

Stress and burnout in mission partners

I am a counsellor in Gloucester, dividing my time between Redcliffe College and a low cost private practice. Over the last 3 or 4 years, I have noticed a growing number of people returning from the field with significant stress and burnout. Some of them had been prescribed medication for anxiety and depression, some had been investigated for heart problems in their home countries, and all of them have needed many months of counselling and practical support. The people I have met are physically and emotionally exhausted, disillusioned, and spiritually empty. Some of them have decided to leave the mission altogether.

Some of the issues which had created tension were as follows : local and field leaders who were not trained or suited to the role : authoritarian leadership leading to lack of consultation: having to relocate on a regular basis : isolation : lack of money for proper holidays : lack of support and care on the field: a culture of overwork.

In 2015 I shared some of my concerns with the Member Care group which meets in the home of Dave and Debbie Lovell Hawker and there was general concern.

Then I emailed a number of people who regularly conduct debriefings to ask them about their findings. 15 people responded, 12 working in UK, plus one in Cameroon and two in Canada who are my contacts. These trained “debriefers” are seeing people from at least 12 different mission agencies. The findings are disturbing.

Feedback from debriefers

Debriefers	Cases of serious stress	Field support	Leaving the field
A	15	Some	4
B	6	No	4
C	5 - 10 per year	Insufficient	1-2 per year
D	30	?	4
E	Dozens	No	Several
F	14	No	0
G	2	No	0
H	3 - 4	Some	0
I	5	Some	1-2 couples
J	5 - 6	Insufficient	2
K	20	No	0
L	4	Insufficient	2
M	4	Insufficient	1
N	3	No	0

NB. “Serious stress” refers to depression and anxiety which requires professional help and affects their well -being and ability to work. These are extracts from a fuller questionnaire.

Further comments

One debriefer noted that people are leaving for “other reasons”. They are reluctant to admit to their stress sometimes because they fear a lack of acceptance, or being classed as a failure, but instead ask for a different assignment or find other reasons to return home. Another debriefer comments that some people are in denial about their own stress.

Feedback from people on the field

I also sent out a short questionnaire to 9 mission partners on the field. This is a small group of people whose names have been given to me by colleagues. No names or identifying details have been recorded. These are extracts from a fuller questionnaire:

Sleep disturbances	3
Anxiety	5
Panic attacks	5
Depression	5
On medication	5
Debriefings not helpful	5
Exhaustion	7
Loss of energy	7
Demotivation	7
Lack of support	7
Frustration	9

I continue to counsel those returning from the field. This year I met with three women who have been asked to leave their mission because they questioned the leadership styles.

We are hoping to conduct some in-depth research on this topic so that we can begin to talk with the leaders of mission organisations about the need for good support and member care on the field. If you are meeting people who have struggled with serious stress and burn-out, I would love to hear from you. If you know people who have returned from the field and would like some confidential counselling help and support, or would like to take part in a survey, please pass on my email address.

Sue Ingleby, Dip. Couns. BACP Accredited.

Email: singleby@redcliffe.org

August 31st 2016