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Reducing Stress

by Dr. Charles D. Dolph

Thousands of books and articles have been written on stress since it has supplanted self esteem and interpersonal relationships as the newest concern in popular psychology. The detrimental effects of stress on physical health have grabbed the attention of millions of health conscious Americans who fear that if they do not reduce their stress levels they may not survive to enjoy self esteem or interpersonal relationships.

Most of the literature on stress has focused on cognitive or physiological techniques which have been

developed to reduce the individual's arousal level. Since stress gets people aroused or "hyped up" physically, the techniques have been developed to help the stressed individual to exert conscious control over his body and reduce his tension level. Some of the most widely cited stress reduction techniques include breathing exercises, deep muscle relaxation, mental imagery, biofeedback exercises, and meditation. All of these have been shown to counteract stress and lead to tension reduction. These techniques have been widely published in books by Christian and non-Christian authors alike.

Most techniques are quite valuable and well worth the relatively brief time required to learn them. Alone, however, they are often not sufficient to help the stressed individual successfully overcome the stress of life. I first became aware of this when I began to teach stress reduction techniques to a person who had come for counseling. When he realized that I was teaching him deep muscle relaxation and biofeedback, he said not to bother because he had already learned those things. He said the problem was not in reducing his physical tension; he could do that. Rather, he wanted to make sense of his life which, for him, would be possible if he could understand the reason for his stress, anticipate and avoid stress, and have a good attitude toward the stress he could not avoid. Since then I have encountered a number of persons who knew the techniques of stress reduction but lacked the *perspective* to overcome their stress. Some of them said that when they are heavily stressed they are too discouraged to use their stress reduction skills!

While stress reduction techniques can be learned from practically any self-help book on stress, it is the Scriptures that give perspective for making sense of one's life. God's Word provides a spiritual and attitudinal framework within which one may choose to use some stress reduction techniques. Psychology is very strong in the area of methods and techniques. Psychologists are very good at suggesting "how to's" for handling stress, or children, or relationships. But psychology is very weak in helping people determine the purpose for living, right or wrong life styles, and other moral issues. Therefore, in coping with stress, we must first insist on a biblical framework and then insert psychological techniques where they are consistent with biblical values and which can be adapted to accomplish biblical goals. Therefore, we first look to the Scripture to get some guidelines for coping with stress.

Stress is anything which requires adjustment, adaptation, or change on the part of the individual. Stress may result from happy or distressing circumstances. Getting married or having a baby may be blessed and long-desired events; yet, no one would deny that they are very stressful in the sense that they require much adjustment and many changes by the persons involved.

What should be our attitude toward stress? The

Scripture provides some excellent examples of people who managed stress, chief of whom are the Apostle Paul and our Lord. Both experienced great stress and both overcame it. The stress Paul recounted in II Corinthians 11:23-12:10 is mind boggling. Let us see how he coped.

1. Paul expected stress. Acts 9:16

To change, grow, and adapt is a normal part of human life. Change makes life dynamic and exciting. In this sense, stress is routine. But, when one becomes a Christian, some extra stressors are sure to follow. Paul knew it, and so did Peter (I Peter 3,4) and James (James 1). Jesus told us not to be surprised if the world hates us. It hated him (John 15). Christians can count on the stress of having to adjust to a hostile environment. Simply planning on such things helps people cope with them better.

2. Paul did not avoid stress when it was for Christ's sake. Acts 21:10-14

In this astounding story, a prophet told Paul that if he went on to Jerusalem he would be imprisoned and given to the Romans. His friends begged him not to go, but he did not hesitate to experience stress for the cause of Christ. Sometimes the Christian willingly walks directly into a stressful situation because it is the right thing to do. Not all avoidable stress should be avoided.

3. Paul did avoid stress related to material things. Philippians 4:10-13

The author of the book of Hebrews (13:5) tells us to keep our lives free from the love of money because God our provider will never forsake us. Paul had learned this contentment. Thus, we see that some stress is best avoided and other stress is best confronted. Sadly, many of us get confused and reverse the biblical approach to stressors. We enter into stressful situations concerning mortgages, car payments, recreation, and the like while we avoid stressful situations which, for Christ's sake, would stir up opposition from the world, the flesh, or the Devil. While we should avoid unnecessary stress over material things, encountering stress for spiritual reasons is necessary for developing one's faith and character.

4. Paul had a clear vocational goal. Romans 15:20
Paul was blessed in that he had a clear and simple vocational goal – to preach the gospel where Christ was not known. Such singleness of mind helped Paul avoid many of the stresses and conflicts people face today. The sacrifices and adjustments Paul made were worthwhile because they helped him reach his goal. When one's mind is on one's work, the adjustments and inconveniences recede into the background because the work itself stabilizes and motivates the person. Paul had ample justification for the stress he endured. It was necessary for him to reach his goal. For many persons today who are not drawn to their work and do not have vocational goals, stressors in the workplace assume undue significance. When there is no goal in sight, there is little reason or satisfaction for overcoming the stress.

5. Paul had a clear purpose for living.

Philippians 1:21

One of the greatest problems that modern man faces is meaninglessness. Most people are trying to determine their value and their purpose for living. When an individual's self worth is based on anything less sure than his standing before God, every stressor is a threat to his meaning and value. Often, people who suffer most from stress are those who have no goals or reason to go on living. Every stressor seems like an insurmountable mountain and they feel as though they have no strength, will, or reason to climb it.

Paul could not lose. He believed that to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If things went tranquilly, then Paul could reach his goal of evangelizing those who had not heard the gospel. If stress arose, he could complete in himself Christ's suffering. If he were killed by the obstacles he faced, he would be with Christ and would have fulfilled his life goal. A purpose for living is essential for stabilizing and guiding one through life's stress. The only right purpose for living is Christ.

6. Paul had an eternal perspective.

Romans 5:18,21

In many places we are told that our present, brief afflictions are working an eternal weight of glory. We live in the preface of eternal life. No matter what stress may be encountered now, it will be brief and productive when seen from eternity's perspective. When we get discouraged, we feel as though our stress will only become heavier and never end. While this is a powerful feeling, it is not the true state of affairs. Stress may be handled much more effectively when seen for what it is – a temporary challenge which will soon pass.

7. Prayer is essential for overcoming stress.

While Paul's books are filled with the evidences of his prayers, the most vivid example of the centrality of prayer in a stressful life is provided by our Lord Jesus Christ. He frequently isolated Himself from all but his Father to whom He prayed at length. Likewise, God is our strength and our refuge. He raises up stressors and He casts them down. He gives us the wisdom and power to avoid them or overcome them. Certainly, the ultimate example of prayer in preparing one for stress is our Lord's prayer in Gethsemane. Undoubtedly, if we isolate ourselves from God, our Wisdom and Strength, by failing to pray, we shall be controlled and defeated by our stressors.

The stress reduction techniques described in so many books can be valuable. Do look at them. But, as you learn them and practice them, remember to do so only in the light of biblical perspectives.

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