

## MANAGING EXPATRIATE STRESS

V. Bala Koteswari\*

Mousumi S. Bhattacharya\*\*

**G**LOBAL business is growing rapidly today and continues to grow in future also. To keep pace with the global change in business scenario, global managers need to meet the demands existing in the international context. Especially the expatriate managers, when they go to the foreign country on assignments they need to face the challenges of the global business scenario. Foreign assignment along with excitement and enjoyment brings the conditions of distress also to the expatriates. Potential stressors like cultural shock, language barriers, and separation from the family will eventually affect the performance and productivity of the expatriates and cost to the firm. The expatriate stress process follows a pattern leading to either adjustment or dropping the assignment and coming back to the parent country. An attempt has been made in the present study to find the problems and stressors of the expatriates. Considerable ways of managing stress at individual level and organizational level are suggested.

**Keywords:** Stress, Expatriate Stress, Stressors.

### Introduction

Global competition, market demands for multinational management structures in the parent country demand the firms to send their best people to forge international relationships and create an international corporate presence. Such people i.e., the expatriates, though perceive the foreign assignments as an instrument towards career progression and financial benefits, often face problems to adjust with the different political, economic and cultural environment of the host countries i.e. the place of the assignments. If ignored, these adjustment problems result in stress, both in professional and personal lives of expatriate which may lead to high turnover; low productivity, low morale and decreased effectiveness. It also damages the firm's reputation in the international context. The failure in the expatriate assignment may also affect the group dynamics by the way of de-motivation and low commitment etc. The relationships between the host-parent countries may also be significantly affected. The productivity of the foreign operations may go down; the ability to operate in the host country may be lessened, the company may lose its market share to competitors and also damage its reputation among clients. Failures can have profound effects on the expatriates themselves by ruining their careers, causing personal blows to their self-esteem and ego, and may be taxing on their family life both physically and psychologically (Yavas and Bodur, 1999; Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985).

Expatriates differ in their causes of failures of the assignment. It has already been established that stress, job related and personal, is one of the major reasons of expatriate failure. The dysfunctional consequences of stress in a foreign assignment can take on a number of negative implications such as, absenteeism, alcohol and drug abuse, turnover, early return to the domestic organization, aggression

\* Lecturer (HRM & OB), Institute of Finance and International Management (IFIM), Bangalore, Karnataka, India.

\*\* Lecturer (HRM & OB), Institute of Finance and International Management (IFIM), Bangalore, Karnataka, India.

to others within and outside the organization, extended leaves, or any combination of these negative behaviors (Lange & McCune 1989, Jong & McMullen 1992, Liese et al. 1997, Darby 1998, Kemmerer et al. 1998, McIntosh et al. 1998).

The present paper makes an attempt to discuss the major issues related to the expatriates' stress and forwards some major coping strategies, both organizational and personal.

## **Stress Process in Expatriates**

Applying the model of the Selye's (1976) General Adaptation Syndrome [GAS], four stages of expatriate stress can be identified: Pre-alarm, Alarm, Resistance and Exhaustion stages (as shown in Figure 1). The stages are as follows:

*Pre-alarm-* Expatriate is totally unprepared for the foreign assignment at this stage. Training is given to the expatriate in the parent country to cope with the cross-cultural differences and to face the challenges existing in the host country.

*Alarm-* The stage of alarm starts when an expatriate actually land in the host country. In spite of the training given, he identifies the differences in culture and experience unfamiliarity of situation, people, etc. Hence he/she may find that other people's behavior does not match with one's own behavior and one's own behavior does not produce expected results. He/she will find that the environment makes new demands for which he/she has neither ready-made answers nor the ability to develop new and culturally appropriate responses.

*Resistance-* In this stage, to overcome the difficulty of adjustment and adaptation, expatriate uses all physical and psychological resources to meet the environmental demand and to reduce the discrepancies.

*Exhaustion-* If the expatriate is able to adjust in the host country's culture; it leads to effective performance and increased productivity. Otherwise, he/she will be unable to adjust to the host country's culture and feel exhausted and loses interest in work and completing the assignment and tries to come back to the parent country.

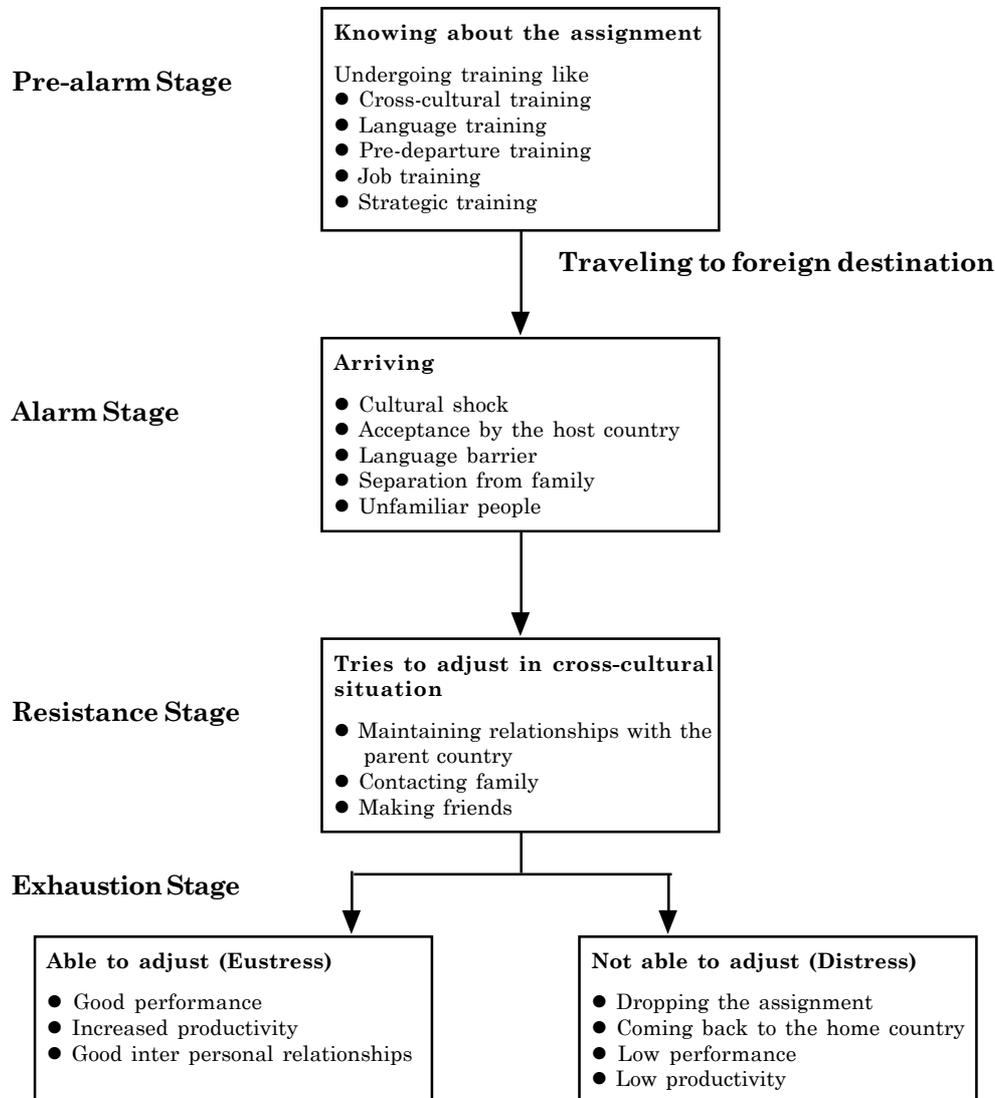
## **Stressors in Expatriate Assignment**

In spite of the training given in the parent country, when the expatriate actually lands in the foreign country, there are various factors causing stress like unfamiliarity of the foreign place, the people, and the doubts of acceptance by the host country and the relationships with the boss or subordinates, etc. which gradually affect his/her performance in the assignment. Some of the problems are mentioned below.

### **Job-related Stressors**

**Cultural adjustment/Shock:** Cross cultural adjustment is adjustment of expatriate with the job, host country nationals, and to general work and non work environment (Black, Stuart, and Stephens, 1989). Most of the effective global managers often suffer the most severe culture shock which is a natural response to the stress of immersing oneself in a new environment. Yavas and Bodur (1999) revealed that the following personal characteristics are exhibited by well adjusted expatriate managers:

- being culturally prepared for assignment
- being a culturally sensitive person
- ability to recognize complexities in host nationals
- liking to mix with host nationals



**Figure 1: Different Stages of Stress Process of an Expatriate**

- being realistic in one's expectations
- willingness to accept the challenges of inter cultural experiences
- enjoy social interactions
- having empathy for others
- effectiveness at resolving conflicts, and
- being a people person

**Job/Task characteristics:** According to Yavas and Bodur (1999) job/task characteristics and organizational variables are also believed to affect expatriate adjustment like role ambiguity/ role clarity, role discretion (Black, 1988;1990), role overload and role novelty (Black, 1988) and organizational culture and size (McEvoy and Parker, 1995).

**Tension between parent and host country work set-up:** Formal support systems that are provided by the organization might be of particular value to the expatriate manager who is facing short, intermediate, and long-term stress associated with their foreign position. The level of stress could accumulate to a point where it would be difficult, if not impossible, for the expatriate manager to fulfill their role in the foreign assignment. Without such support, the expatriate manager may attempt to address the mounting stress in a number of ways leading to failure or dropping of the assignment. Most expatriates believe that accepting foreign assignments gives them an advantage over their colleagues in similar positions in the home country. However, others fear that they will suffer from “out of sight, out of mind” syndrome, and be left out of important communication loops in the corporate office in parent country.

**Communication problems:** The possibilities for communication and interactions are considerably enhanced if managers are proficient in the language of the culture in which an expatriate is operating (Abe and Wiseman, 1983; Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985). An expatriate manager should be aware of the foreign country language despite which it forms a hurdle for his/her existence. Fisher et.al. (2005) stated that following are the aspects of communication toughness:

- differences in the norms and rule for communication
- frequency of communication
- difficulty in learning the host country language
- length of the foreign assignment
- mode of communication – face to face or by phone or memo only
- formality of communication required

**Gender issues:** Gender issue is a stressor particularly to women expatriates. Women expatriates have to be more resilient and resourceful if they wish to be successful in foreign cultures (Jacob, 2004). Women irrespective of their culture face resistance by some men, when they try to advance in their careers. It is a fact that women expatriates have to be more skilled and adjusting to foreign culture than their counterparts.

**Blocked career progression:** Majority of expatriates lack effective career management processes to support repatriation and may even face by-passed for promotions. Stahl (2000) found that two thirds of expatriates identified repatriation and career issues, such as anticipated re-entry problems of lack of career planning as troublesome problems.

**Differences in Compensation:** Substantial differences exist in the compensation of expatriates at the same level in various countries. These differences in compensation practices lead to stress among expatriates.

**Quality of superior-subordinate relationship:** Quality of work relationships act as a potential stressor. Relationships between superiors and subordinates who are from different cultures form the significant aspect of multi-national organization effectiveness (Ralston, Terpstra, Cunniff & Gustafson 1995; Vaught & Abraham 1992). Research by Deluga & Perry (1991) showed that subordinates who effectively use influence strategies can secure desired outcomes and resources from their superiors in the expatriate assignment.

#### **Personal Stressors**

**Family issues:** Family of expatriate also experience stress similar to cultural shock which the expatriate face. Adjustment of the expatriate spouse and family to host country may be potential

problem despite affecting the expatriate and may even lead to assignment failure. Tung (1981) is of the opinion that lack of support from expatriate families may be responsible for failure in the assignment. Unlike expatriate, his/her family doesn't undergo training which would help in their adjustment in host country. Especially, the children find themselves strange in school and face unfamiliarity of the situations but, must cope with all social traumas which can actually cause extreme stress. Moving across vast oceans or between continents, far from family, friends, community, country also creates a more deeply felt and unique kind of stress to the expatriates and their families.

**Dual-career couple:** The case in which an expatriate family is dual-career couple and in which the spouse has left a good job in the home country leads to stress in the couple. International relocations is one of the potential stressor that affects various members of the family differently. This is particularly evident in non-traditional family configurations such as dual-career couples (Harvey & Wiese, 1998).

**Psychological acceptance:** The psychological acceptance of the expatriate in the host country is another difficult proposition leading psychological disorientation. The non- acceptance of the expatriate by the colleagues, boss, subordinates and the organization as a whole is a potential stressor for an expatriate.

## **Managing Stress Among Expatriates**

Expatriate stress cost to both organization and to the individual. Hence, both organizations and the expatriates need to manage stress for organizational and individual well-being. One of the best strategies that can be adopted by the organization may be choosing the right person for the foreign assignment. There exist differences in the effectiveness of coping strategies used across different countries. Expatriates can be active participants in their own adjustment processes, and their adjustment to new cultures rests as much on what they do to help themselves and as on what companies do to assist them. The coping strategies of expatriates stress can be classified into two types, organizational coping strategies and individual coping strategies.

### **Organizational Coping Strategies**

The failure of an expatriate can be disastrous to the organizations. In order to make the expatriate assignment successful, organizations have to adopt some strategies and help in declining stress among expatriates. The very nature of the expatriate selection process (e.g., different candidate pools for different situations) has significant implications for training, compensation, and other Human Resource Management policies and practices integrated together form effective high performance work practices (Huselid, 1995; Huselid, et.al. 1997) for global managers. Following are some of the strategies which organizations can implement to over come the expatriate stress.

**(1) Promoting interaction with the host country nationals:** Interpersonal contacts with the host country nationals teach the expatriate how to behave and act during the assignment. Thus, when expatriate is sent for the assignment to the host country, he will be better adjusted and will be less frustrated by the cultural difference compared to the expatriates who are isolated and who have less communication with the host country nationals (Hanvey, 1979; Selmer, 1999).

**(2) Not letting the expatriates discouraged in the early days of the assignment:** Early decline in satisfaction and discouragement of the expatriate leads to loss of confidence and ability to succeed in the assignment. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), expatriate if stays in unhappy stage is less likely that he/she will ever adjust. Therefore, it is essential to help expatriates to manage stress in the early stages of their assignment to avoid discouragement.

**(3) Helping hand from HR professionals:** HR professionals having an intimate knowledge of

host countries, their customs, language, cost of living, education alternatives and spouse employment opportunities, etc., can help the expatriates in overcoming the problems in the host country. Swank (1995) found that Ford uses international human resource teams with local representatives, to conduct assessments and prepare expatriates for their overseas assignments.

**(4) Testing the personality of the expatriate:** Expatriate agreeableness, indication of collaboration, sincerity, respect and empathy for others, may promote showing tolerance and patience as well as solving problems responsibly. Conscientiousness and emotional stability may show expatriate tolerance to stress. Intellectual openness shows the cultural acceptance, flexibility to the culture and open-mindedness. Hence the personality of the expatriate need to be tested before selecting him/her for the assignment.

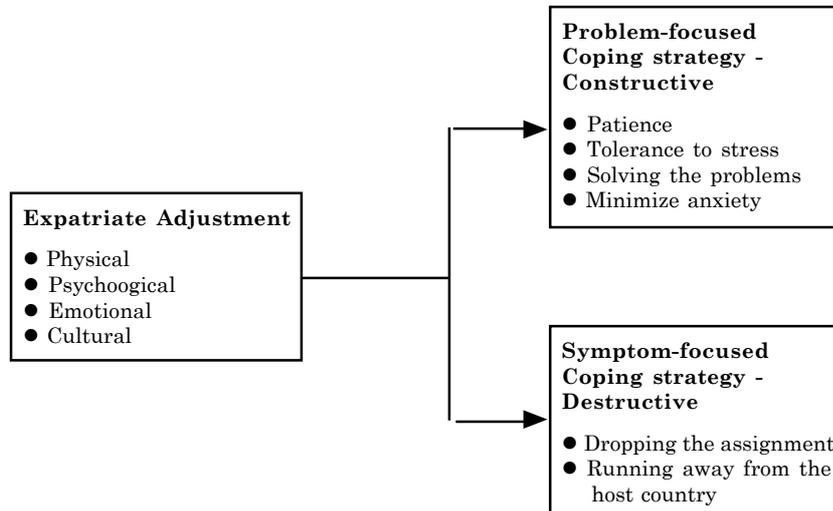
**(5) Selection of the candidates:** Selecting candidates with professional competence, and who is a low risk for being able to adjust to another culture is another important issue. Screening candidates for expatriate assignments so as to “care enough to send only the best qualified,” both in the job requirements, and in their being able to adjust to the host culture. Stone (1991) gave the following criteria used by the companies for expatriate selection: ability to adapt, technical competence, spouse and family adaptability, human relations skill, desire to serve overseas, previous overseas experience, understanding of host country culture, academic qualifications, Knowledge of language of country and understanding of company culture.

**(6) Pre-assignment orientation:** Pre-assignment orientation for the expatriate is essential. Aepfel (1996) found that European companies such as British Petroleum, ABB Unilever, Volkswagen and Bayer AG operate regional assessment centers comprising both host country representatives and specialists to select and orient expatriates.

**(7) Organizational Training strategies to cope with expatriates stress:** Psychologists have proposed two approaches to cope with expatriate stress: *Symptom-focused strategies* and *problem-focused strategies* (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Folkman and Lazarus, 1980). Symptom-focused strategies are used to diminish emotional distress by attending to behavior and expression, physiological disturbance, subjective distress, or all these. Problem-focused coping strategies are efforts to take constructive action to change the situation creating the stress and address the problem and minimize the anxiety and distress (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis and Gruen, 1986). Expatriates who use the problem-focused coping strategy will be able to cope better with the stress than the symptom-focused coping strategy. Hence expatriates should be trained in using the constructive coping strategy. Figure 2 explains the two types of strategies, which an organization may adopt in its training module.

**(a) Pre-departure training programs:** Pre-departure training programs administered by the parent company can ease the transition of the expatriates and facilitate expatriate adjustment to amenities, general living conditions and social interactions (Yavas and Bodur, 1999). Expatriate should undergo the following training programs and counseling sessions before leaving the parent country:

- Knowing and exploring the expectations, concerns of each member in the family
- Managing relationships across globe
- Briefing the culture of the host country
- Teaching effective communication styles
- Providing insight of stress management strategies
- Teaching expatriate how to work in teams and to manage conflicts



**Figure 2: Organization Training Strategies to Manage Expatriate Stress**

**(b) Cross-cultural training before and after arrival in the foreign country:** Imparting cultural training to the expatriate before and after arrival to the foreign country fosters an appreciation for the host country’s culture. This workshop helps in providing basic information about the host country and parent country organizations. However, this training should focus on challenges before expatriates in adjusting to the host culture like steps one can take to progress through the process of cultural adjustment, careful examination of culture shock and how expatriates can deal with it effectively.

**(c) Language Training:** Despite the prevalence of English, an exclusive reliance on the same diminishes an expatriate manager’s ability to interact with host country nationals. Knowledge and fluency in local language enable expatriate to understand and communicate effectively. Expatriate should be definitely trained in the foreign languages in view of the future need.

**(d) Practical Training:** Practical training is aimed at helping the expatriate and his/her family ease themselves into day-to-day life in the host country.

**(e) Job training and Strategic training:** Job training helps the expatriate in new operational skills or supervisory skills that are needed in foreign assignment and strategic training helps in giving a big picture of the global business strategy of the organization (Fisher et.al. 2005).

**(f) Training local supervisors:** Companies which are successful in assimilating non-natives into their workforces provide training not only to the expatriates but also to their local supervisors (John and Roberts, 1996).

**(g) Management Development Programs:** Management development programs can be designed to increase the overall skill levels of expatriates through a mix of ongoing management education and rotations of expatriates through a number of jobs within the firm to give them varied experience. Management development programs can be often used as a strategic tool to build a strong unifying culture and informal management network which support transnational and global strategy.

**(h) Coaching and Mentoring:** Coaching and mentoring expatriates is a vital organization coping strategy (Jacob, 2004; Edward, 2000). Coach has to know the expatriate’s desired outcomes and help in improving the level of performance. In the process, undeveloped potential of the expatriate

will be assessed. In order to make expatriates well anchored in the broader organization, and to prevent professional isolation each expatriate can be assigned to a mentor who periodically touches base and provide information about the events at the home country and the head office, as well as advice expatriate in career development.

**(8) Organizational support at the new locale:** The host country organization should provide the necessary support to the expatriate emotionally, physically and psychologically.

**(9) Repatriation programs:** A largely overlooked but critical and important issue in the training and development of expatriates is to prepare them for re-entry into their home country organization. To help expatriates focus their energies on their foreign assignments, organizations need to create “repatriation” programs as well. The Human Resource Management function should develop a good program for re-integrating expatriates back into work life within their home country organization. And can also utilize the knowledge expatriate had acquired while abroad.

**(10) Coaching on career progression:** Expatriate training programs should include career implications and repatriation concerns. The parent company should clearly explain the expatriates the career value of the foreign assignment and discuss the career track following the repatriation. Expatriates should be made aware of where an international assignment fits into their overall career pattern. If the expatriate thinks that the international assignment is a signal of important change in their career he/she may be highly motivated, committed, more involved and may work wholeheartedly in their new role and this can further help the expatriate to take initiatives in the host country leading to effective performance (Selmer, 1995; Naumann, 1992).

**(11) Knowing the family circumstances:** Thorough knowledge about the expatriate family circumstances, commitments, and family adjustment capabilities by the parent country organization is essential before selecting and sending the expatriate for the foreign assignment, which will help in reduction of the failure in the assignments.

**(12) Keeping Expatriates well connected with the parent country:** The parent country organization should accept some responsibility for ensuring that the expatriate families are happy in the host country and the expatriates themselves should remain well connected to the parent country organization.

**(13) Proper compensation practices:** Equalizing expatriate pay on a global basis to reduce the substantial difference in the pay. Substantial differences exist in the compensation of expatriates at the same level in various countries. These differences in compensation practices create dissatisfaction and distress in the expatriates. The firm should pay executives in different countries according to the prevailing standards in each country, or should equalize pay on a global basis.

### **Individual Coping Strategies**

**(1) Appropriate coping strategy:** Expatriate can adapt individual coping strategy to overcome stress. Stahl (2000) found that the coping strategies can be classified into four categories according to expatriate adaptive function in an international assignment: a) task-oriented strategies, such as planned problem-solving and implementing organizational change; b) learning and adjustment strategies, such as modifying inaccurate expectations and learning more about the culture; c) interpersonal strategies, such as relationship building and seeking task help; and d) avoidance and defense strategies, such as ethnocentric behavior withdrawal. The findings of this study further revealed that the cultural distance is a critical determinant of how expatriates deal with the problems that they encounter overseas.

**(2) Learning how to behave:** Expatriates should thoroughly observe, discretely inquire and should try to learn what principles are lying beneath behaviors of the host country nationals which at first may appear to be unusual. This can pertain to such actions as whether to bow, shake hands with the one you meet, etc. By learning to appreciate the cultural norms of the host country expatriates will be able to adjust to the host country culture.

**(3) Spouse support:** Spouse support and adjustment can help the expatriate as a great stress reliever. Adjustment of the spouse predicted the expatriates' intention to remain in the international assignment (Selmer, 1999).

**(4) Exercising:** Regular physical exercise, some practice of meditation and relaxation techniques can help in relieving expatriate stress.

**(5) Recreation:** Recreational activities like watching movies, listening to music, etc. can be taken according to expatriates' interest to relieve stress.

## Conclusion

To minimize adverse consequences associated with expatriation, successful management of expatriation process need to be adopted with the help of careful human resource management strategy such as selection, training, compensation, etc. which has been discussed in the earlier sections. It is also suggested that effective use of individual and organizational strategies may reduce the possibilities of stress among expatriates. At the organizational level, pre and post departure training, language training cross-cultural training are needed to be implemented and they should be regularly monitored. At the individual level, expatriates should be supported by the family and friends.

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V. Bala Koteswari and Mousumi S. Bhattacharya

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