

# The Emotional Needs of Women on the Mission Field

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*"Thank you, thank you, thank you from the bottom of my heart for giving me the freedom to talk about my emotional needs as a missionary. I can't begin to tell you how utterly therapeutic this has been for me. Somehow there always seems to be the unspoken idea that missionaries aren't supposed to have emotional needs, BUT I DO!! Or somehow we're supposed to live above our needs, as if we weren't quite human. But the truth is I have more needs than what I typically care to acknowledge, and often I just downright don't know what to do with them!"*

This particular response is similar to many which I have received as a result of surveying 70 women in the last two years on the subject of their emotional needs on the mission field. The responses to these surveys, along with gleanings from counseling missionaries for over 20 years and my own experience as a missionary for three years have provided the basis for this paper. I would like to address here the needs most frequently identified, ways to address them, the consequences of unmet needs, and several practical applications that can be made.

How are the emotional needs of missionary women different from other women? Frankly, there is really little difference, but trying to meet emotional needs on the mission field can be ever so much harder. Women are typically more isolated in mission settings, limiting opportunities for developing friendships. The challenges of missionary living are greater and more demanding as women contend daily with a multitude of cross-cultural stresses and demands. Simple conveniences of life are often missing. Many basic supports that most of us take for granted are frequently not available on the mission field, such as reliable postal systems, telephones that work, dependable transportation, or even hot water and electricity. Furthermore, there is no ready access to the many helpful resources in abundance here at home, such as family members living close-by, a wealth of possible friendships, a sound church with quality teaching and worship, Christian bookstores, Christian television and radio programs, professional counseling, or support groups. The absence of familiar resources and support systems tends to quickly heighten one's sense of neediness and vulnerability...and how readily sin natures can manifest in the midst of neediness and vulnerability!

Because missionary women are involved in fulfilling the Great Commission in some of the darkest places in the world, they tend to be on the front lines of spiritual battle and are often subject to heightened resistance from the devil. As a result, these women are especially vulnerable to satanic attacks, some subtle and some anything but subtle. One tactic of the enemy commonly used against missionaries is attacking them through their emotional needs. When these needs are not being recognized and addressed in healthy ways, the door is inadvertently opened for discouragement, depression, despair, and ultimately, devastation in any number of ways. Unfortunately, too many of our missionary women become casualties in battle, and the whole world suffers for it. Their loss becomes our loss.

At heart, most women seem to thrive on roots, security, and safety---elements hardly characteristic of the typical missionary woman's experience. If anything, missionary life seems to be marked more by the antithesis of roots, security, and safety. A woman's emotional makeup does not suddenly change just because God may call her to the far ends of the earth. To the extent that she can identify her needs and address them appropriately, her effectiveness on the mission field will significantly increase. And to the extent that we as the non-missionary population can better understand our missionary women, our effectiveness in supporting, encouraging, and praying for them will undoubtedly increase.

One particular missionary woman articulates clearly her thoughts on dealing with the issue of emotional needs. She states: *"I was stunned - no, shocked - to realize I'd have to grapple so much with emotional needs on the mission field. I think I just naively assumed that because I'm a committed Christian called into full-time ministry overseas, I would never have to worry about this area of my life. I guess I just expected these needs to get taken care of automatically or that God would miraculously remove them from me. I had never realized how much energy would later go into trying to meet my needs or how much pain I'd experience trying to live with needs that I had no clue how to meet. If only I had been encouraged to think about this area of my life in advance."*

## **EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF MISSIONARY WOMEN**

Following are the most commonly identified emotional needs for both single and married missionary women.

### **• Intimacy and Close Friendship**

Hands down, the number one need most often expressed is the need for an intimate, close friend. This type of longed-for friend is described in a number of ways: *"a friend with whom I can share my very soul and know that everything will be kept confidential; someone with whom I can be completely transparent, sharing even my secrets, and still be fully accepted and loved; someone who will allow me to process issues with her and just be willing to listen to me without trying to 'fix' things; someone who will provide support, encouragement, and honest feedback; a kindred spirit; someone who will remain a trusted friend through the years"*. One particular woman sums up her need this way: *"How I long for a consistent and long-term soul mate, someone I can be myself with and know I'm accepted even at my worst emotionally and at my least spiritual times."*

This longing for intimacy and close friendship on the mission field characterizes both the single and married woman, the older and younger, the veteran missionary as well as the newer one. Even if happily married, missionary wives still need close female friendships, realizing that there is something special in the friendships of other women. States one missionary wife with a twinkle in her eye, *"Face it, men just don't often listen and respond to us the way we need. Much as I deeply love my husband, often we're just on different wave lengths and I desperately need close female friends with whom to connect. Besides, he's often so busy and simply doesn't have time to just sit down and talk. And when we do talk, he wants me to get right down to the bottom line, but I need to think and process out loud. That often drives him right up a wall! My women friends give me the space to do this."*

Indeed, married women blessed with close female friendships comment that their marriages are inevitably stronger because of these friendships. These fortunate women state that having good female friendships in place considerably lessens the pressure they might otherwise place

on spouses to meet their emotional needs. Sadly, though, many missionary wives do not have any such close relationships, and their marriages suffer for it. Many wives struggle with the unending demands placed on their husbands' time and energy, restricting their time together as a couple, and with no close female friends to help fill in the emotional gap. Frequently missionary women express intense loneliness in their marriages as they try to grapple with husbands' preoccupation with work and hectic travel schedules.

Not surprisingly, this longing for intimacy and close friendship is especially the cry of many single women. In contrast to married women, a single woman does not arrive on the missionary field with a "built-in" companion or an already established support system. Rather, she goes as a unit of one. She has no guaranteed intimate partner, no primary committed person with whom to share her joys and sorrows, with whom to build a future. She enters the mission field alone, likely with no one there knowing or sharing her history. Over time, this sense of "going it alone" can lead to a real feeling of isolation and loneliness if good, solid relationships are not eventually established. As one single woman says who has long struggled with this area, "*I came into this experience alone and I'm in it alone.*" In fact, loneliness is by far the biggest struggle single missionaries seem to face.

If the need for intimacy and close friendship is so important, what prevents it from getting met? For many missionary women, the blockage is partially the result of isolation and geographical distance from other missionaries or from other Christians with a common language and/or culture. Though some missionaries live close together in their communities, many live in isolated settings, in remote places far removed from their co-workers. In some cases, a missionary woman may be the only person in a city or village who speaks her mother tongue! Comments one woman living far from others, "*The isolation is at times unbearable. In my first term, I was so isolated and life was pure survival. I would have given anything for some kind of emotional support. Communication was almost non-existent when we were isolated.*" And even when women are able to get together, the opportunities may seem too infrequent to make it worthwhile attempting to build any meaningful relationships.

Mobility in the missionary community is another factor working against close, intimate relationships. The missionary lifestyle tends to be a constantly mobile one, full of many moves, transitions, hellos, and good-byes. This degree of mobility makes it difficult to develop ongoing, consistent, and deepening relationships. One woman tearfully comments, "*I find it hard to establish relationships that are long-term and stable because of people coming and going all the time. Somehow I seem to live with a sense of uprootedness.*" Notes another woman, "*The friend you make today will be gone a year from now, or else you will have moved on.*" Yet another reflects, "*This kind of living makes it easy to shut down rather than risk the hurt of continual change.*" In a similar vein, one woman questions, "*Why bother trying to develop a close friendship when the other person will invariably be moved to another site before long, or going home on furlough, or else I will be? What's the point to it? It's just too painful! I don't have the energy to keep starting over and over again.*"

Lack of a safe environment for sharing and lack of confidentiality are two other reasons why women may not experience intimacy on the mission field. Some missionaries have had experiences of sharing confidential information with a co-worker, only to have that information later "leak out" and be used against them. As a result of feeling hurt, betrayed, and violated, they no longer feel safe to share. In the absence of safety and confidentiality they can count on, these women may choose not to make themselves vulnerable again. Anonymity tends to be limited for those missionaries who live and work closely together, making it more difficult to disclose their thoughts and feelings. Some missionaries find the pain of loneliness at times

easier to live with than the pain of further misunderstanding among their co-workers with whom they work closely.

Limited ability to relate deeply with each other is another reason women may have difficulty in finding close friends. The mission field tends to attract highly committed people, some who may be inclined to invest considerably more energy into their work than into relationships. The very nature of mission work historically has called for hardy, pioneer-spirited individuals who could "go it on their own" in the toughest of circumstances. This type of person, however well-suited to isolated settings, harsh elements, or sparse accommodations, may have a much harder time dealing closely with people and all the intricacies of relational dynamics. For these missionaries, the thought of opening themselves up to others can be quite intimidating. One spunky, veteran missionary freely admits she feels immeasurably more confident contending with poisonous snakes that on occasion show up on her mission compound than with relational conflict among her co-workers!

The busyness of life can likewise hinder close friendships from developing. So many missionary women comment that there is simply too much to do by too few people. Frequently, they speak of the unending, pervasive needs that continually confront their community. They often struggle with feeling overly committed, but are uncertain how to reduce the demands placed on their time. They are surrounded by the needs of nationals, regularly having a steady stream of needy people coming to their front door. Many women feel stretched beyond measure, resulting in their own needs simply getting lost in the process. They often wish their mission could somehow allocate more time for relationship-building between missionaries. One woman describes the challenge this way, *"Everyone here at our missionary center is so overworked and tired and often struggling themselves. No one has anything left to give anybody."* One missionary woman I counseled several years ago asked, with tears streaming down her cheeks, *"Why, oh why, can't our mission recognize that unless we cease from our super-busyness long enough to look at the needs among our own people, we won't be very effective in ministering to others? Many of us are so lonely, but no one seems to notice. Can't they see we're heading for burnout? Why can't our own needs be valid? Mine are screaming to be heard, and I can't seem to stuff them down any longer, no matter how hard I try."*

Another barrier to meeting friendship and intimacy needs comes in the form of "emotional baggage" carried onto the mission field. This baggage is essentially unresolved emotional issues, such as unhealed emotional injuries from the past, family "ghosts" or "secrets", or those destructive habits that hold one hostage. (Examples are childhood physical or sexual abuse, parental divorce, addictions, sexual sins, perfectionism, or chronic low self-esteem, to name just a few.) This type of "baggage" taken to the mission field invariably has a negative impact on ministry relationships and effectiveness.

A number of women who are in leadership positions in the mission community cite the scarcity of other female leaders as a contributing factor to their unmet relational needs. These women often experience isolation and loneliness as the rare women in leadership, working primarily in the company of men. They long to connect with other women in leadership, to process things out loud, and to have a safe place to share confidential information.

#### • Validation and Affirmation

Ranking almost as pervasive the need of missionary women for intimacy and close friendship is their need for validation and affirmation, of both their personhood and ministry. They long to have their gifts and abilities respected and utilized, their God-given potential fully developed. They want to be accepted as full members of their team, seen as equals by their male

counterparts, with their ideas and contributions given equal weight. Writes one missionary, "*I want to be able to serve nationals and co-workers with my gifts and abilities and not be seen as a threat to male egos.*" The opportunities for women on the mission field are numerous, and women need the freedom to tap into them without reservation.

This need for validation and affirmation is similar for both single and married women, though expressed somewhat differently. Single women do not want to be assigned a lesser role because of their marital status or gender. They want equal recognition given to their skills and leadership abilities as is offered to men and to married women. Some single women find that their mission organizations grant a greater status of adulthood and maturity to married couples than to singles. One particular single shares how she was placed under the authority of a couple in ministry situations, even though she was considerably older and more experienced than the couple. Another single woman comments, "*I sometimes feel like an appendage to a larger ministry team with most of the decision-making and general direction being handled by the men. Many times the single woman in a larger ministry comprised of couples feels that she is just a 'helper' even though she may carry a heavy responsibility in the work.*" In contrast to feeling under-utilized, other singles mention just the opposite. In some mission settings, there is the unspoken assumption that because singles have no marital or family obligations, they have much more free time and should thus be expected to work longer hours, take fewer vacations, or even to be on call around the clock.

Because the single missionary does not have a spouse or children in which to invest herself, she needs to carefully guard against drawing an inordinate sense of identity from her work. Many missionaries tend to be task-oriented by nature, and singles may unwittingly overextend themselves in their work because of the deep sense of purpose and significance their work provides, especially in the absence of family relationships.

For the married missionary women, they sometimes feel their roles of mother and homemaker relegate them to the sidelines of mission decisions and responsibilities. Though these women may have chosen their mother and homemaker roles as their primary ones for a period of time, they do not want to be given a lesser voice in mission issues. They still need to be seen as an integral part of the mission, still included in mission planning and decisions. Many missionary wives keenly desire to make their own contribution to the mission cause, serving not just in a supportive role to their husbands, important as that role may be.

The need to be validated tends to be even greater for those missionary women living in countries that typically devalue women. In Muslim countries, for example, where women are generally considered inferior to men, missionary women frequently report a stronger need for validation. Single women, especially, can find this a challenge in the Muslim culture.

### • **Healthy Relationships in the Missionary Community**

A need for healthy relationships among co-workers also ranks high among women on the mission field. A missionary community is rarely a homogeneous group, but one that may be comprised of different mission organizations, denominations, nationalities, and subcultures, each with its own values, beliefs, norms, and customs. Add to that mix all the individual personalities and temperaments involved, and one can well imagine the challenge in trying to integrate the many differences. Conflicts, misunderstandings, hostility, rejection, betrayal, and criticism can mark the missionary community just as any other group of people living and working together. Understandably, it can be quite disillusioning for missionaries to recognize their co-workers "feet of clay" and to see their own as well.

Women quite often acknowledge they inadvertently began their missionary experience with totally unrealistic expectations. They just assumed missionaries would get along well with each other because of laboring together in the work of the Kingdom. What they sometimes find instead, however, is a heightened potential for conflict because of "rubbing shoulders" closely in the missionary community in the midst of difference, without having good communication and conflict-resolution skills. Missionary women frequently express a need to re-work unrealistic expectations in the interest of building relationships.

#### • **Spiritual Nourishment and Support**

Unfortunately, missionary women's own needs for spiritual input and growth often get lost in the shuffle of ministering to others' needs. *"To experience more of God's presence and His love in the midst of my mission work"* is the cry of many women longing for a deeper relationship with God, while immersed in unending ministry around them. They long for spiritual nourishment to help renew and restore their souls. They crave more biblical teaching in their own language, quality worship that ministers to the depths of their soul, and fellowship that encourages them in their spiritual journey. Many women express a need for help to work through issues of faith that get presented on the mission field. One missionary poignantly writes, *"There's a sadness and depression that comes from dealing with constant poverty of soul, spirit, and material things surrounding most missionaries. Coping with these often requires spiritual 'contortions'---how do we not be overcome with sadness and depression when we offer only a tiny drop of help in the sea of human misery? These are VERY real issues! Being compassionate means daily hurting for all the hurts around you."* Indeed, the numerous hurts confronting missionaries can be potentially corrosive to their faith and spirit. Not surprisingly, missionaries often wonder how to maintain a spiritual and emotional balance through the many challenges presented.

To help navigate these rough waters, many missionary women express a need for pastoral care. They long for someone to give them perspective on their questions and struggles, to assist them in re-focusing, to help them sort through the tough issues on the mission field, to guide them in their mission experience as they pass through the different seasons of life. Often mentioned is a need for a mentor – such as an older, wiser woman to come alongside and assist in providing encouragement and support, spiritual direction, and accountability in issues of spiritual disciplines and personal sin. The growing emphasis on member care in the missionary community in recent years has begun to address this need for pastoral care in very positive and constructive ways.

#### • **Time Alone**

A related need is for time alone to rest from continually giving out to others, time to nurture body, soul, and spirit. Though this is a universal need, it seems all the more critical for missionary women because of their intense involvement in the lives of others. They need regular times to escape the demands of those around them, to have a private get-away spot where they can replenish their own emotional and spiritual resources. Women frequently comment that they feel they are drying up in the process of giving out all the time, or "dying on the vine", as one describes it. Yet because of the tremendous needs on the mission field, women often have a difficult time giving themselves permission to occasionally set aside those needs and nurture themselves without feeling guilty. One missionary woman wistfully states that what she is most eagerly anticipating on her upcoming furlough is the freedom to close her windows and doors in the middle of the day to take a nap without village people huddling outside her front door wondering why she is "shunning" them.

Missionaries also need time away from each other. For those who live and work closely together, privacy can be a real challenge to find. Nonetheless, it must be found, and without guilt, if they hope to function at their best.

### • **Maintaining Close Contact with Separated Family Members**

For those of us who are not missionaries, we probably cannot begin to understand the sacrifice those in mission work make in leaving behind beloved family members as they leave for the field. Good-byes become tearful partings, not just because parents, grandparents, children, and other relatives may not be seen for a long time, but also because some of these loved ones may never again be seen this side of heaven. Relationally-oriented as most women are, separations from family members can be a very difficult aspect of their missionary experience. This is especially the case when the separation is from their very own children or grandchildren. No matter how clearly a woman may know it is God's will for her to be on the mission field, it still can be an intensely painful struggle for her to deal with the reality of being separated from family. To maintain close contact with beloved family members and nurture strong relationships with them from afar is a tremendous challenge for many missionary women.

No one pulls harder on the strings of a missionary woman's heart than her own children. Many mothers on the mission field grapple with the pain of their children living away from home. Some of their children may be attending boarding school elsewhere or may have returned to their home country to attend college or to find employment. Missionary women often tearfully speak of the challenge in trying to meet their children's needs long-distance or of having to place them in the care of another person. They recall wiping their tears as many times they watched a plane take off with its precious "cargo" headed off to boarding school, knowing it would be months before seeing their children again. And now as the mission field more than ever draws its new recruits from the age 50+ crowd, many grandmothers join the ranks of women leaving behind beloved family members to set off on mission ventures.

### • **To Be Understood by People Back Home**

Missionary women at times struggle with lack of understanding among friends and supporting churches at home. Women often feel it is hard for people who have never lived on the mission field to understand their needs or to relate to their struggles. Sums up one missionary, *"It's the rare lay person who understands what I'm experiencing and who understands my emotional needs. When I finally drum up the courage to share, I find that some spiritualize my needs, some give pat answers, and some empathize."*

Missionary women need the freedom to share deeply from their hearts without people quietly dismissing their struggles or without granting them a "super-spiritual" status. One woman sadly expresses, *"Genuine sharing of needs back home somehow seems to result in us being given the label of 'too emotional for our own good', like it's inappropriate to have those needs. And that's really painful because I so much want people to know what I struggle with. I'm not asking for sympathy, just understanding and a recognition of what we really grapple with on the mission field."* Women state they are more than willing to share the "good missionary stories" typically requested as long as they are free to share their real-life struggles as well. They long to be seen as real people and have others connect with them in their challenges of life.

## EMOTIONAL NEEDS UNIQUE TO SINGLE WOMEN ON THE MISSION FIELD

As one veteran single missionary wryly states, *"The hardest part of singleness on the mission field is being single!"* Here is how various single women describe their needs:

### • Learning to "Go it Alone" on the Mission Field

Perhaps the greatest need – and challenge - for singles is that of learning to function as a “solo” on the mission field. As mentioned previously, a single woman does not carry her support system with her to the mission field. She has left family behind and goes totally alone to establish a new life. Because she is single, no one will share as intensely in her missionary experience as would a spouse. When she has decisions to make, other people may pray for her and support her, but the weight of decisions rests primarily on her shoulders. She typically has no one constant person with whom she can “bounce off” ideas, who will act as a sounding board for her. In difficult situations, there is no husband to protect her or fend for her; she has no male covering as does a married woman. Says one single woman, *"A woman with a strong marriage can verbally process, pray, and share with her husband behind closed doors, whereas a single is primarily on her own in the missions setting when bad situations occur"*. In short, the task of looking after herself is largely her own. This can significantly contribute to a sense of being isolated in her mission experience.

The single missionary must learn to meet her emotional needs in the absence of a spouse. Typically, there is no one particular partner she can rely on to love her, hug her, encourage her, affirm her, give her a shoulder to cry on, or simply just be her own cheerleading section. Other people here and there may provide emotional support, but she cannot necessarily count on it. Whether single or married, each woman must ultimately be responsible for getting her own emotional needs met, but it is especially incumbent upon the single person to do so. Even if not comfortable for her, she must be willing to be intentional, decisive, and assertive about getting her needs met in order to survive well on the mission field. She must learn to allow the Lord to become her husband, drawing on a close, intimate relationship with Him for regular emotional sustenance. She must be willing to reach out to others and must learn to nurture herself in healthy ways.

Learning to successfully navigate the waters of loneliness is critical, no matter how difficult that may be. It is important that the single woman manage her time alone well, ultimately learning to view it as solitude instead of loneliness. She needs to guard against spending excessive amounts of time alone, exacerbating a sense of loneliness. She must learn to become a friend to herself and value her own company.

Out of necessity, the single missionary typically must function more independently than does her married counterpart. Depending on her situation, she may need to handle basic house and car repairs on her own. She must learn how to manage her home, handle herself in the marketplace, conduct business affairs in a foreign language, interface with local authorities as needed, and possibly deal with government red tape and hassles, all on her own. Basically, she has to learn to become self-sufficient.

Singleness may call for some restriction of her activities, such as in the area of travel. In many countries, it is unsafe for a woman to travel alone, sometimes even with another woman, especially after dark. The single woman must be prepared to stay indoors after dark, or else find a male companion with whom she can travel without in any way raising suspicion in either the mission community or among the nationals.

### • Finding Acceptance in a Host Culture Where a Single Woman May Be an Anomaly

In some cultures where singles minister, there is no such thing as a “single woman” category. Usually only the physically or mentally handicapped woman would ever remain single into her adult years in those areas. In contrast, many women who go to the mission field are single and may remain so the entirety of their years on the field. The single woman may be seen as an odd entity in a host culture that devalues unmarried women. Some single missionaries report being mocked in their host cultures because of their marital status. Comments one woman, *“Where I live and work, women, especially single women, have no rank. With no husband or children to show the world, you’re considered the absolute dregs of society. Much as I know in my head I know that’s not true, I really have to work at affirming myself.”*

Depending on the host culture, sexual harassment may be a real problem, particularly for the single missionary. One woman describes the challenge this way: *“In the country where I serve, you’re open to every conceivable lewd comment from the national men. When you go to the market, you just simply learn to expect sexual harassment. I often wish I had someone stand up for me, to serve as a cover for me, so I wouldn’t have to deal with this alone.”* Affirming her worth and specialness to God in these discriminating settings can present a challenging assignment for the single missionary.

### • Finding Acceptance in the Missionary Subculture Where Singleness is Not the Norm

Fitting into the missionary subculture can also present a challenge for singles. Given that many mission communities are comprised primarily of couples and families, singles can sometimes feel like a social peculiarity, like the proverbial “fifth wheel” or “the odd woman out”. They sometimes wonder, *“Is my singleness fully respected among my married co-workers? Where do I belong? Just who or what is my primary group? With whom can I vacation or spend the holidays? Is it indeed possible to develop a sense of family as a single?”*

Singles sometimes grapple with feeling excluded from various mission social events, even looked down on, due to their marital status. Many find it hard to meet people as a single if not already part of an established unit. Some admit longing to feel “looked after” by other missionaries instead of having to fend for themselves much of the time. Single missionaries comment they sometimes have to fight against self-doubt or shame in the missionary community because of their marital status. Some speak of the unfairness of raised eyebrows if two single women spend considerable time together or in others not understanding the dynamics of long-term same-sex friendships.

### • Coming to Terms with the Possibility of Never Getting Married

The plain reality is that if a woman goes to the mission field single, there is a high probability that she may leave the mission field still single. The sooner a woman can come to terms with her singleness, the less frustration she is likely to encounter in this area. For many singles, though, this issue tends to be a recurring one, rather than one that gets settled once and for all. This can be a difficult process, necessitating working through a multitude of painful feelings, such as sadness, grief, disappointment, despair, anger, shame, or bitterness. The biological clock ticking away does not help matters any as it reminds one of the passing of child-bearing years. Singles at times struggle with God, wondering, *“Is this my reward for serving Him faithfully! Is this what obedience to His call is all about?”* Hope and despair at times may alternate with each other as women struggle to make their experience fit their theology. Some

women may have an opportunity to date and marry on the mission field, but that is generally far more the exception than the rule.

Recognizing that she may never marry invariably raises issues of security for the single woman. Questions present themselves, such as, *“If I stay single, who will take care of me when I’m older and possibly can no longer adequately take care of myself? Will I have someone with whom to retire? Will I have adequate resources in my later years?”* These questions can begin to hit hard, especially in mid-life. Not all mission boards provide for their missionaries after retirement, and the single missionary (unless married before) does not have the option of her children taking care of her instead. It is the rare missionary who has a large pension plan or a substantial Social Security savings account to handle financial needs in later life.

Another aspect of coming to terms with singleness on the mission field has to do with caring for one’s aging parents. This issue is in no way limited only to single women, but it seems that they in particular agonize over the question, *“Where does my primary responsibility lie--with the mission field where I feel called by God to work, or with my parents back home?”* Regardless of the emotional or financial cost to her or of the proximity of other family members to the parents, it is often automatically assumed by married siblings (even if their own children are grown) that it is the primary responsibility of the single female offspring to provide care to aging parents. Even if she lives on the other side of the world, the single missionary may be expected to terminate her work and return home. In the absence of a spouse or children, her own calling is often given less weight by her family. I know of one missionary woman who had six married siblings, all with grown children and all living within 30 minutes of the parents. Because she was the only single sibling, however, it was assumed she should be the one to give up her work and move back home to care for her aging parents thousands of miles away.

#### • Developing **Healthy Relationships with Men**

Even if she has successfully settled the issue of singleness, the single missionary woman still needs opportunity to relate to men, both single and married, missionaries and nationals. She needs the opportunity to see life through a man’s eyes and the male perspective that her female friends cannot give. Naturally, though, she needs to exercise a great deal of caution as she relates to men. Because missionary wives may be involved primarily at home caring for their families, they are often less directly involved in mission work than are the single women, working right alongside the married missionary men. To avoid problems, singles need to keep their relationships with men out in the open, free of suspicion or misguided intentions. They must do their best to ensure that their manner of relating to missionary men is not questioned by nationals, even if that behavior may be considered totally acceptable within the missionary subculture. In relating to national men, the single missionary must be especially sensitive to cultural cues concerning decorum in male-female relationships. With God’s grace, she needs to rise above the frustration that often comes in having to continually be scrutinizing her behavior so as to avoid any suspicions. She needs to decide whether or not she will date national men and be aware of possible implications of doing so.

#### • Dealing with the Issue of Sexuality in a Healthy Way

Dealing with one’s sexuality in the absence of a marital partner can be a special challenge for singles. Questions are raised, such as, *“Can one truly be sexually fulfilled as a single? What are appropriate ways to meet sexual needs? How does one commit to moral purity for the long haul? How does one sublimate sexual needs or desires in healthy ways? Is masturbation a sin? How do I handle my guilt from impure thoughts?”* Unfortunately, this topic rarely gets addressed openly on the mission field or in pre-field training. Sensing that the discussion of

sexuality may be off limits for Christians, single missionaries sometimes attempt to deny or repress their sexual feelings and drives, even asking God to remove them.

To avoid dealing with the area of sexuality in a healthy manner, however, only invites potential problems for single missionaries. They may live with continual frustration and tension that rob them of joy and vitality. They may attempt to hide the issue behind excessive weight or may minimize their femininity in appearance and behavior. Some may become totally absorbed in their work in an attempt to suppress this conflictual area. For yet others, the outcome is much more serious if they become entangled in immoral relationships.

Through the years, I have counseled a number of women whose missionary careers came to a crashing halt because of immoral relationships in which they had become entangled. One particular woman became sexually involved with a national man out of her intense loneliness. Totally driven by her overwhelming need and too embarrassed to acknowledge it to fellow missionaries, she fell prey to the solicitous attention of a kind, non-Christian man in her village. She quietly began dating him, all the while convincing herself that her strong faith and high moral standards would safeguard her from any inappropriate behavior. Only too late did she realize how desperately vulnerable she had become, and she returned to her home country as a bleeding, broken woman. I have also counseled several women who became sexually involved with other missionary women. These women were not homosexual in orientation, by any means, but they had never learned how to appropriately acknowledge and address legitimate emotional needs that, over time, became sexualized. I might comment here that rarely ever are "moral failures", whether heterosexual or homosexual, simply issues of meeting sexual needs. Instead, they are primarily attempts to meet deep, underlying emotional needs that in the absence of healthy awareness and addressing of these needs, find expression over time in a physical/sexual involvement.

Singles need to learn to embrace their sexuality. It is important that they not negate sexual needs and feelings.

#### • Giving and Receiving Physical Touch

For the single woman, there is no spouse or children of her own to caress her, hug her, cuddle up next to her, or rumple her hair. It has been said that to be emotionally healthy a person needs eight to twelve hugs a day. Yet many single missionaries may go for literally months without a single hug, depending in part on how their host cultures or mission groups view hugs. Even a "holy hug" from a Christian brother or sister may raise eyebrows. Whenever a single missionary has physical contact with another adult, she needs to be fully aware of her needs and motives and be sensitive to cultural and mission norms concerning the propriety of such behavior. She needs to recognize that any physical touch, even something so seemingly innocent as a back rub or neck rub given by another woman, can potentially lead to inappropriate behavior. A single status in no way, though, eliminates a God-given need for touch. It just means a single person needs to become creative to get this need met.

#### • Good Living Arrangements

Quite often single missionaries feel that their needs in living situations are assigned a lesser priority than those for families and couples. On the mission field, there is sometimes the misconception that any two singles should be able to live together and adapt to each other, despite differing personalities, temperaments, or personal habits. Unfortunately, disastrous consequences can result when singles are arbitrarily placed with each other. On occasion

singles may be assigned to live with couples or families, whether or not a prior relationship with them existed.

Singles at times feel they are the ones most expected to move or to have others move in with them, and as singles come and go, so their roommates come and go. One single missionary woman told of 16 different roommates in 18 years! For those single women experiencing a multitude of changes in living arrangements, home hardly feels like a stable refuge. Singles find it takes tremendous emotional resourcefulness to attempt establishing close and long-lasting relationships with roommates when they come and go frequently.

Because her living situation may feel temporary (recognizing that permanency is a rare trait of any facet of missionary life), the single woman may simply decide to treat her home as a temporary residence, decorating it only minimally and withholding placing her "personality stamp" on it. As a result, her living quarters may feel more like just a house rather than a home. One particular single missionary humorously describes her experience this way: *"Even when I do decide to decorate, the decor keeps changing as roommates keep changing! Conceivably one could argue that all the adjustments and readjustments of singles' living situations are simply a refining tool of God to help produce flexibility and adaptability, but after awhile, these changes feel far more chaos-producing than character-producing!"*

## **EMOTIONAL NEEDS UNIQUE TO MARRIED WOMEN ON THE MISSION FIELD**

The emotional needs of missionary wives are not essentially different from other married women, but the particular demands and stresses on the mission field seem to invariably heighten their needs and present additional challenges in meeting them.

### **• Maintaining emotional equilibrium while continually juggling the roles of wife, mother, and homemaker in a foreign setting.**

Balancing this juggling act can be a challenge of the highest order on the mission field. Missionaries typically comment that simply the act of living requires much more time on the mission field, and perhaps no one feels it more than the missionary wife and mother trying to manage a busy household in a foreign land. Depending on how primitive her setting is, she may need to heat water on the stove for family baths, wash their clothes by hand, grow much of their food, boil their drinking water, soak all fresh produce in chlorine to eliminate parasites, cook food "from scratch", bake their bread, and possibly even kill and clean the chicken for dinner. Convenience foods and time-saving appliances that we take for granted in the industrialized western world may be almost non-existent, and what appliances are available may break down on a regular basis. Refrigeration may be limited, necessitating daily shopping. Shopping for only a few items can take literally hours, and the trip to the store can be a life-threatening experience with the modes of transportation and driving habits in some countries! In certain areas, it is culturally unacceptable for men to shop, so the missionary wife there cannot count on shopping assistance from her husband. Depending on how well she knows the language of her host culture, communicating with nationals can present a real challenge as she carries out her daily responsibilities. In addition, she must remember to observe all the cultural customs and norms when out in the public eye.

If she has young children at home, she is likely the parent most involved in their day-to-day care while her husband is more directly involved in mission work (sometimes gone for days or weeks at a time). Babysitting, daycare services, or other support services are typically very limited. Having grandparents around to help baby-sit is a luxury that has to wait until furlough. If she

home-schools, as many missionary mothers do, she adds to an already demanding job description the role of teacher, often having only limited educational resources with which to work. Her children may be attending boarding school away from home, in which case she struggles continually with a sense of loss and the challenge of trying to nurture them long-distance.

In the midst of caring for her family, she needs to work on keeping her marriage strong and growing, even fresh and exciting. She needs to focus on her husband and ensure that he does not get lost in the shuffle of life. She needs to let her husband know her needs and not let herself get lost. She needs to find time and energy to do her part in revitalizing this most important relationship on a regular basis, no small challenge given the typical limitations of both time and energy. She needs to help create a space and time for a healthy sexual relationship with her husband. Otherwise, it becomes far too easy for marriages on the mission field to just “coast in neutral” because of so many other demands placed on them. And unfortunately, missionary couples are not spared the pain of divorce just because they are in full-time ministry in foreign lands.

The missionary wife/mother frequently needs to serve as the “resident doctor” for basic medical problems in her family. Dealing with illness or injuries tends to fall much more on the shoulders of a missionary woman than on those of her non-missionary counterpart. Because medical care is often limited on the mission field, handling health issues becomes yet another responsibility for the missionary wife/mother, regardless of her training.

As if these responsibilities were not enough, the missionary wife may have a steady stream of nationals coming to her door, asking for help of various sorts or just stopping by to visit. Due to cultural norms in her host country, she may feel little freedom to decline assisting them or ask them to come back later, however graciously presented. Privacy can be a scarce commodity in a missionary home.

Dealing with visitors from back home also becomes part of the missionary wife/mother’s juggling act. Much as she may dearly love and welcome visitors, entertaining them for a period of time in her home can add a tremendous load to her responsibilities, if not handled sensitively and wisely.

#### • **Taking care of herself in the midst of meeting her family’s needs**

In the midst of all of the above, the missionary wife/mother must still pay attention to her own needs if she is going to thrive on the mission field. It can be tempting for her to expect her husband to meet her needs rather than assuming responsibility herself, no small challenge in a foreign setting. Besides having no ready access to babysitting services, she may also not have available to her adult educational classes, a local YMCA, good bookstores or libraries, bathtubs in which to relax, a place to be alone, friends close-by...or shopping malls or coffee shops! It may not even be safe to venture outside just to take a walk by herself. She may need to become extremely creative in finding ways to take good care of herself.

#### • **Contributing directly to the cause of the mission**

Despite her important and demanding roles of wife, mother, and homemaker, the married missionary woman still needs to feel she has something of significance to contribute to her mission. As mentioned earlier, some wives and mothers struggle with knowing how to fit into the mission, uncertain how to connect to the larger cause. One missionary woman writes, *“Sometimes I wonder if I’m even a missionary because I function just as a mom who simply*

*happens to live on the mission field. My role can be very confusing. What am I? I need to feel like I have a purpose in this mission beyond my role in the home. But what is that? Yet knowing that larger purpose can sometimes create a difficult dilemma for the missionary wife/mother as she tries to figure how to integrate that purpose into her extremely busy days.*

## **WAYS TO ADDRESS EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF MISSIONARY WOMEN**

Permit me to speak directly to missionary women in this section, pooling their ideas along with some of my own, on how to meet emotional needs. Much more could be said about each of these ideas, but space allows for only addressing them briefly.

- **Recognize that no matter how healthy you may be, you WILL have emotional needs as a missionary.**

Being a committed, godly woman called to God's service on the mission field will NOT exempt you from emotional needs. Having emotional needs is normal, natural, and legitimate. God created us with these needs to keep us ever mindful of our need for relationship, first and foremost with Himself, then with others and ourselves. You WILL at times experience loneliness, discouragement, and misunderstanding. Count on it! That's simply part of the human experience. The question is not, "Will you have needs", but "How will you handle them?"

One veteran missionary woman summarizes her thoughts on this subject in this fashion: *"The idea that we are anything different as missionaries in another culture than we are here at home is not true. In fact, what we are seems to intensify in another culture; i.e., if we are selfish, giving, lonely, hospitable, reclusive, etc., we will be even more so where we are the 'revered American missionary.'* If we have problems with relationships here - in or out of the home/church - we will find those same problems overseas, only again, more so." In fact, don't be surprised if you discover needs on the mission field you had not even realized beforehand that you have. The stress of missionary life may bring out needs and reactions in you that leave you totally reeling and dumbfounded initially.

Be assured, there is nothing spiritual whatsoever about trying to ignore one's emotional needs and "just live by faith" instead. To deny one's needs in a vain attempt to live above them is a sure way to become enslaved to one's needs, to become controlled by them, to be need-driven rather than faith-driven. Having emotional needs is not the antithesis of faith nor is the absence of needs the hallmark of a godly saint. One need only to look at the life of David, "a man after God's own heart" to understand this. The Psalms are replete with David's emotionally crying out to God time and time again in the rawness of his deeply-felt needs.

- **As much as possible, get your emotional needs in good order before even going to the mission field. Develop a healthy self-esteem.**

If you have not yet begun your mission work, consider postponing an assignment until you've taken care of your "emotional baggage". Taking unnecessary "baggage" to the field with you only serves to compound the inevitable stresses and strains of missionary life, ultimately limiting your effectiveness. Become as emotionally healthy as you can on this side of an assignment. Whatever troubles you have at home will become magnified on the mission field---guaranteed!! Anticipate what emotional needs you will have on the field and begin now to prepare for them. Before heading overseas, work hard at developing a strong, support system of healthy relationships in your home country. You will reap the benefits for years to come. Make a serious matter of prayer any unresolved issues and have a few trusted friends make a

commitment to pray for you. Face directly any issues that need to be confronted and don't allow yourself to run from the pain or discomfort of them. Consider support groups and/or counseling as necessary. If you're already in mission work and have "emotional baggage" that needs to be addressed, begin taking steps immediately to work on the issues.

Do all you can to develop a healthy and accurate self-esteem before beginning your mission work. Make a serious study of the character of God. Learn to know within the depths of your soul your identity in Christ and how He sees you. Ask God to root out the lies and misconceptions about yourself that limit your potential. Learn to know yourself as much as possible, both the healthy and the unhealthy. Identify your strengths and weaknesses, and come to terms with your weaknesses, all the while continuing to work on them. Accept what you cannot change about yourself and learn to become comfortable with yourself. Continually trust God to complete His good work in you, even while fully seeing all that still needs to be done. The value of a healthy, solid self-esteem cannot possibly be overestimated if one is going to survive successfully on the mission field.

- **Be sure of your calling to the mission field. If possible, exercise choice in your mission assignment.**

Know without a shadow of a doubt that God has called you personally to the mission field. If you are married, a husband's call alone is not sufficient; you need your own. Without this calling, it is too easy to quit later when the battle intensifies, when you wonder whatever could have motivated you to sign up for mission work.

Exercise choice, if you can, as to where you go on the mission field. Try to choose a mission setting that supports healthy friendships among women. To choose an isolated situation where you would be mainly on your own could be a set-up for defeat. Do some homework on your part first. If possible, visit a potential mission setting before making a final decision.

To those who are single, try to go to the mission field as part of a team. (Some mission organizations send out singles only in pairs.) Avoid the "going-it-alone" route as much as you can. If possible, choose a host culture that is accepting of single women, allowing freedom to move about on one's own.

- **Cultivate a close personal relationship with the Lord.**

Make this relationship an absolute priority, despite whatever else may be going on in your life...and don't wait until you get to the mission field. Learn how to have intimate fellowship with the Lord, drawing from Him - not from your spouse or your friends - as your primary source for meeting emotional needs. This is especially true if you are single. Wisely writes one missionary, *"The Lord must be your strength, your joy, your everything - even if you are married."* Do not make the mistake of assuming that your service for the Lord substitutes for time alone with Him. Schedule time in your day for Him as this time may not happen otherwise; do not allow busyness to crowd it out. Jealously guard your time with Him. (Do not allow yourself to feel guilty, though, especially as busy mothers, when your "quiet time" may get shortened or sometimes simply lost in the day. Just start over the next day.)

- **Recognize that YOU are the one ultimately responsible for getting your emotional needs met. Give priority to meeting your needs.**

As you seek the Lord's help in this area, He will guide you and give you wisdom, but it is you who needs to take the primary human initiative to get your needs met. Do not assume people

around you will meet your needs; you could be very disappointed or disillusioned otherwise. YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOU...not your spouse, roommate, prayer partner, mission leader, friends, or anyone else. One seasoned missionary woman emphasizes, *"You can pray for, long for, or hope for someone else to help meet your emotional needs, but you CANNOT expect it or demand it."* So be willing to accept responsibility for getting your own needs met. Develop a plan; be proactive and assertive. Make getting your needs enough of a priority that you are willing to invest time, energy, and money in seeking solutions. One missionary wife speaks from the voice of experience as she comments how taking initiative has been her primary life-saver. She states, *"No one is going to observe my need and take steps to meet it. That's my responsibility. This includes taking initiative to make time with friends, to take time to read, to include fun and relaxation, to pursue potential friendships in unlikely places---among single women and with women both younger and older than myself. If I don't bear responsibility to do these things, no one else will either. So if they aren't important to me, they simply won't happen."*

Do NOT wait until everyone else's needs are met before you begin thinking about your own. As women, we tend to be nurturers by nature, often to our own detriment. We look after everyone else's needs first, then tend to ourselves - IF there happens to be any time or energy left over, which often there is not. What comes to mind here are the instructions typically given by airline personnel to flight passengers just before take-off. The message goes something like this, *"In case additional oxygen is needed on this flight, oxygen masks will automatically be lowered. Please place your mask on FIRST, then assist your children or others around you who may need help."* Whether on or off an airplane, we're of virtually no help to anybody else around us if our own oxygen supplies are dangerously depleted.

The plain, perhaps somewhat harsh, reality of mission life is that it requires a tremendous measure of emotional resilience or hardiness if one is going to endure the course well. Taking ownership and responsibility for your own emotional needs will go a long way in strengthening your internal resources.

**• Identify your own specific needs and feelings. Give yourself permission to express them.**

Learn to recognize what triggers your needs and what intensifies them, then work with that knowledge accordingly. Honor your needs and limitations. When I was a missionary in Japan, I lived right in the midst of a Japanese community and totally immersed myself every way possible in the Japanese way of life. I typically loved this immersion, but about every 3 or 4 months, I suddenly found myself feeling as if I were "drowning" with anything and everything Japanese. At those times, I had a desperate sense of needing to come up for air by escaping to familiarity for awhile. Fortunately, I had wise missionary relatives living in Tokyo who understood my need, so at those critical times they would invite me to come visit them. They graciously allowed me to hide away in their house for several days and return to all my familiar American ways as much as I could. Miraculously at the end of this self-imposed "house arrest", I would emerge thoroughly refreshed and rejuvenated, ready to re-enter the mainstream of Japanese life for another few months...until the process started all over again.

Learn to say, "I'm lonely," or "I'm hurting," or "I need..." Allow people to reach out to you. Don't build a tough shell around yourself. Make an absolute commitment to share yourself and your struggles, even if you cannot choose the friends you would ideally like. Admonishes one missionary: *"To not communicate one's inner self condemns one to a downward spiral of loneliness and depression, or to becoming hardened in a way that restricts the flow of Christ's*

*love in us."* Commit to becoming vulnerable, to taking risks in sharing. Exercise discretion, though, in what and with whom you share.

Choose to stay open in relationships despite the mobility and transitions so typical of missionary life. It does indeed hurt to say good-bye over and over again, but the loneliness of walling one's self off from potential friendships simply to protect against the pain of more good-byes hurts far worse. The price to pay for staying involved and open in quality relationships on the mission field is decidedly far less than choosing to close off to others.

Consider journaling as an excellent tool to help express your feelings, to sort through what's going on in your life and give clearer perspective. A journal can become a type of best friend who will allow you to pour out your heart and share your innermost secrets in full confidence.

**• Come to terms with the reality that some of your emotional needs may go unmet for periods of time.**

Hard as that may sound, there will be times when you simply have to live with unmet needs...and be content in the process. It would seem that Jesus himself had unmet needs while on earth, and so will each of us. Deliberately and intentionally choose to trust God for grace and strength, even joy, during these difficult times. Trust that if God indeed has brought you to the mission field, He will provide for you during those dry stretches. One former missionary, single at the time, shares her thoughts about her own unmet needs on the mission field, "*I never stopped longing for relationship, or affirmation, but I learned to be content without my needs met.*" Following is part of an e-mail message she sent after her return to the United States to a new missionary struggling with loneliness.

*I think what you are going through is very normal. To be very honest, I never got over the loneliness I felt most of the time I was there. I learned to accept it as part of what God had called me to, but I never got over it. The Lord and I had some very long conversations over it and many nights, especially out in the village, I cried myself to sleep.*

*So I can't give you any easy answers as to how I overcame the loneliness...because I didn't. I do know that the Lord showed himself in some very special ways during that time, and He Himself comforted me.*

*I remember one particularly bad day when I was really struggling with adjusting to village life alone, living with a local family. I got so frustrated that I remember going out behind the village, sitting on a hill and crying, "Lord here I am in the middle of nowhere and no one knows what I am going through right now. No one cares!" Then I opened my Bible to Psalms 103:11-14, and then 1 Peter 5:6-7. I had to be reminded that God did care. It didn't mean I ever felt good about being alone. I just knew that I could cry out to God and He did hear me, but that, for the moment this is what He had chosen for me.*

*So I am afraid I have no solution for loneliness. I eventually learned to live with it, accept it, and no longer fear it. I took comfort in knowing that God brought many of the great men of Biblical times - Abraham, Moses, Joseph, Jesus - through times in the wilderness. (By the way the main semantic component for "wilderness" is a "lonely place".)*

*I did discover one thing that I grew to love, and that was the sea wall down by the bay. I used to walk down to the wall and then jog along the wall. I let myself just walk on the beach or sit on the rocks if I was either really hot or really tired. Many times I lingered and sat and watched the sunset. But the sea wall became my time with the Lord, often kind of a hug from the Lord each day. I miss that, I miss that very much.*

Another missionary woman writes, *"I believe the fact of living in a foreign country presents some emotional needs which cannot be really met...but one must accept and find the Lord sufficient."* Yet another one muses, *"I believe I've learned that God does not promise to meet all our needs by immediate answers to our prayers, but knowing He is at work to develop character and a deep spiritual walk with Him has made the loneliness worthwhile."* You may not always have a profound sense of needs being met in the moment, but looking back, you can likely see that God gave exactly what was needed to persevere through those difficult times. Those periods of unmet needs provide an excellent opportunity to depend on God in ways not otherwise experienced.

- **With God's help, learn to change loneliness into solitude.**

Recognize that loneliness is not caused by isolation or singleness per se, but by the mindset that says, "Someone ought to be here." Loneliness has been described as being alone with one's self while solitude is being alone with God. Loneliness is simply part of the human experience and is part of what drives us to a deeper relationship with God and other people. Ask God to teach you how to spend time with Him as a friend. Remember that you always have the freedom to choose your own attitude, regardless of what may be going on around you. Victor Frankl in his book, Man's Search for Meaning, stated that even though he was a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp, he was freer than his guards because he found they could not take away his right to decide his attitude. He wrote, *"Ultimate freedom is a man's right to choose his own attitude."* Recognizing this freedom can be a tremendous way to avoid self-pity.

While learning to enjoy the company of God, learn to enjoy time alone in your own company as well. Develop the art of becoming your best friend! Put yourself on your list of people with whom you enjoy spending time.

- **Keep expectations realistic.**

Recognize the emotional drain on you that the myriad of cross-cultural stresses and demands of missionary life creates. Allow yourself the freedom to make mistakes, to live with your imperfections and limitations. Give yourself time to adjust to the differences in your host culture. However interesting newness may be, it can be very wearing. Don't try evaluating yourself or your world when you're tired, sick, angry, pressured, or depressed! Be careful not to compare yourself with others. The better you know yourself – your strengths, abilities, weaknesses, limitations, "trigger points", and temperament – the more effectively you will be able to set realistic expectations. If it is hard for you to identify your unrealistic expectations, ask someone you trust to share what they observe about you or how they experience you.

Be careful about expectations you assume for your workload. Allow me to pass on the counsel of my wise mother years ago as I was just starting my counseling practice. She stated, *"No matter how many clients you see or how hard you work, there will always be many more people with many more needs than you can possibly ever meet."* So pace yourself accordingly. There's no special merit in burning out for the Lord!

Work diligently to keep expectations of other people realistic. They also are finite, imperfect, flawed beings. **Count on the fact** that they will hurt you and disappoint you at times.

• **Make a conscious choice to actively pursue developing several key friendships on the mission field.**

Seek out fellowship with other Christian women and intentionally start cultivating friendships. Even though the pool may be small from which to draw, don't become discouraged. You might be surprised at how a friendship develops, even from what perhaps initially seems like an unlikely match. If you live in an isolated setting and no particular friendship seems naturally possible, ask the Lord to bring a friend across your path. When you find a possibility, deliberately pursue this friendship, even if long-distance. Write letters; make telephone calls; send e-mail messages; schedule trips into town together at the same time; plan vacations together. Do not allow distance or busy schedules to force you to neglect developing and nurturing friendships. As one woman states, *"No matter what it costs to say hello and good-bye, make friends and keep them; be a good friend."*

If possible, meet together with several other women on a regular basis. Get together to celebrate holidays, birthdays, engagements, babies, or any other special occasions. Create reasons! Share struggles, pray together, swap news from back home, help each other with house projects, or in teenage parlance, "just hang out". If one of these women is an older woman whom you deeply respect, consider asking her to become a mentor to you. If no one close-by can fill that role for you, consider "e-mail mentoring".

Be aware of emotional dependencies in your friendships, however. Because no one friend can meet all of your emotional needs, avoid the trap of trying to jealously possess the time and attention of any one particular friend. Seek out at least several friends to help meet your needs for friendship and intimacy. Learn how to set appropriate boundaries in your friendships.

Listen to one single woman's story of how she dealt with the need to cultivate friendships on the mission field:

*When I worked in Kenya, I lived in a little house by myself. People asked me if I were lonely, and I'd say, "No, the Lord lives with me." But later during my furlough, a counselor told me, "You are intensely lonely." I replied, "Oh, really? I tell people that I'm not lonely, and I thought I was telling the truth."*

*The counselor helped me see that God is a relational God and that we are made in his image. Therefore, quality relationships are part of the package if we are going to be emotionally whole. He told me that I should spend 30% of my time in in-depth relating. Prior to this, my priority list had looked like this: 1) my personal relationship with the Lord, 2) my health, 3) my office job for which I had come to the mission field, and 4) personal outreach in my free time.*

*Relationships weren't even on the list. So I made a list of my favorite people in town. And I would make a plan to spend a substantive amount of time with one of them every day. For example, Suzie's 2-year-old went down for a nap at 1:00 every day. So I would drop in to see her at 1:00. Ruth was single, so I'd ask her if we could do something together on our day off. I really enjoyed my boss. So I invited his family of five to dinner, and we spent a whole evening together. Seven days a week I made appointments. If I saw one of my favorite people as I was running errands, I gave myself permission to forget about my do-list and to linger and enjoy a conversation with that person for as long as it worked out.*

*I had to interview people in my job. Prior to this, when the interview was over, I would chat a little bit so as not to be abrupt and then go my way. But now, if I especially liked the person, I would linger and just enjoy spending time with him or her. After a few months I realized that I*

*was much happier. I wasn't spending as much time visiting my non-Christian friends to witness to them in my free time, but I felt like I was living life more as God had intended it to be.*

- **Broaden your circle of friends.**

Do not limit yourself to just your own team, your own mission, or the mission community for friendships. Reaching out beyond your familiar world can expand your thinking and protect you from "tunnel vision." Besides, a friend outside your own group may feel like a safer person with whom to share your heart as there is less likelihood she is socializing with other people you know. Reach out beyond the missionary community to the larger expatriate community as well - to the foreign business and academic community, if available. Intentionally seek to develop friendships with nationals. Though cultural differences may limit deep friendships from developing, you could be delightfully surprised. Comments one woman, *"God redefined what I thought of as needs and brought much satisfaction through relationships with nationals."* In reality, there's probably no better way to win nationals to the Lord than to first develop friendships with them. If unsure, ask God to show you how to develop friendships with nationals.

- **Develop good relational skills.**

This is especially necessary if you are an introvert and relating to others doesn't come naturally for you. One can learn how to be a good communicator and friend. Observe carefully people who have good relational skills. Practice on safe people around you. If you're considering going to the mission field, work hard at developing good relationships first. If you don't have good friendships at home, you won't automatically start making them on the mission field. Good relationships are ABSOLUTELY essential to being successful in mission work. Advises one missionary, *"Don't go to the mission field until you have first figured out how to initiate, develop, and grow in healthy, intimate relationships. You need them to be successful on the field. You need them to grow in your walk with the Lord. You need them to glorify the Lord in your life."* The ability to develop and maintain friendships is one of the greatest personal and ministry skills a woman can have, let alone one of the greatest gifts she can give to herself.

- **Develop a strong, healthy support system back home.**

Make sure you have at least a few people back home with whom you can fully share what's really going on with you - the good and the bad, the joys and the sorrow, the victories and the struggles. Communicate regularly with these people and allow them to be a real support to you. Many missionary women happily report finding compassionate and empathic responses when they relate openly with a few deeply trusted friends. As appropriate, share from your heart with your larger body of supporters. (You may need to educate them on how to care for missionaries.) Though you may feel vulnerable, you could be surprised by the extent to which some people will be able to identify with you. One particular woman commented on her joyful surprise in finding her supporters so open to her struggles. She attributes their receptivity to her frequent communication with them in which she tries to be as accurate and as positive as possible.

With the introduction of e-mail communication, one can now keep in contact with people at home in a way never dreamed possible by early missionaries. Says one missionary: *"E-mail is the absolutely most wonderful invention since sliced bread! Utilize fully."* Whether by e-mail, "snail mail", faxes, or phone, people need to hear regularly from you to continue as a support base for you. Do your best to talk some of these people into visiting you on the mission field. (Grandmas and Grandpas are a must!)

Of **critical** importance, develop a good solid prayer base back home. Form a prayer team of faithful intercessors who will commit to pray for you on a regular basis. You will not make it on the mission field for long without a strong prayer covering. Keep your prayer team informed regularly of your prayer concerns and praise reports.

- **Take good care of yourself.**

Eat healthy foods; get adequate rest and sleep; exercise regularly. How we care for our bodies has a direct impact on our emotional well-being. Give yourself permission to relax and have fun. Laugh a lot. Learn how to play and enjoy life. Pursue outside interests such as mountain climbing, photography, bird-watching, flower arranging, or coin-collecting. TAKE VACATIONS. If you are single, take them with your best friends. You may find limited choices due to fewer resources, cultural restrictions, and safety issues, so prepare to be extra creative, imaginative, and flexible as you seek outlets for fun. Take advantage of any good books, tapes, CDs and videos you can find.

### **WAYS TO ADDRESS THE EMOTIONAL NEEDS UNIQUE TO SINGLE WOMEN ON THE MISSION FIELD**

- **Take the initiative to make friends with roommates or other singles, missionary wives, couples and families. Develop appropriate friendships with men.**

Commit to developing friendships with those in your community, both single and married, male and female. Don't wait for others to initiate and don't automatically assume they may be too busy or not interested. Entertain others in your home; practice hospitality. Become an "honorary auntie" to the missionary children around you. This provides an opportunity to meet some of your own needs for relationship with children and gives parents a much-needed break.

Work hard to develop good relationships with roommates, whether or not you had a choice in living together. Plan regular times to talk, pray, play, or travel together. Commit to becoming as good friends as possible, regardless of the length of time you may be roommates. Guard against becoming emotionally dependent on each other, however. Be prepared for the reality of conflict. Just as in marriage, you will invariably have clashes with each other. Resolve to address the issues together and prayerfully work through them. Seek outside help, if necessary (but with each other's permission first).

Exercise the utmost of wisdom and discretion in developing friendships with men, both fellow missionaries and nationals. If the men you relate to are married, draw their wives into your friendships. Doing so can serve as a powerful deterrent to feelings of jealousy or exclusion on the part of the wives or to any inappropriate behavior on your part with the men. Make sure that your manner of relating to male co-workers, even if totally appropriate by your own culture's standards, does not clash with the host culture's standards on male-female relationships. Be especially sensitive to cultural cues in relating to national men.

The extent to which you reach out and develop relationships, seeking to build a sense of community, will have a major impact on your effectiveness and sense of well-being on the mission field. Just because you may be single does not mean you must live out your mission experience feeling alone or lonely. Your singleness in no way lessens your need for relationship. You just may have to work harder at creating community.

- **Limit how much time you spend alone.**

Don't unnecessarily exacerbate your sense of aloneness. Spending inordinate amounts of time alone is a guaranteed set-up for loneliness. Learn to develop a good balance between "alone time" and "people time", regularly offsetting one with the other. Learn to recognize what times of the day or what days of the month you may have the hardest time by yourself, then plan accordingly.

- **Acknowledge your own "nesting" needs.**

Being single doesn't exempt you from these needs. Make your abode look and feel like home, no matter how temporary your living situation may be. Decorate it attractively to express your personality. Take several favorite items with you from home to add to your new setting. Even a few small treasures can help bring a sense of continuity to a totally new environment, making it feel more familiar and inviting.

- **Come to terms with your singleness before going to the mission field.**

For many singles, this issue tends to be a recurring one, rather than one that gets settled once and for all. Whenever the issue re-surfaces, pour out your heart to God and find a trusted friend with whom you can share freely. Make regular acts of committing your singleness to God. Recognize that a woman does not have to be married in order to be happy and fulfilled. God has made you whole as you are and you do not need a husband to be complete. The ultimate issue is faithfulness to God - living out His will in our lives, walking in obedience to His spirit - regardless of one's marital status. Be careful not to idealize marriage. A husband isn't the answer to life's problems. No, singles do not have the corner on frustration! A single woman myself, I have often said that one of the best things that helps me keep a healthy perspective on my own singleness is doing many hours of marital therapy through the years! And do not go to the mission field expecting to find your husband there...you could be sorely disappointed otherwise. God may indeed bring you a mate on the mission field; just don't plan on it.

- **Honestly acknowledge and address your sexual needs and feelings.**

Acknowledge them as God-given and as part of the way God has created you. Learn to express them in healthy, creative ways. If properly channeled, your sexual energy can become a source of tremendously productive creative energy. Enjoy being feminine in both appearance and behavior; revel in being the woman God has made you to be. Just because you do not have a sexual partner does not mean your femaleness must be ignored or hidden. Discuss the area of sexuality openly with a counselor or trusted female friend and make it a real matter of prayer.

Commit yourself to absolute moral purity. Do not set yourself up for unnecessary temptation. Hold yourself accountable to someone you trust. Be careful of your vulnerability, especially when feeling emotionally needy. Ask a more-experienced missionary woman to help you become aware of the sexual nuances and subtleties in your host culture. Learn what unintended messages you could innocently be giving off to men. Actively and intentionally monitor your thought life. Carefully guard against involvement in any form of pornography or in attempting to find "pseudo-intimacy" through avenues such as an unbridled fantasy life, excessive reading of romance novels, or inappropriate Internet "chat rooms".

- **Find healthy ways to meet your need for touch.**

Develop healthy relationships with missionary and national children whom you can hug freely. They'll love you for it! Take advantage of physical touch that may come naturally with greetings or farewells. Ask your married female friends for hugs. Consider a pet; there's nothing like a huggable little dog waiting for you at the front door who can't wait to jump all over you when you come home!

## **WAYS TO ADDRESS THE EMOTIONAL NEEDS UNIQUE TO MARRIED WOMEN ON THE MISSION FIELD**

- **Do not expect your husband to meet all of your emotional needs.**

No one spouse can possibly meet all the needs of the other spouse. One sure way to cripple a marriage is to place the primary burden of meeting needs on the spouse's shoulders. YOU are the one who must assume primary responsibility to get your own emotional needs met. This doesn't mean withholding expression of your needs to your husband; just be realistic how much he can meet.

- **Commit to building a strong marriage.**

Seek to establish a good foundation in your marriage before going to the mission field. Deal with any problems that need to be addressed. Marital problems will not cease just because you've chosen to serve the Lord in full-time ministry. One missionary woman points this out so well as she emphasizes, *"Married women without a good marriage are MISERABLE."* Whatever marital problems you have back home will only intensify on the mission field...guaranteed! If you're already on the mission field, openly address the problems with your husband.

Discuss with your husband how you both intend to build and maintain a strong marriage that encourages friendship, good communication, and healthy intimacy. Resolve to work through any conflicts that arise. Set aside regular times to talk. Passionately admonishes one missionary wife, *"Communicate, communicate, communicate with your husband. Build bridges instead of creating schisms in your relationship with your husband, as this relationship will be your primary source of life. If this relationship breaks down, you (both of you) might as well pack your bags and go home, as there is no ministry that will be effective on the field (or at home) when this vital link is broken."* Resolve to be your husband's biggest encourager. Plan dates with him. No matter how demanding missionary life may be, you MUST spend time alone with your husband if your marriage is going to thrive. Allow sufficient time to play together, despite the workload. This isn't a luxury, but a vital necessity.

If possible, discuss in advance potential sources of marital conflict you may experience on the mission field. Develop a plan to deal with problems that may arise as a result of the particular stresses of missionary life. Ask a seasoned missionary couple to share with you some of their struggles and how they dealt with them.

- **Intentionally affirm your value during those years when your primary role in the mission setting may be that of mother and homemaker.**

For those of you who spend most of your time with your children, recognize you have absolutely no less value than those women directly involved in mission work. Don't in any way underestimate that role. Fully affirm yourself as you help to shape the lives of those precious

little ones. And watch for opportunities to minister to other people in the midst of raising your children. Wisely advises one woman, *"If you have young children, don't feel you are not fulfilling your missionary role. Make these roles a route for ministry. Befriend a national mother and teach her, by example, how to live out Biblical roles of wife and mother. She may never have seen these before."*

- **Don't allow the demands of home and family to isolate you from other women.**

Regardless of busyness, you still need female friendships. Find quality time to develop and maintain friendships with other women. Be willing to take the initiative to do whatever is necessary to plan time together. Save energy for these friendships! As one busy missionary mother encourages, *"Rest enough so you have sufficient physical energy to pursue friendships. Don't put off because of fatigue."* This is especially true if you are home-schooling your children.

Seek to develop friendships with single women. You may be delightfully surprised to discover how much you have in common with them and how much you may have to offer each other. Consider "adopting" one into your family, but recognize her role is not just to baby-sit (and don't take her on as a project or out of pity). With God's help, choose not to become threatened by your single co-workers. One particular single comments, *"Don't be afraid of the single missionary. She's not after your husband. She's probably already had opportunities to be married."*

- **Make a life for yourself; continue to develop yourself as a woman.**

States one missionary mother, *"Don't take all your identity from your husband's role and don't let being a mother consume you--the kids will be gone someday and you'll still be a person. Then what?"* You are more than your husband's wife or your children's mother, important as those roles are. Utilize your God-given gifts and abilities as much as possible. Stretch your mind. Read books that spark your interest. Pursue personal goals you've dreamed of for a long time, such as taking a correspondence course, learning to play the guitar, getting into an exercise routine, or writing poetry. Even if time limitations mean having only a few minutes here and there to pursue these goals, do so anyway. This is NOT selfish! You will have more to give back to your husband and children emotionally if you allow time for yourself. You can't give out of an empty well. Remember your oxygen mask! Find snatches of time alone whenever possible just to catch your breath, to think, even to nap.

Recognize, however, that you may simply need to live with some of your needs going unmet for periods of time, especially in those years of having young children at home. Remember, this is a season of your life. Life won't likely always feel so demanding. Your children will be gone from home in a matter of time. Trust God more fully than ever to get you through those stretches where your needs take more of a back seat. And get your praying friends to diligently commit to praying you through those stretches!

- **Ask mission leadership to articulate their expectations concerning wives and mothers in ministry. Seek opportunities to contribute to the larger cause of the mission with your particular gifts and abilities.**

Find out what roles and responsibilities you are both expected and permitted to assume on the mission field (and if possible, do this before even accepting a mission placement). If you are uncomfortable with what is outlined, discuss openly your feelings and concerns with your leaders. Be able to articulate clearly with them what you need.

Use your gifts and abilities as time allows to make your particular contribution to the mission. Take the initiative to create opportunities. Remember, though, that even during those stretches when all your energy seems to be going into maintaining your home, you are still making an immense contribution.

## **WHAT HAPPENS WHEN EMOTIONAL NEEDS ARE NOT MET?**

An entire book could be written addressing this particular question, but suffice it here to briefly say that there can be a huge price to pay for sustained unmet needs. To ignore emotional needs or to live with them unfulfilled for long periods of time can set up any person for a host of problems – physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual. Missionaries may be especially vulnerable because of all the unique challenges the mission field presents. Potential problems may include discouragement, depression, despair, debilitating loneliness, explosive anger, panic attacks, dutiful but joyless work, lost vision or purpose, addictions, interpersonal difficulties with co-workers or nationals, marital or family problems, divorce, health problems, financial problems, moral failures of various types, spiritual lethargy or dryness, or - in the most extreme of cases - suicide. It is utterly heartbreaking to see missionaries return home virtually broken and "burnt out" after having invested tremendous amounts of energy and time preparing for their missionary calling, to say nothing of the tremendous financial loss involved. I have worked with a number of such missionaries as they sort through dashed dreams and hopes after excruciatingly painful experiences, assisting them in picking up the broken pieces of their lives and slowly begin to heal. God is so faithful to redeem their pain and rebuild their shattered lives, but, oh, the utter agony they often experience in the process.

## **PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS**

This paper is not meant to be an exhaustive study on the emotional needs of missionary women, by any means, but hopefully it can serve as a beginning point of discussion on this subject. Possibly several applications could be made:

### **For those Women Considering the Mission Field**

Ask yourselves the following questions in some honest soul-searching:

1. What are my emotional needs now? Am I able to clearly articulate them? What am I currently doing to meet these needs? How well am I succeeding in meeting them? Which, if any, are unfulfilled? What blocks their fulfillment? What specific steps can I begin taking to get them met?
2. Is there any "emotional baggage" in my life that needs to be addressed? If so, how can I begin to deal with it? Should I consider counseling? Am I truly open to resolving any unfinished issues in my life?
3. What kind of support systems do I already have in place? How can I strengthen them? Will they continue for me on the mission field?
4. How can I begin preparing now to deal with the emotional needs I will likely experience on the mission field?

You may want to consider discussing these questions with someone who knows you well and who would give you honest feedback. Make your emotional needs a regular matter of prayer.

### **For Those Women Already on the Field**

Consider the above questions and do your own soul-searching, asking for input from a trusted friend or two as well. If needed, consider counseling as available. It's never too late to begin addressing needs. Make your emotional needs a regular matter of prayer.

### **For Missions Personnel**

I would encourage you to carefully review your mission's policies and practices related to the women in your organization. In what ways does your organization contribute towards women addressing their needs? How is sensitivity demonstrated toward them? Are women encouraged to expend time and energy meeting their needs? Despite the inevitable demands and busyness of mission life, is ample opportunity provided them to develop close friendships with other women? In what ways are they encouraged to fully develop their God-given potential? What is your organization doing to ensure that women do not inadvertently experience discrimination based on gender or marital status? How are mothers in the home given input in ministry decisions? Are couples given adequate time away from their responsibilities to nurture their marital relationships? Are there any changes that might need to be made? If so, what steps are necessary to make these changes?

I would suggest that the material in this paper be discussed in pre-field training and orientation. Have candidates grapple individually with these questions as well as discussing in small groups. Have couples discuss together. Sensitize men to the emotional needs of women.

Offer a seminar, workshop, or retreat on the mission field for women to deal openly with the topic of meeting their emotional needs. It is the rare woman who would turn down an opportunity to share her thoughts and feelings on this subject. Provide a setting for the men as well to talk about the needs of their wives and how to relate to them.

### **For the General Reader**

Could I boldly challenge you to ask the Lord what personal application He would have you make as a result of reading this paper? I, for one, come away with a decidedly renewed commitment to pray more faithfully and fervently for missionaries, as well as to encourage a number of specific missionary women I know quite well by "e-mailing" them on a regular basis.

Here's to doing our part to support God's faithful servants on the front lines of battle

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