

Real Stress Management

By Bouvier Williams

Stress

This past week has left me exhausted. There were so many things I had to deal with at practically the same time. I had to get 14 people at work ready to apply for an executive training program within by Friday. I had to get my apartment ready for guests on Sunday. And to top it all off, there were several large bills due to be paid by Monday. None of these tasks by themselves were difficult, but trying to juggle all of them in the same week left me feeling quite stressed out. At times, I felt tired. At other times, I felt myself getting quite irritated. Overall, I just wanted the stress to stop so I could catch my breath.

Maybe you went through something similar. Perhaps your boss gave you an unrealistic deadline, perhaps there was a loan to repay by a certain date or face some kind of penalty. Maybe one of your kids got sick. Or you were told that your services were no longer needed at your place of employment. Whatever, the news, or events I'm sure there was some stress to manage.

Who hasn't dealt with a difficult situation and felt their heart sink under the weight of new pressures, expectations, and stress? Life is full of pressures and worries, with our families, marriages, and finances -- and when the burden of workplace deadlines, school due dates, and other responsibilities is added to that load, even the toughest of us will sometimes wonder how on earth we're going to make it through.

What's really bad is that the amount of stress we face as Americans seems to be rapidly increasing. Numerous surveys confirm that adult Americans perceive they are under much more stress than a decade or two ago. A 1996 *Prevention* magazine survey found that almost 75% feel they have "great stress" one day a week with one out of three indicating they feel this way more than twice a week. Back in 1983 only 55% of the survey respondents said they felt under great stress on a weekly basis. It has been estimated that 75 - 90 percent of all visits to primary care physicians are for stress related problems.

Job stress is far and away the leading source of stress for adults, but stress levels have also escalated in children, teenagers, college students and the elderly for other reasons, including:

- increased crime, violence and other threats to personal safety,
- pernicious peer pressures that lead to substance abuse and other unhealthy life style habits,
- social isolation and loneliness; the erosion of family and religious values, and the
- loss of other strong sources of social support that are powerful stress busters.

And you know what? All the stress is making us sick. Repeated stress contributes to hypertension, strokes, migraines, heart attacks, diabetes, ulcers, neck or low back pain. Physically, many of these effects are due to increased sympathetic nervous system activity and an outpouring of adrenaline, cortisol and other stress-related hormones. Certain types of chronic and more insidious stress may be due to loneliness, poverty, discrimination, bereavement, depression and frustration. These stressors have even been associated with impaired immune system resistance to viral linked disorders ranging from the common cold and herpes to AIDS and cancer. In desperation, people are seeking relief for their problems through any remedy they can find.

Our culture is inundated with self-help books, therapists, time-management workshops, massage parlors, recovery programs and prescription drugs. And those are the positive attempts to relieve

stress. Many have gone down the horrible path of seeking relief in alcohol, narcotics, prostitution or at it most extreme; suicide. We suffer so much that many of us cry out like Job, ***"The churning inside me never stops; days of suffering confront me."*** (Job 30:27). ***Taken from the NIV***

No one can argue against the fact that stress is one of the most significant issues to plague our so called modern society. But is it possible for a Christian to be stressed out? Didn't Jesus himself say that we shouldn't let our hearts be troubled? What does the Word have to say about stress? Well, why don't you open your Bible and find out? Turn to Luke Chapter 10, versus 38 – 42 which reads in the New International Version.

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

It seems like such a light-hearted scene. Can you imagine, Martha running around the house tending to the food for the guests? Making people feel comfortable? People stopping her to ask questions or make requests. Perhaps even making sure small children are being looked after. The woman had a lot on her plate. All the more so because the guest-of-honor was Jesus Christ himself. I'm sure everything had to be perfect. Nothing less would do for a man like Jesus. But ask anyone who has every hosted a dinner party or even a large after-church lunch and they can tell you what kind of stress they experience. Will the all the food be ready in time? Will there be enough to satisfy everyone? Will my guests enjoy the meal and the atmosphere of my home? What if they're unhappy? What will they tell other people about me? That my friends' is real stress.

And obviously Martha was feeling the pressure because she got so caught up in the dinner arrangements that she forgot who the dinner was intended for. Yes, she was feeling the heat. Until finally she notices Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus and then she decides she isn't going to take it anymore. How could her own sister abandon her to do everything by herself? And when she cries out to Jesus to make Mary help her, she gets a different response than the one she probably expected.

Notice how the Lord quickly assesses the situation and in a loving way seeks to calm Martha's nerves. ***"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed."*** Now Jesus knows she's at her wits end and is breaking under self imposed pressure. Yes, I said self imposed. One of the reasons we sometimes get so stressed out is because we ourselves are doing things to put pressure on ourselves. For example, Maybe you waited until the last minute to get something done and things didn't go as planned (like the exam you didn't prepare for and now you have to cram). Or you were working on something and never considered the fact that something might go wrong and you had no back-up plan in place. That's like typing an important document and your computer crashes. If you didn't save it as you went along, oh well.

Or maybe, you didn't confirm an appointment with someone and they forgot they were supposed to do something for you. These are the times when it's less about someone causing the stress, but rather us getting in our own way. But notice how Jesus doesn't accuse Martha. Rather he seeks to comfort her, because he knows she needs a stress antidote and he has the cure for what ails her. Only one thing is needed, he says. For you see, Jesus is all about stress relief. Mary understood this and planted herself right at his feet. For she must have remembered when he said, ***"Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from***

me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11, verses 28-30)

The first thing we must do to be deal with our stress and our worry is to come unto Jesus. Without Him, our life has no real purpose or hope. We simply run from one activity to another, seeking to fill our lives with purpose, peace, and happiness through poor substitutes. If we do not know our real purpose in life; our reason for existing, life is very meaningless indeed. Yet, God created each of us with a special purpose in mind. There is something that needs to be done on this earth that can only be done by you.

Much of the stress that we carry springs from the fact that we don't know who we are or where we are going. Even those who believe that ultimately they are going to heaven are often still anxious in this lifetime because they do not really know who they are in Christ and who Christ is in them. The fact of the matter is we are bound to have tribulation in this life. It is unavoidable, but having trouble in this life is not the real issue anyway. The real issue is how we react to it. That is where stress is born. The trials we face in this world will either break us down or make us stronger in the Lord.

"I will show you who he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them in to practice. He is like a man building a house who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came the torrents struck that house but could not shake it because it was well built." Luke 6:48. Jesus didn't say that once we built our house on the rock that everything would be perfect. No, He said that a flood came in torrents smashing against the house. The key is that the house was built on the rock of Jesus, and the rock of *putting His words into practice*. Is your house built on Jesus? Did you dig your foundation deep into Him, or was the house hastily erected? Is your salvation based on a prayer you prayed once or is it growing out of a committed relationship to Him? Do you come to Him every day, every hour? Are you putting His words into practice in your life, or do they lie there like dormant seeds?

But you might be saying, hey, that was no big deal. Martha just hosted a small dinner party. I'm facing big problems in my life. I don't have the money to finish school or pay my rent. You might even be saying to yourself I just found out that my husband or wife is cheating on me. My doctor says he found a lump and it doesn't look good. Yes, I have REAL issues to deal with.

Again, let's look to the Word. When all is said and done, there are still times when we all face incredibly difficult circumstances that have the potential to literally destroy us. One of the best way to counteract stress in those times, is to begin to praise God and thank Him for His countless blessings in our lives.

The old adage "count your blessings" really is true. In spite of everything, there are so many blessings woven throughout our lives that many of us do not even have the eyes to see them. Even if your situation seems hopeless, God is still worthy of all your praise. God delights in a heart that will praise Him no matter what the bankbook says, our family says, our time schedule says, or any other circumstance that would try to exalt itself against the knowledge of God.

As we praise and bless the name of the Most High, everything else in this world begins to pale and fade away against the sheer loveliness of who He is. Look at Paul and Silas. Turn to **Acts 16:20-26** in the NIV. ***"They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice." The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening***

to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose."

Now these men had just been severely flogged, ridiculed and attacked by a huge crowd of people. As an aside, Roman floggings involved using leather chords or strips with little pieces of metal attached to the ends of the strips. The purpose of that was to make the recipient of the flogging feel experience significant pain which would be sustained for a long time after the whipping. So one could say that being flogged and thrown into stocks, which is an ancient device designed to restrict movement of a prisoner, was an example of someone having a really bad day!

But instead of fearing for their lives, or becoming angry at God, they began to praise Him, singing out loud, careless of who might hear or judge them. As they began to praise Him, their hearts were soon overflowing with the real joy and peace. The song of those two men who loved God more than life itself began to flow through them like a river of liquid love into their cell and out into the entire prison. Soon, there was a flood of warm light bathing the whole place. Suddenly, an amazing thing happened. A violent earthquake shook the prison, the doors flew open, and *everybody's* chains came loose! You see Praise *a/ways* brings freedom. Freedom for ourselves, and freedom for those around us who are bound up as well.

But let's be clear for a moment. Is it sinful to feel stress? Am I failing in my Christian walk if I have a moment of stress? We need to understand that stress comes from an external stimulant or cause in our environment that prompts and internal response or decision. When placed in a dangerous, threatening, or challenging situation there are specific physiological reactions that our bodies experience coupled with strong psychological responses. When you are under stress, your body quickly releases chemicals into the blood. This sets into motion a series of physical changes. These include a faster heartbeat and breathing rate, higher blood pressure, and increased muscle tension.

These physical changes give the body added strength and energy. They prepare the body for dealing with stressful events such as giving a speech, aiding an accident victim, or fighting or fleeing from an attack. When stress is dealt with in a positive way, the body restores itself and repairs any damage caused by the stress. However, many people don't deal with stress in a positive way. Thus, stress-related tension builds up and, with no outlet, takes its toll on the body.

Our psychic reactions are somewhat harder to predict. These mental reactions vary according to the situation and the person. They may include feelings of anger, fear, anxiety, annoyance or frustration. A small amount of stress can help people perform their best--during an exam, an athletic event, or on stage. With too much stress, people may become accident-prone, make a lot of mistakes, and may not be able to function. Stress can be compared to a violin string. If the string is too loose (not enough stress), it won't produce music. If the string is too tight (too much stress), it will break. Some degree of stress is necessary to function properly.

So are we bad Christians for feeling so stressed? I don't see where Scripture says there is something wrong with us if we experience stress. Job tore his clothing and shaved his head when he heard the news that his children and practically all his possessions were lost in the same day. That was real stress he experienced. Yet God himself said ***"Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason." Job 2, verse 3.***

What is clear is that we are responsible for the choices we make as to how we will act. Fortunately, we have examples of how to cope with the worst that the enemy can throw at us. In an article on stress management, Dr. Kenneth Boa, writes about four principles that Paul taught in **Philippians 4**,

verses 4 - 9. Dr. Boa said “Paul teaches us how to turn pressure to our advantage. Paul taught four principles in this passage:

1. **Be Thankful.** When our present circumstances are considered against the bigger framework of God’s grand plan, we can lift up praise the way Paul and Silas did
2. **Be gentle.** A person under the effects of stress is like a car in which the driver has one foot on the accelerator and the other on the brake. Gentleness creates a spirit of peace. But it does not imply becoming a doormat; Christ was gentle without being weak. Gentleness implies having great power while exercising great control.
3. **Trust God.** The words in verses 5-7 are worth memorizing or printing out and posting on your desktop or calendar. If there was a machine that could turn anxiety into peace, it would make its inventor a billionaire. Yet God has given us the recipe for doing just this.
4. **Live ethically.** How much stress is generated by fear of being found out? Ethical people experience less stress. Being truthful is, in many ways, its own reward. It makes sense if for no other reason than because of its stress-reducing properties.”

Paul’s advice doesn’t tell us how to better manage our time, balance our different responsibilities, or write that paper you’ve been putting off for weeks; it doesn’t lecture us about the dangers of procrastination or reprimand us for biting off more than we can chew. Instead, it quietly reminds us that no matter how much stress and anxiety the world throws at us, there is one source where we can always find refuge when we’re feeling overwhelmed.

Fortunately for us, Jesus is our personal stress reliever we can access at any time and HE is the best solution I can share for how to live through the trials and tribulations of a world that has gone crazy.

Jesus is the full embodiment of God’s love -- and from that vantage point, the cares and worries of our daily lives are always put in their proper perspective. If you’re feeling stressed out and weary, unsure how you’ll get through the latest crisis, take a moment to listen quietly to your Father’s promise to you: “Come to me, you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”