CROSS CULTURAL STRESS

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Cross cultural stress is a complex, multivariate experience which describes the psychological impact of being in contact and integrating into a different culture.

Known also as culture stress, occurs to varied and many groups such as immigrants, business people and their families on overseas assignments, refugees, foreign students, and residents of the host culture among others. The multicultural nature of the global village brings along the potential for cross-cultural conflict, making cross cultural stress quite an important source of cultural fatigue and shock for many. Cross cultural stress responses can elicit psychological crises and/or social dysfunction when reactions to cultural differences become barriers to performance.

The factors surrounding cross cultural stress are multifaceted, and include individual psychological differences, previous acculturation experiences, social support networks, and other multicultural integration experiences. My personal point of view is that cross cultural stress is normal when experiencing differences in the host culture.

Stress refers to any event in which environmental demands, internal demands, or both tax or exceed the adaptive resources of an individual. Our actual understanding of stress is broad enough to transcend physiological reactions and include social and cultural forces. The concept cross cultural stress emphasizes them, although those experiencing it may not recognize it or respond effectively to the issues confronting them.

Cross cultural stress can be experienced in stages: 1) Honeymoon phase, characterized by a sense of relief and sometimes joy; 2) Crisis, a phase where post decisional regret is shown; 3) Psychological symptoms, where anxiety, confusion, etc. are manifested; 4) Acceptance and reorganization, when the acculturation process begins.

A significant stressor under cultural transition is the experience of loss. Real or potential loss of familiar cultural environments have pervasive, intensive, long term implications. Loss can impact the self and individuals can suffer from identity loss. Implications for this kind of suffering is that one finds as an underlying base, thinking dysfunction. People suffer cognitive overload and show behavioral inadequacies. Many times individuals manifest symptoms such

as strain, anxiety, confusion, disorientation, emotional upheaval and impotence resulting from the loss of an understood way of life and the assumptions behind it.

Along with the above symptoms, a pervasive loss of information can come for those suffering cross cultural stress. This loss of information leads individuals to feel anxious, uncertain about their social status and their role in the community. A lack of clarity in the environment makes daily decision making and problem solving difficult. People's responses become based on their values, beliefs and general experiences in order to understand what is happening around them. Simple things become complex and such an experience leads to feelings of distress. The greater the ambiguity, the greater the anxiety and loss of control. As people experience loss of control, possibilities of depression increase because of the individual's sense of helplessness and their willingness and ability to cope with their immediate life challenges decrease. Of course some people are affected more than others. Common symptoms are oversleeping, withdrawal, eating disorders, compulsive drinking, irritability and hostility, marital and family conflicts, intense episodes of crying, and loss of concentration and effectiveness at work.

On the other hand, indigenous populations need as well to be taken into account. Local people when exposed to foreigners can show signs of cultural fatigue. They experience the guest's values as a challenge to their local values, assumptions and established ways of doing things. These experiences also cause strain and anxiety among the locals, resulting in confusion and impotence from the misunderstandings of cultural cues and social rules.

A confrontation of two different belief and value systems can only contribute to the acquired sense of disorientation and conflict with one's immediate environment. The managing of the adaptation process becomes a priority in order to reduce stress reactions and to allow for a basis upon which insight, transformation and growth can occur. Although there are no general recipes and many aspects of managing cross cultural stress vary as a function of individuals' differences and social contexts, some experiences are generally and commonly recognized. As already in New Roots discussed (Spring 1995 issue), a first step in the process of accommodation (acculturation) is self knowledge and becoming tolerant of the host culture.

For the successful management of cultural stress, particularly when the experience is one of total cultural immersion, a sequence of issues need to be addressed through:

1. Cross Cultural Training: Assessment of one's ability to adapt to a new culture is a useful first step before going to a new culture. Individuals vary in their disposition to change and accommodate to the rigors of a new culture. It also helps to foresee the common problems encountered in living in a foreign country. Explore your values and understand the nature of social behavior in your host country. Psychological preparation and support is a must because you will find yourself in an outsider status.

2. Cross Cultural Coaching: Apart from assuring your physical well being in your new host country and finding how to meet basic fundamentals such as buying food, transportation, etc. you will need to produce effective foreign cultural behavior. Stress management will be essential in order to cope with ambiguity and be able to foster adaptation. Establishment of a social network is a must in order to successfully address issues of self esteem, emotional needs and personal development. Along with the above, one needs to learn behaviors that are understood in the host country - not only language but social interaction patterns. Participation in the daily life of the host culture then, is essential for acculturation.

3. Cross Cultural Competence Development: Managing cross cultural stress can be eased by developing a problem resolution approach. If cross cultural stress is normal when experiencing differences in the host country, it is also normal to face problems in the new culture. Denying their existence will only complicate the accommodation process because the cultural conflict will escalate. Recognize that problems that occur in cross cultural contact involve cultural stress and impact the individual.

Cross cultural effectiveness include the ability to deal with psychological stress, ability to communicate, ability to establish interpersonal relationships, and ability to adjust and deal with different social systems. People who value their experiences in other countries and achieve emotional comfort and a sense of belonging, learn to manage cross cultural stress and learn as well new skills and attitudes that allow them to acculturate. All cross cultural experiences have the potential to expand one's world view and certainly enrich our social interactions.

Personal Cross Cultural Self Dis - ease.

The managing of a cross cultural adaptation process allowing for a basis upon which insight, transformation, and growth can occur begins with self awareness. This is the opening up of our own personal area of human existence. This addresses the Self within us in order to prevent us from remaining prisoners of our own Selves in unknown cultures. This kind of awareness helps us become better and healthier global citizens.

Disillusion: a Source for the Wounded Self.

A first premier is acknowledging the fact that life is arduous and in the process of living we find disillusion. Disillusion just plainly belongs to life and it is accompanied by strong feelings of loss, our source of our tragedies. Many authors, Tillich among them, pointed that "we all discover that sooner or later in life, we encounter the unknown and nothing can save us from anxiety, nothing prepares us to cope with the fear of pain, or save us from the process of dying our own death." These are the experiences which are

common in cross cultural adaptation. and characterize our psychological ecology. For those of us living in host countries, we experience a sense of dis-ease because we are bound to change the way we perceive the context of our existence. The basic analogies, metaphors and images that established our identities in a not long gone past, have weakened and do not inform our life anymore in our new cultural situation. We have now to learn to manage the context by searching in our own biography. Our life story describes the early wars that took place within ourselves. The inner twisting of conflict and the thunders of fear that socialization taught us so well and we carry around wherever we go. People experience those internal combats affecting our processes of adaptation differently. Some examples follow:

A Bounded Self

These are people who are out of touch with their own feelings, needs, desires. They identify so much with others that they live through them. These are individuals who

establish their identities through something outside of them. Their maxim could be something as "your success is my success. If you fail, I do as well". They depend on someone else.

A Narcissistic Self

These individuals do not know what it means to be loved unconditionally. They are looking for parental substitutes in order to know that they matter.They experience disappointment in one relationship after another, seek material things in order to get a sense of worth, and/or look for the perfect lover. The narcissistic lacks the mirrored experience of knowing that one is lovable and acceptable as one is.

The Magic Self

This I call the David Copperfield Syndrome. It is a belief that certain gestures, words, or behaviors can change reality. The classic example is the belief that we are responsible for somebody else's feelings: "see what you have done to me. Now **YOU** made me upset."

In the host country it can manifest itself in the form of magical thoughts such as "only if I have enough money, then I will be OK." Another one is "If I have a degree, it will make me smarter and then I will succeed." "If my partner leaves me, then I die." or "Here I wait for my prince." Sometimes we find some alien thoughts. The absolutizers, the all or nothing polarities. The "if you don't love me, then you hate me." Nothing in between, black and white.The "if I feel guilty, I must be rotten" attitude. It goes so far and can be so powerful that one can be convinced that by the time one will retire there won't be any money left in the "Pensionskasse" and this will be an absolute catastrophe.

The Apathetic Self
Here an individual experiences a sense of emptiness. Such a feeling can manifest itself as a depression. It is experienced when we complain that life is dull and meaningless.

These are but a few of the internal battles we carry around with us. They interfere with the process of living that provides unity, depth, dignity, meaning and value in life. We need to fight those battles in order to find principles that can furnish the foundation for personal identity. Dostojewski captures the essence of the fight: "you are free and you will find yourself becoming graceful as you assume the responsibility for yourself and others." There is no magic. No matter what, you alone can make the decision to outgrow your dis-ease and establish a way of life that is satisfying.

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