



Counselling that enables you to embrace life and thrive ...

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Chronic Stress and Homeostasis

Chronic Stress

Working in a cross-cultural environment, particularly in a developing country, exposes staff to high levels of chronic stress. This stress can be measured by adding up all the major life events that are incorporated into making the transition to this new work and living context. The easiest way to do this is by using the Social Readjustment Scale¹, which measures the stress load a person carries over a 12-month period. A score of less than 150 on this scale is indicative of a low to moderate change of becoming ill in the near future, a score between 150-299 shows a moderate to high change of becoming ill in the near future, and a score above 300 suggests a high or very high risk of becoming ill in the near future.

Figure 1 below uses the Social Readjustment Scale to map stress across the different phases of cross-cultural work. It is interesting to note that the stage between the first field assignment until returning home is a period of long term chronic and high stress that suggests a high or very high risk of becoming ill in the near future. The impact of this stress is likely to feed into a reduced capacity to deal with conflict, and contribute to poor mental and physical health.

Homeostasis

The concept of homeostasis give us a context in which to understand why this chronic stress is harmful to staff.

Homeostasis = the tendency of biological systems to maintain relatively constant conditions in the internal environment while continuously interacting with and adjusting to changes originating within or outside the system.

Homeostasis happens through balancing the activity of the sympathetic nervous system, which we use for our flight and fight response under stress, with the parasympathetic nervous system that is active during rest (Figure 2). This system was designed to work in parallel so that one side balances out the other.

Chronic stress undermines this balance. A long-term imbalance results in illness. Choosing a life-style that is intentionally stressful places an individual at risk of a number of adverse outcomes. The good news is that knowing how the stress system works, helps us to make informed choices about how we can respond and try to bring back some balance through increasing activities that encourage rest.

1

• "The Social Readjustment Rating Scale", Thomas H. Holmes and Richard H. Rahe, *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, Volume 11, Issue 2, August 1967, Pages 213-218.

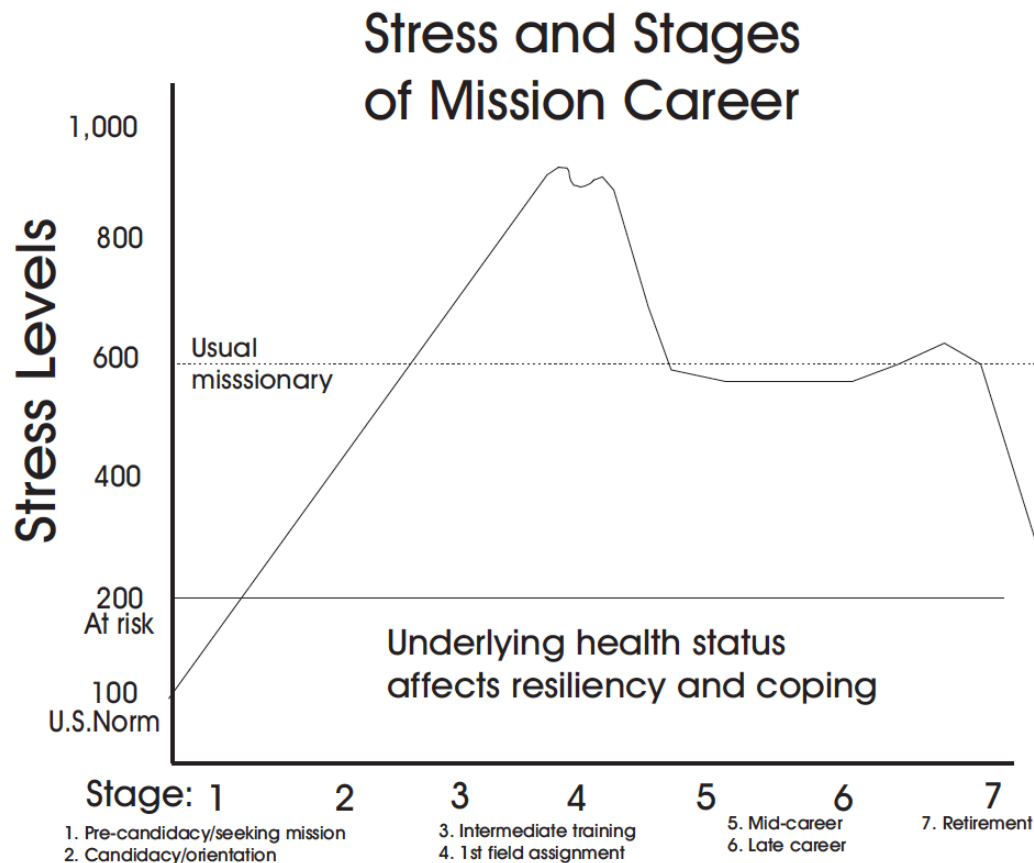


Figure 1. Stress and stages of mission career².

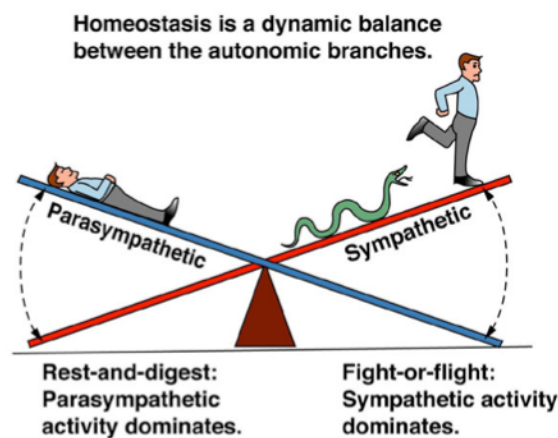


Figure 2. Homeostasis and our stress response.

² Dodds, L. A., Dodds, L. E. (1993) *How people get sick and wounded: levels of prevention and intervention*. Mental Health and Missions Conference, Angola, Indiana.
<https://www.heartstreamresources.org/wp-content/uploads/Prevent.pdf>

Ways to restore homeostasis

- Sleep:
 - Have a routine
 - Sleep the same amount each night
 - Go to sleep and wake at the same time each day
 - Avoid taking naps in the daytime
 - Using strategies to deal with insomnia – relaxation strategies (below), take a bath, eat something (banana, glass of milk, piece of cheese)
- Exercise:
 - Burns off stress
 - Improves mood
 - Assists with sleep
 - At least 3-5 times per week
 - Build it into your life so it's easy to do
- Foster Creativity:
 - Reading
 - Craft
 - Gardening
 - Cooking
- Social Connection:
 - Express your thoughts and feelings
 - Show hospitality
 - Build relationships so you feel connected and belong
 - Do something meaningful
 - Find a role and a place where you can express yourself
- Relaxation:
 - Prayer
 - Meditation/contemplative prayer
 - Silence
 - Building margin
 - Reading the bible
 - Stretching
 - Relaxation exercises – deep breathing, muscle relaxation

Social Readjustment Scale³

Fill this inventory out for the period covering the last 12 months. When you have finished, add up your score.

Event	Impact Score	My Score
Death of spouse	100	
Divorce	73	
Marital Separation	65	
Jail Term	63	
Death of close family member	63	
Personal injury or illness	53	
Marriage	50	
Fired at work	47	
Marital reconciliation	45	
Retirement	45	
Change in health of family member	44	
Pregnancy	40	
Sex difficulties	39	
Gain of a new family member	39	
Business readjustment	39	
Change in financial state	38	
Death of a close friend	37	
Change to a different line of work	36	
Change in number of arguments with spouse	35	
Mortgage over \$20,000	31	
Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	30	
Change in responsibilities at work	29	
Son or daughter leaving home	29	
Trouble with in laws	29	
Outstanding personal achievement	28	
Spouse begins or stop work	26	
Begin or end school	26	
Change in living conditions	25	
Revisions of personal habits	24	
Trouble with boss	23	
Change in work hours or conditions	20	
Change in residence	20	
Change in schools	20	
Change in recreations	19	
Change in church activities	19	

3

• "The Social Readjustment Rating Scale", Thomas H. Holmes and Richard H. Rahe, *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, Volume 11, Issue 2, August 1967, Pages 213-218.

Change in social activities	19	
Mortgage or loan less than \$20,000	17	
Change in sleeping habits	16	
Change in number of family get-togethers	15	
Change in eating habits	15	
Vacation	13	
Christmas approaching	12	
Minor violation of the law	11	
Total		

Score Interpretation

300+	Likelihood of Illness in Near Future about 80 percent
150-299	about 50 percent
less than 150	about 30 percent

If your score is high, you might want to consider using some of the strategies listed above to increase your rest and restore balance to your body.