12, 2014).


The unique counseling needs of TCKs merits a full, separate article.

Duane Hammack has developed an outline used by IMB personnel consultants to coach applicants who have a recent history of pornography use to write their own personal sexual purity strategies focusing on both internal and external elements.