

Coping With Stress
Presented by Jack Heppner at Braeside EMC, Winnipeg
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Introduction

I want to say at the outset that we cannot live without stress in any meaningful kind of way. We need a certain amount of stress to keep us active and engaged with life. Our goal can never be to eliminate stress in our lives completely but to manage it or cope with it in healthy ways. No stress equals no life.

There are always some people who are so disengaged with life, so lacking in commitment, so careless about discipleship in the way of Christ, so centered on themselves and their own comforts that they do not experience much stress. If stress does catch up to them on occasion they think everyone else is trying to spoil their party and they begin the blame game. If you are that kind of a person, much of what I will say today will not apply to you. All I will say to you is that I hope and pray that one day you will wake up to find out how dead you really are. So now you can go to sleep.

But there are many others who have a sincere love for Christ and a desire to serve him, who sometimes find themselves stressed out. This can be a bewildering experience, especially when it feels like you are alone with the debilitating symptoms that unhealthy stress leaves in your spirit, emotions and indeed your body. How can it be, we wonder, that having given ourselves to serve God, we often feel so burned out. These are the people whom I am addressing this morning. If you are such a person, please don't go to sleep.

Learning to Live Faithfully in the Context of Stress

As far as I know our modern term “stress” is not found in the Bible. So I do not have a specific passage to exegete to get the answers we are looking for. So it may appear to you as though I will be rambling through life and the biblical record in search of some pointers to help us. Well, that is exactly what I will be doing. Perhaps we can learn something together this way. My presentation will be more like a chat about stress than like a typical exegetical sermon.

In I Timothy 4:16, Paul encourages Timothy by writing to him as follows: *Watch your **life** and **doctrine** closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.* There are two things you are to watch, according to Paul's word to Timothy – your **life** and your **doctrine**. Many of us, especially Christian leaders, expend a lot of energy watching our **doctrine** closely, making sure we stay close to the truth. Fewer, however, watch their **lives** closely, even though that is the first on this list of two things to watch.

Few ever step back from their busy lives to ask themselves seriously how their life is doing. If someone asks it is so easy to simply say, “Just fine, thank you.” But we need to ask ourselves honestly from time to time whether we are maintaining what I call a **holy rhythm** in our lives that can sustain us in the long run. Or whether we are in fact experiencing **Unholy Arrhythmia** – irregularities that will lead to some kind of a breakdown if left unchecked.

Some researchers now tell us that stress contributes to 90% of all diseases. And that half of all visits to the doctor are stress related. They also tell us that this is a relatively recent phenomenon, having begun somewhere early in the 20th century. Unfortunately, this phenomenon is found in both non-Christian and Christian circles alike. Sometimes I wonder whether the situation is even worse among Christians, perhaps because beyond just living, they are also subject to the pressures that church life sometimes brings with it. Perhaps that should not be the case, but I’m afraid that it sometimes is.

However we cut it, many of us find ourselves caught in a cultural phenomenon of unprecedented and epic proportions. It is interesting to note that the cultures with the most “progress” and the most “labor saving devices” are the most hurried and stressed out. One would think it should be just the opposite, but it’s not.

A few years ago I got to know Mesache Kresetya, then moderator of the Mennonite World Conference. He told us that even though the church in Indonesia was going through much persecution, the concept of burnout among pastors was unheard of. That gave me lots to think about, especially as I witnessed burnout all around me and within myself. So many church workers I knew seemed to be stressed out.

One ray of light in our stress-filled lives comes with the fact that we now understand that stress does not come from circumstances but is our response to circumstances. The reason this is good news is that while we often can’t control our circumstances we can learn how to respond in the context of circumstances in ways that don’t multiply the stress factor. This is where Romans 8:28 is helpful for me. We are assured that “in all things”, that includes all the stressful situations of life, “God works for the good of those who love him.” Knowing that God sees and understands my situation and that he is in the process of producing something good from the circumstances I find myself in, encourages me to make responses to my lot in life that don’t multiply the stress factor in my life.

Another thing I have learned about stress is that it doesn’t only arise in difficult and troubling circumstances. Stress can arise in the context of positive and constructive dynamics where you really enjoy what you are doing. As a matter of fact you enjoy it so much that you overdo it – you don’t recognize that you have limits – and then gradually you begin to feel stressed out.

This is often the case among workers in the church, including pastors. It’s not that things are falling apart. On the contrary, things are sometimes going well and you are giving it all you’ve got – and sometimes more. Life is good but too hectic. The technical term for this kind of stress is Eustress – positive, but deadly when not kept in check.

Eustress floods our bodies with adrenalin, just as surely as stress arising in difficult circumstances, in pretty much the same way. And bodies flooded with adrenalin too often and too long simply break down. God created adrenalin to be used in special cases of emergency, not on a daily or hourly basis. Not being aware of this, it often comes as a surprise to busy and happy people that they begin to feel stressed out. “How can this be, they ask, when I am having so much fun?”

Trevor Walters, a pastor in British Columbia, whom Ruth and I met at an Oasis Retreat, asserts that stress affects our spirits, emotions, and bodies – in that order. He notes that the **“Spirit of God has little affinity with our hurried, hassled, hasty and heartless way of living.”** It simply happens that too much adrenalin diminishes authentic spiritual energy and causes us to lose our appetite for God. This is especially dangerous because it is possible to mistake an adrenalin rush for spirituality. They are not the same thing! But many can’t tell the difference. Sometimes we can mask this loss by keeping busy even though our joy and peace is gone. But probably some of our spiritually sensitive friends will begin to notice and wonder what is happening to our souls.

If stress is not brought under control at the spirit level, it will begin to affect our emotions. We will find ourselves discouraged, depressed, losing our patience with people, or being more critical than usual. Of course at this stage it is not hard for others to take note that something is wrong, even though we try really hard to leave the impression that all is well.

If we don’t listen to the warning signs in our spirits and our emotions, eventually our bodies begin to break down. From out of the blue we experience various physical symptoms. When that happens our bodies are speaking to us. But when we don’t listen even to our bodies, they eventually say, “Okay, enough is enough. You didn’t listen to your spirit, nor your emotions, and now you are not listening to me either. So I will make you listen - big time! And that is when we break down completely.

At least this is how it has happened in my life. And from my observations more people in our churches are somewhere on this continuum than we care to admit. Our challenge, of course, is to “watch our lives” carefully. To listen to those inner stirrings of our souls that affect our spirits and emotions negatively before the body gets involved, and then take some corrective measures to lead us back to what I call a “holy rhythm” of living as God intended for us to live. It is interesting and helpful to note that, according to Walters, the recovery process works exactly in the reverse order to how our problem began. First we must give our bodies the rest and attention they need. As we do our emotions begin to heal and eventually our spirits.

Sometimes excessive stress arises because of unrealistic expectations. This is especially true for committed Christians who are willing to serve. Once you open your eyes and your heart to needs around you, the needs will stretch as far as the eye can see. Given that

there always are so many needs around you, sometimes other people place unrealistic expectations on you. They don't mean to hurt you, but if you are a willing servant of God, others will latch on to you and ask you to get involved – here, there and everywhere. However none of these well-meaning people know how full or empty your gas tank is. Only you know that, at least if you have been checking. In such a context it is important for you to “Watch your life.” For you to evaluate carefully and prayerfully whether God is indeed calling you to get involved or whether you are simply doing so to please others.

Jesus modeled this for us on a number of occasions. When the disciples told him that the crowds were waiting for him and surely it would be appropriate to go teach and heal some more, Jesus listened to the voice of his Father and headed to the mountains instead or to the other side of the lake. Not every opportunity to serve translates to a personal call to get involved. Jesus couldn't do it and neither can we. If we try we will get stressed out.

I had to learn this while on a mission assignment in Bolivia in my mid-twenties. When we arrived there, we found there were so many needs all around us and I jumped right in with both feet to help where I could. I remember so clearly one day I was headed out in our ambulance to pick up another sick person. I was so tired and worn out I had a hard time staying awake. I remember stopping beside the road and crying out to God for just a little more strength. “There are so many needs all around,” I said to God. And I still remember God saying to me, almost in an audible voice, that I was not called to meet all those needs. “Do what I call you to and that is enough.” I found a great release in that.

But sometimes unrealistic expectations come from our own souls. Our own insecurities, perhaps, create a drivenness by which we try to prove our worthiness to ourselves, to God and to others. This is a much more difficult problem than the expectations placed on us by others, because this often has to do with wounds in our souls that have not healed. And most often we are unwilling to face those wounds and walk the difficult pathway towards healing. Unhealthy drivenness, rooted in a wounded soul, is – at least in my opinion – one of the biggest sources of stress in people's lives.

I hesitate to linger here because of the sensitive nature of this topic. In his book, *Healing for Damaged Emotions*, David Seamands suggests that unhealed wounds play all kinds of havoc with our lives. They may be covered over like new bark covers damaged parts of a tree, but they are there none the less. He refers to these wounded parts of our soul as “infirmities” that need special attention. A common symptom of such an infirmity is perfectionism. While many of us try to make perfectionism into a virtue, it is in fact the key symptom of deep woundness, says Seamands. With our perfectionism we are trying to prove something.

And, we should add, that perfectionism is the source of much unnecessary internal and external stress. There are other symptoms of woundedness such as a low self-esteem, or even some forms of depression. It is a good thing that we have a High Priest who is

“touched with the feelings of our infirmities” (Hebrews 4:15). Some of our souls cry out for healing for the infirmities they live with. Does yours?

Sometimes stress arises from unbiblical theological assumptions we have picked up along the way. Often we inherit them from our experiences in early life and they become the “default” positions to which we naturally return without thinking, causing undue stress.

For example, one assumption I grew up with was that there was no limit to what one could do for God. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13) meant that if I had enough faith nothing could stop me. But that is too simplistic a view. Yes I can do all things God calls me to, but not all things, period. I can’t be at two places at one time, nor can I work around the clock on a regular basis. There are limits to what we can do and we should not deny that by interpreting such passages with naive literalism and boosting our own sense of spirituality in the process.

Another assumption I learned was that every moment of every day must be productive. “Work, for the night is coming...Give every flying minute something to keep in store” went the song we frequently sang. I would give account to God some day for every idle moment of my life. Such thinking produces unrealistic expectations and will keep you on a treadmill to the point of burnout. We need to balance such thinking with a theology of rest and a theology of holy rhythm.

Another assumption for me was the notion that with Christ every problem can be fixed. If you try to be a Messiah who can fix any and every situation with a quick scripture reference or a fervent prayer, you will find your stress level rising when life just doesn’t work that way. Sometimes we need to submit ourselves to living gracefully with certain realities that don’t have an easy fix, even with Jesus.

So I am suggesting that on occasion we have to reject assumptions we have picked up unwittingly in favor of more biblical notions if we want to live well with levels of stress we can handle.

Sometimes stress arises unexpectedly at work or in other relationships. It is a good thing to know that our spiritual resources for dealing with situations are not only operative during our devotional times. As David Bosch says, we have a “spirituality of the road” that accompanies us into life’s temptations and troubles.

For example, you may find yourself in a situation where you are asked to **compromise**. Your boss may expect you to participate in a cover up of some wrong doing. This increases stress big time, especially if you are uncertain of what you will do. If you go along with it once, and then again and again, soon you will find it hard to discern honesty from dishonesty. You will always have to try to remember what you said to whom so your story remains plausible. That creates stress.

If you determine ahead of time to be honest and truthful, you will find your stress level diminishing. You may lose your job, but you can walk out of the door with your head

held high. You say, but losing a job for honesty's sake creates its own stress. Perhaps, but it will be more like a test. If we can learn to trust God for our futures, he will direct our paths in ways that take us into a new future with him. I have a friend who has walked away from two jobs because he refused to compromise. Today he holds his head high in a job in which he is allowed to be honest.

Another situation most of us encounter from time to time is that of conflict. If not handled right, conflict can become a major source of stress. Unfortunately there is no pat answer that will resolve all conflict situations, but if we are concerned about keeping our stress levels in check in the context of conflict, there are some things we can do. One thing is to take Paul's advice drawn from the example of Christ seriously. He states in Philippians 2:3-4. ***Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.***

There is much more that can be said about how to deal with conflict, but one way to reduce your stress level in the context of conflict is to think yourself into the other person's situation and point of view. Simply clinging to your own point of view and defending it to the death is a sure way to increase your stress factor.

There are some more simple bits of advice one can give to help us think clearly about stress. They are so simple that one is almost embarrassed to mention them. But they must be said because many of us simply ignore these basic truths.

The first is that we need to get enough rest. Archibald Hart says, ***Often-used descriptors of our society include active, busy, driven, fatigued, tired, exhausted, weary, burned out, anxious, overloaded, or stressed. But seldom do you hear our society described as well rested.*** Richard Swenson goes on to suggest that a healthy life-style comes equipped with four gears – *park, low, drive, overdrive* – and I would add a fifth – *reverse*. Park and reverse are both legitimate positions on your gearshift. Can you imagine driving a car without them?

Yet often we drive our lives without ever using Park or Reverse. According to God's design, part of the park position is to get enough rest. Swenson continues by saying that ***Many people don't believe they should sleep very much, believing that this will make them more efficient and productive.*** Most of the time this is not true. Just this week I heard a news report that lack of proper rest is costing society billions of dollars a year. And much of that is related to the stress that builds up with lack of proper God-given rest.

Secondly we need to regain simplicity as a life-style. Historically Anabaptists were committed to the "simple life". They took Jesus quite seriously when he admonished them to be content with the basic necessities of life (Matthew 6:25), and that where your treasure is there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:21). But for the most part many of us have forgotten that focus a long time ago. It is time to reclaim that for our lives if we want to live well with stress. Stress expert, Hans Selye, advises, ***Do not underestimate the delight of real simplicity in your lifestyle.*** Words well spoken to those seeking to reduce stress in their lives.

A third simple bit of advice is to keep physically fit. It is said that our generation sits more than any generation before us. And so one of the downsides of an advanced society is that we have less need to be physically active. Our bodies are designed to be physically active. And when they are not our stress levels increase proportionally. It is not just good medical advice the government is giving us these days to “Get moving.” It is first of all God’s advice for a body he has designed. Forget what the government ads tell you if you want, but listen to the God who made you. The “Get moving” slogan is not the creation of a wise government bureaucrat. It is first of all God’s advice.

In conclusion I want to refer to a dramatic story in the gospels of Jesus sleeping in the back of the boat during a storm (Mark 4:35-39). Even though all the needs in Palestine had not been met, and even though a storm was approaching, Jesus gave himself permission to rest.

How unlike Jesus we often are. How could we go to the back of the boat to sleep when a storm is approaching? We can’t, says Kirk Jones, because we tend to live with the myth of our own *indispensability*. He comments further on this story as follows: ***If we are to observe the time we need and deserve to rest and refuel, we must believe the unbelievable, the preposterous, and the absurd; namely, life will go along just fine during my temporary absence...Feeling consciously or unconsciously that we are the essential indispensable element of a program or institution is a terrible liability and a lie...The lie, and an idolatrous one at that, is to bow down to the god of personal irreplaceability.***

The ability to “get to the back of the boat” is something that we must learn. It does not come naturally to many of us. Ultimately it depends on a faith decision, and a willingness to let Jesus be our example. If we are afraid that the back of the boat signals the demise of our usefulness, we should keep in mind what Jesus did upon reaching the shore – he cast out demons, raised the dead and healed the sick.

I hope I have not discouraged anyone from getting involved in life and in the service of our God. If you take from my message to you this morning a new permission not to get involved because involvement might bring on stress, I have failed in my assignment. If our main focus in life is to seek a stress-free existence, we will likely not be found to be faithful. Stressful circumstances always will arise in the course of an engaged life. My encouragement to you this morning is to get involved in life and service, but find ways of reducing stress-inducing responses to stressful circumstances that will inevitably swirl around you.

I leave you with the famous Pauline blessing:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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