

COPING WITH STRESS

Watch your life closely

JACK HEPPNER
EMMC CONFERENCE MINISTER
Fall, 2002

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. UNDERSTANDING STRESS	1
A. Watch Your Life 1	
B. Terms	1
C. Stressors in Life and Ministry	2
1. The invisible nature of ministry	2
2. The disparity between expectations and reality	3
3. Unbiblical theological assumptions	3
4. Cultural progress	4
D. The Physiology of Stress	8
1. Adrenalin and stress	8
2. The Symptoms of stress	8
3. Spirit, emotion and body	10
E. Where to From Here	11
Questions for Discussion	11
II. FINDING HOLY RHYTHM	12
A. Learn to Accept Limitations	12
B. Learn to Manage Adrenalin	12
C. Get Enough Rest	13
D. Find Healing for Unhealed Wounds	14
E. Establish Clear Boundaries	15
F. Re-establish Margin	16
G. Focus on Your Circle of Influence	17
H. Focus on Important, Non-urgent Tasks	18
I. Regain Health Through Simplicity	19
J. Keep Physically Fit	19
K. Get to the Back of the Boat	20
Questions for Discussion	21
BIBLIOGRAPHY	22

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Watch Your Life Closely

I. UNDERSTANDING STRESS

A. Watch Your Life

1. In I Timothy 4:16, Paul encourages Timothy to *Watch your **life** and **doctrine** closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.* Many persons in ministry spend a lot of energy watching their **doctrine**. However, fewer persons in ministry watch out for their **lives** with any degree of diligence. Few ever step back far enough from their scheduled lives to take note of how their lives are, in fact, doing — whether they are maintaining a “holy rhythm” that can sustain them in the long run. That is until their “unholy arrhythmia” results in some kind of a break down — spiritually, emotionally, morally or physically.
2. Increasingly, people in the medical profession are more vocal about the fact that many of our modern diseases are directly related to stress. In an essay entitled, *Stress and Burnout in Ministry*, Rowland Croucher asserts that “Stress now contributes to 90% of all diseases. Half of all visits to doctors are stress related.” He goes on to say that anxiety reduction may now be the largest single business in the Western world. Unfortunately, Christians, including persons in ministry, in the Western world are not exempt from this societal phenomenon.
3. This document is not an exhaustive study on the subject of coping with stress in ministry. Rather it is a compilation of practical and theological reflections on the subject which I hope can be of some help to my fellow pilgrims. Hopefully, with the help of God and the support of one another, we can learn to “watch our lives” more carefully.

B. Terms

It will be helpful at this point to define some of the terms we will be using throughout this paper. It will help to keep us on the same page (Swenson, Margin 58; Hart 42).

1. **Stress:** Hans Selye, the “father” of stress research, began popularizing the term in the 1930s, giving support to the idea that the concept of stress as we experience it today is a relatively recent phenomenon. Selye defines stress as “*the normal internal physiological mechanism that responds to and adapts us to change; it is the non-specific response of the body to any demand made*”

upon it.” This is contrary to the popular thinking that defines stress as an unpleasant circumstance. Stress is *not* the circumstance, it is our *response* to the circumstance. It is not “out there” but rather “inside us.”

2. **Stressors:** Stressors are those environmental changes that set in motion the stress adaptation response. Someone accuses you or affirms you, gives you an unexpected gift or fails to repay a loan, cuts you off on the highway or lets you into the line up, praises you for a good sermon or tears it to shreds. Such changes in equilibrium are not stress — they are external stressors that elicit an internal response.
3. **Eustress:** Eustress is the positive, constructive aspects of our stress response to stressors in our lives. Eustress energizes us, “psyches us up,” makes us especially creative before a deadline and allows us to be exceptionally productive in response to stressors we experience. Often eustress is not recognized as stress, but as we will see later, this form of stress can be dangerous if experienced too often or over too long a period of time.
4. **Distress:** Distress is the negative, destructive aspects of our stress response to the stressor. This is what most of us mean when we use the word *stress*. Distress is experienced in the form of emotional responses such as anger, anxiety, defensiveness or fear.

C. Stressors in Life and Ministry

While it is widely recognized that too much stress can be a problem, it is not our goal to eliminate stress completely in our lives. The ability to have a stress response when it is needed is God-given, and without it life would become dysfunctional at best and impossible at its worst. Our goal is to manage stress in order to maximize its benefits and minimize its damage. In order to manage our responses to stressors, it is helpful for us to understand what they are and how they are calling us to respond. The following list of stressors is not exhaustive, but include many that we all face as we try to live responsible Christian lives.

1. **The invisible nature of ministry:** Persons like Eugene Peterson have helped us in recent years to define true Kingdom work, especially that of pastoral type ministry, as largely “invisible” work. The business of “curing souls”, he says, is more often defined in terms of hiddenness, subversiveness, prayerfulness, quietness, and unbusyness than in terms of projects visible to and understood by the masses. Most of us have a natural bent toward seeing work as “visible,” with tangible results that can be displayed and described.

For people oriented toward visible work, it is hard to understand the amount of energy that is needed for invisible work. That is why we are tempted to focus on doing “visible” work so people will see the results and know that we have been “working” to justify our reputations and perhaps even our salaries. And then we think we can squeeze the “invisible” work that

God calls us to into left-over time with left-over energy. Such a situation is more than most of us can handle and invariably leads to some kind of distress.

2. **The disparity between expectations and hard reality:** For those of us committed to addressing the needs of people around us, the task is never done. Only those who deliberately close their eyes will not see the many needs that remain untouched. In fact there are thousands of possibilities for involvement in the lives of others which we will have to miss out on. If we expect more of ourselves, or if others expect more of us, than what is in fact possible, we will find our stress response rising.

Impossible expectations come from two main sources — from *without* and *within*. Others, mostly well-meaning persons, place expectations on us. On the one hand, this is healthy and normal. We are called upon by Scriptures to encourage each other to love and to do good works. On the other hand, the cumulative effect of the expectations of others can become unreasonable and even impossible. Such a disparity between the expectations of others and what we can in fact do can easily create a crisis situation. Sooner or later we all come to realize that we simply cannot fulfill all of the expectations people place on us. It is simply impossible.

Sometimes unrealistic expectations come from our own souls. Often we are driven by internal pressures to do more than is realistically possible. Such drivenness usually comes from some unhealed wounds in the soul. Insecure in our identities, we have a need to prove our worth to ourselves, others and even God. The more we accomplish the more love we will deserve, the more respect we will gain, and the more fulfilled we will be. Or at least that is our unconscious line of reasoning. The more driven we are because of wounds in our souls, the more we will tend to justify our feverish activities. Stressors coming from a wounded soul are much more powerful than stressors coming from other people.

3. **Unbiblical theological assumptions:** It is easy to pick up faulty assumptions about life from our homes, schools, churches, and the general influences of media in general. The perspectives about faith and life that we “inherit” from the experiences of our early years forms the “default” position to which we naturally return again and again without thinking. Even if we have found them to be faulty and have replaced them with better theological presuppositions intellectually, it seems the earlier, engrained patterns easily return to trouble us even if they are in fact unnecessary stressors. That is why it is necessary to keep reminding ourselves of biblical truth and seeking God’s grace to live by it in spite of previous conditioning.

- One of the false assumptions 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,” meant that if I had enough faith there was nothing that could stop me. “We are limited only by our unwillingness to serve.” To burn out for

Jesus was a sign of intense spirituality. To admit to limitations was to admit to being unspiritual. Once such a perspective is internalized and one becomes addicted to it, unnecessary stress will ensue.

- Tied with this perspective I picked up the notion that *every moment of every day must be productive* in some way. “Give every flying minute something to keep in store; Work, for the night is coming, when man works no more.” The fact that I would give account of every word said and every minute lived reinforced the notion that true Christians are always on the move. That, combined with a strong, farm work ethic allowed for little rest or relaxation without a gnawing sense of guilt. What would I say if Jesus came and found me napping while the world was still lost and dying?
- Then there was *the spirit of triumphalism* that permeated my childhood. The real Christian is on the victory road — happy all the time, living above the world, climbing up sunshine mountain, healed and whole from the moment of conversion. That was the public persona we were encouraged to wear. The reality, of course, was quite different much of the time, but it was not acceptable to say so. Testimonies were stories of victory, not struggle and defeat. So put on a plastic grin and chant the victory songs. Such duplicity, when taken into adult life and ministry becomes a major stressor. Keeping up a pretense that all is well when it is not takes more energy than we think.

Everyone has a package of assumptions that need to be tested and possibly changed. *It is okay to question childhood assumptions.* That is part of maturing in Christ. And if the theological assumptions we acquired early in life are not appropriate or biblical, we should not criticize our forebears. They did the best they could in passing on the faith they had come to know. What our children learn from us will also be flawed in some ways. But sometimes early childhood impressions must be superseded by healthier biblical perspectives to allow us to live healthy, productive lives for God that keep stress levels in check. However, we may be surprised at how tenacious those early assumptions are.

4. **Cultural Progress:** Richard A. Swenson argues, persuasively I think, that we live in an unprecedented era with unprecedented problems. He notes that the tired line that life has always been difficult; that basically nothing has changed, is sounding more hollow all the time. Most of us are not trend-perceptive, so we do not notice the gradual cultural shift any more than we notice children growing up. But when all the data is analyzed, he insists, one fact is certain: *Something historical is happening in our lifetime.*

Granted, life in earlier times was not easy. But, argues, Swenson, there was *margin*, a commodity now more or less gone from our lives. The dreams of a good life of by-gone generations have been more than fulfilled for millions in North America. Yet...

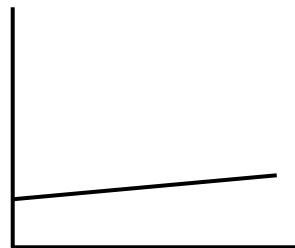
...food plus health plus warmth plus education plus affluence have not quite equaled Utopia. We have leisure, entertainment, convenience, and

comfort. We have insulated ourselves from the unpredictable ravages of nature. Yet stress, frustration, and often times even despair unexpectedly accompanies our unrivaled prosperity (Swenson, Margin 22).

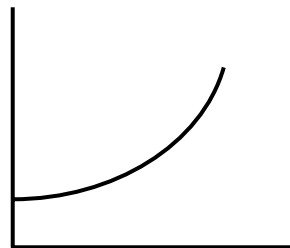
He goes on to argue that it is the cultures with the most progress that have the least margin. It is those societies that have the most labour-saving devices that are most hurried. If we want margin back, he says, we will have to subjugate progress.

As we subjugate progress, we make it subservient to our greater goals and needs, especially relationships. We once again practice economics “as if people mattered.” We once again agree that things do not own us and are not even very important. We once again assert that jobs are only jobs, that cars are only organized piles of metal, that houses will one day fall down — but that people are important beyond description...If, however, we fail in our attempts to break the addiction and to subjugate progress, we had better put on our crash helmets and brace ourselves. The train continues gaining speed, and no one is at the controls. Progress is leading us to a threshold, but when asked, will not tell us which threshold we near. As sociologist Robert Bellah and colleagues have pointed out; “Progress, modernity’s master idea, seems less compelling when it appears that it may be progress into the abyss” (34).

The mathematics in this new world is exponential instead of linear (Margin 44). Increasingly, what is happening in our lives is not represented by a linear but by an exponential curve (See figure below).

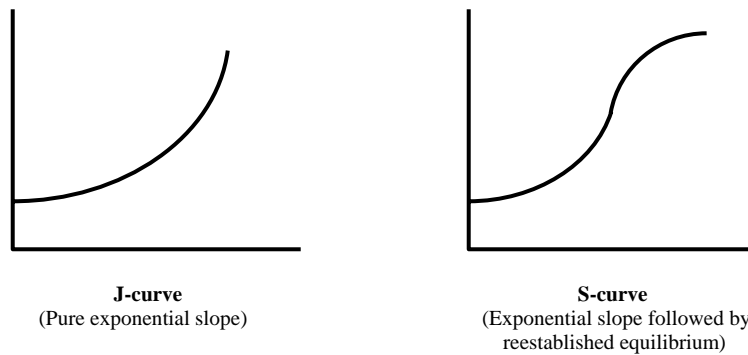


Linear Graph
(Describes much of the past.)



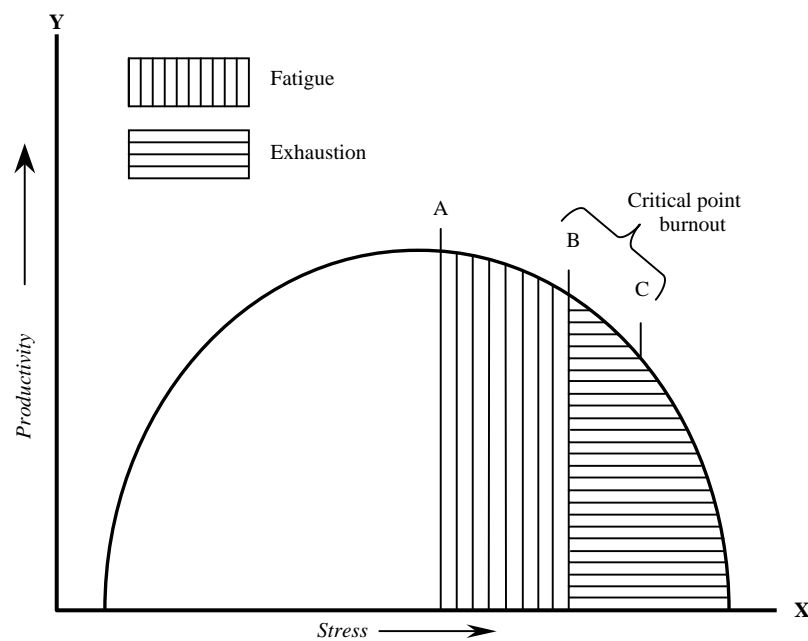
Exponential Graph
(Describes much of the present.)

Almost every phenomenon we can describe in modern life fits the exponential curve (Margin 47). However, even mathematically, the J-curve can not continue becoming more steep. Eventually it will be forced into an S-curve in which there is a leveling off of sorts in order to find a new equilibrium (See figure below). There is already some evidence that we are entering this S-curve in terms of cultural progress as people become aware that in many respects it has left us high and dry.



One of the factors contributing to our re-evaluation of progress is simply the fact that human beings have limits (Margin 75). When we keep pushing ourselves past our emotional, mental and physical limits we will eventually succumb to fatigue and burnout (See figure below).

Figure 5.1 – Human Function Curve



Progress has brought with it the problem of the Overload Syndrome. The following examples of overload in our culture may not apply to everyone equally, but certainly describes the experience of many (Margin 83).

- Activity overload
- Change overload
- Choice overload
- Commitment overload
- Competition overload
- Debt overload
- Decision overload
- Education overload
- Expectation overload
- Fatigue overload
- Hurry overload
- Information overload
- Media overload
- Ministry overload
- Noise overload
- People overload
- Pollution overload
- Possession overload
- Problem overload
- Technology overload
- Traffic overload
- Waste overload
- Work overload

So what do we do with cultural “progress”? Can we get off the train? Can we stop the train? Probably not. During the industrial revolution when society was undergoing massive changes that brought untold suffering to the masses, the “Luddites” tried to stop the inevitable “progress” by burning factories and using other forms of violence. But they failed. Sometimes those of us who question contemporary progress are labeled as “Luddites” who have buried their heads in sands of earlier eras. The fact is that it would be naive to think that we could stop the train.

What we can do, however, is control our stress responses to the stressors on the progress train that call for unthinking response. We must admit that overload brought on by progress has us by the throat. Understand that chronic overloading is not God’s will. And choose our involvements and responses carefully. Swenson summarizes it well.

We must not allow ourselves to be hammered by distress in the many areas of our lives that have absolutely no *transcendent importance*. It is not the will of the Father for us to be so battered by the torment of our age. There must be a different way — a way that reserves our strength for higher battles. And indeed there is (Margin 88).

D. The Physiology of Stress

1. **Adrenalin and Stress:** As we have noted earlier, God created our bodies with the ability to make appropriate stress responses to stressors we face. And that we all need a certain amount of stress to keep us alive, healthy and productive. But stress is not good as a constant reality in life; it should be short lived. Why is this the case?

In his book, *The Hidden Link Between Adrenalin and Stress*, Dr. Archibald D. Hart explains it this way.

When the state of alarm or emergency is triggered, our various physiological systems are bathed in adrenalin, which disrupts normal functioning and produces a heightened state of arousal. In the immediate emergency reaction, the heart beats faster, digestion is speeded up, and a host of hormones is released into the bloodstream to prepare us for dealing with the emergency. But difficulties arise when we live in a constant state of emergency. It is like an elastic band. Normally it will return to its original shape, but when stretched for too long it won't retract (22).

The elevated level of adrenalin can give a person a “heightened sense of well-being, increased energy, reduced need for sleep, and feelings of excitement or even euphoria” (39). In any case, it prepares the body for an unusual “fight or flight” response which the body assumes will be of short duration. The body can not tell whether the adrenalin bath it is experiencing comes from distress or eustress — from pain or pleasure. That is why “excitement and challenge can kill us just as easily as sadness and fear” (27).

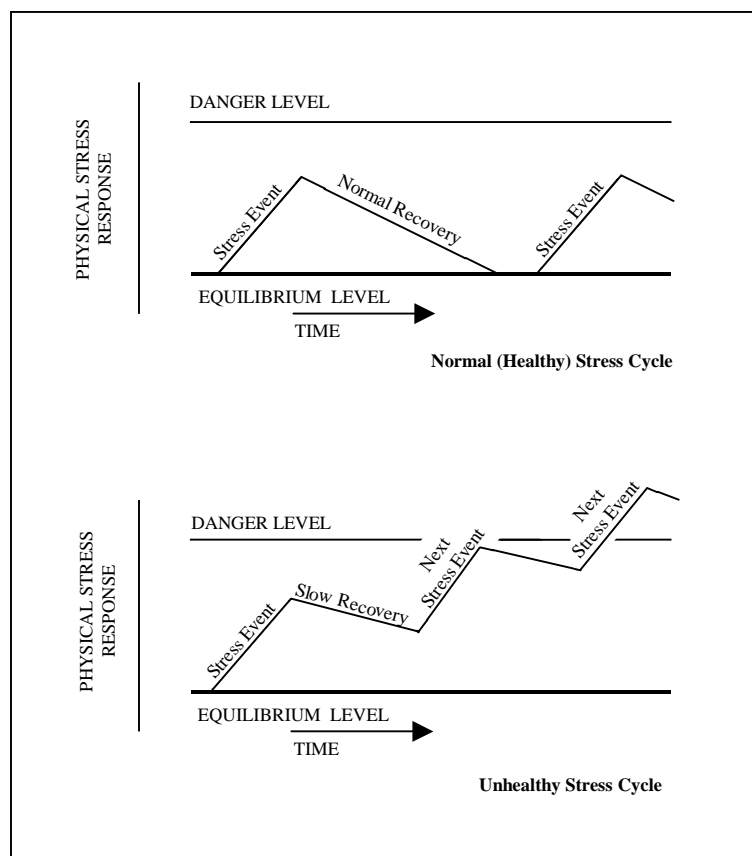
This comes as a surprise to many people. Often they assume that because they are enjoying what they are doing their heightened state of living on adrenalin must be healthy. They assume that if they don't feel anxious they are not experiencing stress. This is a delusion. “Most people who die of heart attacks enjoyed up to the last minute the process that led to the destruction of their cardiovascular system” (51).

2. **The Symptoms of Stress:** In order to protect us from damage caused by stress, the body has a defense system composed of three parts (70).
 - An **Alarm System** is designed to sound a warning when something goes wrong. Pain signals tell us we have been pushed beyond our limits. But in our performance-oriented culture we try to remove the pain instead of

listening to the message it is giving us. We take Tylenol instead of backing off from the pressure.

- An **Activating System** is designed to prepare us for action in response to the alarm. Sometimes the signals given by the alarm system call for an active response. That is when adrenalin is recruited making us physically stronger and mentally sharper (not more creative or innovative). Sharp decisions are easy. Thoughtful decisions are impossible.
- A **Recovery System** is designed to provide healing, recuperation and revitalization. The adrenalin level begins to decline, accompanied by a feeling of depression and some of the other negative side effects of withdrawal. Hart maintains that it is possible to be addicted to adrenalin and therefore withdrawal from high levels of adrenalin is experienced similarly to withdrawal from other addicting drugs. Many do not cooperate well with this third system because they have been taught to feel guilty when they rest, or because they do not want to experience the unpleasant side effects. So they stay on red-alert with adrenalin high. Besides being dangerous to long-term health, this is also defying God's image in one's body.

The following diagram illustrates clearly the difference between a healthy and unhealthy stress cycles.



Notice that in the healthy stress cycle any stress event is followed by a recovery process which brings us back to an equilibrium level before the next stress event. In the unhealthy stress cycle, the next stress event is initiated before the equilibrium level is reached. If this happens too many times in succession we begin to approach the danger level. That is to say that we have reached a stress *situation* instead of a simply experiencing stress events. Adrenalin is now a constant presence in our bodies.

3. **Spirit, Emotion, and Body:** Trevor Walters outlines the process of break down when we run on adrenalin too long.

- The first part of our persons to be affected is our *spirits*. Hart states that “The Spirit of God has little affinity with our hurried, hassled, hasty, and heartless way of living” (56). So the first breakdown we experience is that of our spirituality. Too much adrenalin diminishes spiritual energy and causes us to lose our appetite for God. It can also bring out the worst in us as we find ourselves giving in to thoughts and practices not normally considered acceptable. In some cases it is even possible to confuse adrenalin arousal with true spirituality. Whatever way it manifests itself, living with stress affects our spiritual life.

Sometimes we are not even aware of this, especially when spirituality is confused with an adrenalin rush. It is one of those intangible things not easily detected by others. Yet, if we stay in this state long enough, we will begin to notice that our joy and peace is gone. Keeping busy, however, is a good way to camouflage this condition even from ourselves. However, sensitive people in our congregations will pick up on this reality as well and wonder what is happening to our souls.

- If stress is not brought under control, it moves next to affect our *emotional* make up. We find ourselves being discouraged more often, or depressed. We have less patience with people than we used to have. We are hurt more easily, lose our temper more often, criticize others unfairly, and generally demonstrate that we are frustrated with life and ministry. Of course at this stage other people are beginning to take note much more readily that something is wrong. But amazingly enough, we often still try to leave the appearance that all is well. That is why it is easy to blame others for your problems in this stage.
- If nothing is done to bring our bodies back to an equilibrium level, the next part of our being to be affected is our *bodies*. Some bodily symptom begins to appear “out of the blue,” at least so it seems. It is the body saying that we have already transgressed our spirits and our emotions and, since we would not listen to their complaints, I will make you take note. If we drive those voices back under cover by masking the symptom with medication, the body will find another way to tell us again. Always it looks for the weakest link in our genetic make-up — that’s why it affects people differently. If we persist in ignoring or suppressing these symptoms, the body may go into a state of collapse.

I found it interesting to hear Walters explain that the healing process takes place in precisely the reverse order. If we finally do listen to our bodies and allow them to relax, gradually the physical symptoms begin to disappear. Then slowly our emotional health returns. We find we can laugh again and enjoy normal experiences of life once more. As healing progresses we begin to find our spirits healing and connecting with God again in meaningful ways.

- E. Where to From Here?** Perhaps all this information about adrenalin, stress and breakdown is a source of stress for you. Is it really that bad? That pervasive? That critical? Should we not just be more up beat? Push all this negative talk off the table and replace it with stories of heroes who were able to handle the pressures of life and ministry? Perhaps. But will that solve our problem? Can we just cruise along without taking serious note of our changing times and how so many are not able to handle the stress in spite of their best intentions? I think not.

As I mentioned at the outset, what has encouraged me most about my personal journey and my research in this area is that there is hope. There are ways of managing and reducing stress that most of us can adopt that will not only restore us, but in fact offer us a new lease on life and ministry. We turn our attention now to a search for those ways and means.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do you experience the tension between doing “visible” and “invisible” work (Page two)?
2. Can you identify with any of the theological assumptions listed on page six? How have they affected your life and ministry? Identify any other faulty assumptions you have had to struggle with.
3. Identify the three kinds of overload you experience most regularly from the list identified by Richard Swenson on page seven. How are you trying to overcome these overloads?
4. Which of the stress cycles depicted in the diagram on page nine best describes you? Explain.
5. Do you think Trevor Walters’ thesis about how stress affects spirit, emotions and the body is valid (page ten)? What experiences have you had and what observations have you made that would support your response?

II. FINDING HOLY RHYTHM

Finding a “holy” rhythm that honours God and respects our spiritual, emotional and physical limitations will only happen with deliberate effort. What follows is a preliminary set of reflections about what I am learning about finding a “holy” rhythm. It is not a thorough biblical study on the subject, although many of the principles I will outline arise out of the biblical orientation of many of the writers on the subject. Some principles I am learning arise more directly out of contemporary research, although I am convinced they are not in discord with a biblical perspective.

A. Learn to Accept Limitations: What we are dealing with here is the problem of over-commitment leading to over-load and breakdown. Many people do not need to be convinced to get with it. Their problem is more often knowing when it is time to quit. We see the needs. We see the opportunities. We have ideas that might work. But in the end we don’t have the time or the energy to pursue them.

This is more than a practical consideration. It is a spiritual battle that all of us need to fight, especially if we are committed to a life of active service for God. Once we begin to see the needs around us and that our efforts can make a difference for others, the challenge is to know when to quit. If I were to come to your house at mid-night, just as you are ready to go to bed, and ask you why you are going to bed, what would you say? Probably that it is time to knock it off, the day has been long enough and you have ministered well. But surely, I say, there is more you could do — another letter to write, another call to make, another book to read. There are still a lot of needs out there! I know, you say, but enough is enough! Exactly. Sooner or later we all need to quit. But not only because we are exhausted, rather because we humbly accept the fact that we can not be all things to all people. We are limited.

The amount of work we do is not the point so much as being obedient to what God calls us to do. Anything we do for God, while important, is still only a drop in the bucket of God’s cosmic, eternal agenda. We must humbly go about cooperating with God in his agenda, all the while realizing that we are but a cog in the wheel. Instead of noting our educational accomplishments after our signatures, it might be more appropriate to write, “Ltd.” Jack Heppner, Ltd.

B. Learn to Manage Adrenalin: It is possible to re-learn how to live with adrenalin. Most of us know people who have changed their life patterns following a physical breakdown caused by adrenalin. Often some of the drivenness disappears. There is more time for deep relationships, to smell the flowers, to relax in God’s goodness, to let God do some of their work, and to focus on priorities that really matter in the long run. In short, they often begin living life as God intended it — and that means deliberately controlling the pressure on the adrenalin tap.

Hart ask the question of how much adrenalin we need to respond to challenges. Not as much as we think, he says. Stress can be aggravated by trying too hard. We can choose for ourselves how much adrenalin we need. It is possible to bring our propensity for high arousal under control. He states further,

When you find yourself noticing adrenalin in your system, ask yourself, ‘Do I need to be in a state of emergency right now, or do I need to accomplish some important task.’ If the answer is yes, go ahead and use all the adrenalin you need. If no, move quickly to relax your body. Adrenalin surges should not be allowed to continue beyond the immediate legitimate emergency that provokes them. As soon as possible after the emergency, you should bring down your level of arousal (135).

The recipe for adrenalin control depends largely on our unique personalities and life situations. But there are a variety of things we can do to bring down adrenalin. Remind our selves verbally of our limitations. Stop trying to play the role of a messiah in situations. Ask ourselves whether the price we will pay is worth it. Learn to deliberately slow down. Quickly resolve those emotions that are adrenalin biggies. Look closely at the faces of persons around us and remind ourselves of our common human and spiritual heritage.

In order to manage adrenalin in our bodies, the bottom line is to change behaviours, dropping unhealthy patterns and adopting healthier ones. If only we could learn to do this before we experience the negative effects of adrenalin overload!

C. **Get Enough Rest:** Archibald Hart states

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.” We are a tired generation, one for which Mathew Arnold’s “hurry sickness” has become a way of life. Our carburetors are set on high, and our gears are stuck in overdrive. Our lives are non-stop. We have leisure but little rest. The pace, the noise, the expectations, and the interruptions of modern life have not soothed the soul nor brought refreshment to the burdened spirit (226).

Basically we must admit that progress has not brought us rest. As a matter of fact, progress has evoked a negative attitude toward rest. “It is too bad we have to rest because there is so much to do.” When this cultural phenomenon is coupled with faulty theological assumptions the result is deadly — both figuratively and literally. Swenson suggests that “the only experience many of us have with rest today is the first half of *restless*” (Margin 227).

Swenson goes on to suggest that a healthy life-style comes equipped with four gears — *park, low, drive and overdrive*. The *park* position is a legitimate one. Can you imagine a car without it? This is the gear we use for rest and renewal, recharging our batteries, contemplation, prayer or sitting on a stump. It will help to shift down on occasion, but it is also important to park frequently.

Of course, part of the *park* position, according to God’s design, is reserved for sleep. Hart suggests that if we are going to survive we need all the sleep we can get. We have deluded ourselves into thinking that the ideal, and the most

productive life, is one with a minimum of sleep because sleep is the enemy. Of course the presence of adrenalin reduces our temporary need for sleep. But when that becomes the norm we will be in trouble sooner or later. Archibald Hart has a perspective on this. He asks how so many people can sleep so few hours.

I believe it is because they are operating on too much adrenalin. Perhaps some people manage to achieve an optional balance between wakefulness and sleep and thrive on this. But I suspect there are only a very few in this category. Most people who operate on very little sleep are probably suffering from bad early training and mistaken beliefs about sleep. For many, unfortunately, that is not the end of the story. They will pay for their lack of sleep at some later time in terms of increased wear and tear on their bodies.

Many people don't believe they should sleep very much, so they wake themselves up with an alarm-clock or deliberately stay up late at night. They enjoy their reduced need for sleep, believing they are more efficient and productive because they don't sleep as much. In many cases this is simply not true (153).

D. Find Healing for Unhealed Wounds: What do unhealed wounds have to do with stress? A lot! Living with an unhealed soul takes a lot of energy because one attempts to live with both a public persona and the realities of a private bleeding heart. Sometimes we are aware of the wounds and how they drain us. But at other times we can be unconscious of the wounds that continue to fester under the protective bark of our public persona.

In his book, *Hiding from Love*, John Townsend suggests that all of us have restoration work to do. Because of sin, none of us live in a world free of hurt. Some hurts are minor and are easily outweighed by the positive effects of healing experiences in life. But sometimes the damage remains with us, either consciously or unconsciously. In that case, our task is not simply to "build a house" for God, but to restore a structure that has been damaged. If we don't, we will remain immature in that area of life that is blocked by the damage. And, of course, life will be loaded with unnecessary and uncalled for stress.

In *Healing for Damaged Emotions*, David Seamands calls these unhealed areas of our lives *infirmities*. The effects vary with persons, but what Seamands discovered was that many of these scars are not touched by conversion and sanctifying grace, or by the ordinary benefits of prayer, Bible study and other spiritual disciplines (12). This runs counter to the simplistic view which basically says that if you are spiritual enough everything would be healed. After all, in Christ we are new creatures! That is why it came as a surprise to me in my mid-forties when I discovered that I had a lot of wounds from early childhood that were still festering and needed healing.

I am convinced that more of us live with *infirmities* than we care to think. Their effects show up in many ways. Over-sensitivity to criticism. The need to control. Indecisiveness. Inability to experience intimacy. A critical attitude.

Perfectionism. Withdrawal tendencies. Fear. Etc. All of these behaviours can be adrenalin inducing and thus compound our stress problems. In spite of excessive piety and devotion, many people find some of these evidences of infirmities ever present in their lives. “What I am saying,” says Semands, “is that certain areas of our lives need special healing by the Holy Spirit.”

Charlie Steinmetz was ugly, deformed, but brilliant. He designed and built the generators in Henry Ford’s first plant in Dearborn, Michigan. One day the generators broke down and Ford called Steinmetz to fix the problem quickly because the whole plant was shut down and he was losing money. Steinmetz appeared to tinker with the motors for a while, threw the switch and the power was back on. A few days later Ford received a bill for \$10,000. Thinking this was too high he returned the bill with a protest. Steinmetz sent the bill again. This time it read: \$10 for tinkering on the motors. \$9,990 for knowing where to tinker. Henry Ford paid the bill.

The Holy Spirit know where to tinker in your life. Do you?

- E. Establish Clear Boundaries:** In their book, *Boundaries: When to Say YES, When to Say NO, To Take Control of Your Life*, Henry Cloud and John Townsend suggest that our stressed out generation is suffering from a lack of setting boundaries. Without appropriate boundaries we find it difficult to know what is on our property and what we are responsible for.

The authors use Galatians 6:2-5 to show that we are responsible *to* others and *for* ourselves. In verse two we are told to carry each other’s burdens. This means that if the loads of our brothers and sisters are more than they can bear, we gladly help carry that burden. We are responsible *to* one another. In verse five we are told that each one should carry his own load. Notice the shift from burden to load. We are all responsible to carry our own loads — those daily things that God asks us to carry. In that sense we are responsible *for* ourselves. “Problems arise when people act as if their “boulders” are daily loads and refuse help, or as if their “daily loads” are boulders they shouldn’t have to carry” (31).

If people in ministry try to carry the loads for which people themselves are responsible it will lead to unnecessary stress. We are responsible *to* others when their loads become burdens, but not *for* them with respect to the loads they are asked to carry. We are responsible *for* ourselves, which means that sometimes we will have to establish clear boundaries.

Cloud and Townsend point to the story of the Good Samaritan as a good example of setting boundaries. He delegated responsibility for the care of the wounded man to the inn-keeper, which allowed him to go on his way to attend to other important business. A boundary-less Samaritan might have insisted on staying with the wounded man himself, especially if the wounded man would have asked him to stay. Perhaps we could reduce a lot of stress in ministry if we became “boundaried” Samaritans instead of feeling we must walk with others the whole way all the time.

Basically, what Cloud and Townsend are saying is that in order to live healthy lives that have stress under control we must understand the concept of boundaries and live well within them.

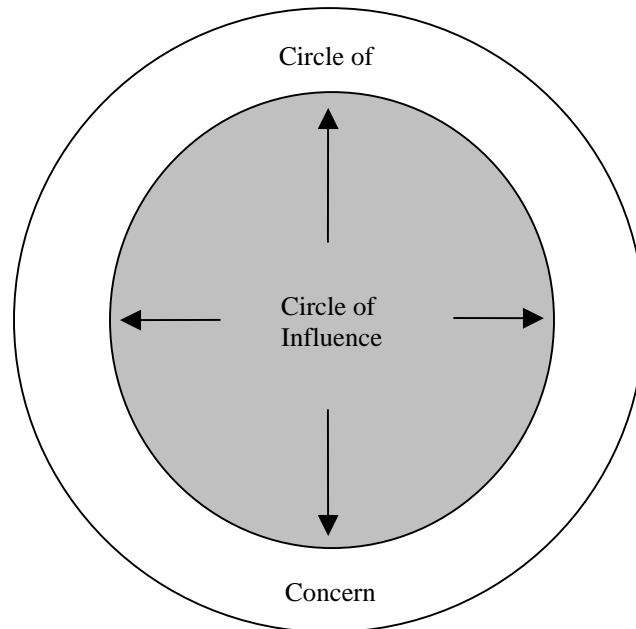
F. Re-establish Margin: Richard A. Swenson argues, in his book *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives*, that the biggest problem related to overload in our culture is the fact that we have forgotten how to live with margin. He suggests that understanding and living with margin is increasingly urgent and essential. He does grant that some people seem to be able to thrive without margin, but for most of us it is a prerequisite for well-being. “Add a dose of margin” he challenges, “and see if life doesn’t come alive once again (91).

Basically Swenson argues that we all find ourselves in one of three positions with respect to margin. If we are operating at a level which allows some energy reserves for the unexpected emergencies we have some margin and we are living healthy lives. If we are using up a 100% of our energies we have no reserves left and are living on the edge. If we are operating beyond our capacities we are using more than a 100% of our energies, relying on adrenalin to see us through. If this goes on for too long the body will literally begin to feed on itself to provide the overdraft and breakdown is sure to happen.

Of course, the problem is that we don’t have an indicator which tells us when our margins are about to disappear. You might say our gas tanks do not have fancy, electronic gauges that give us accurate readings. So, like I did with my 1959 Volkswagen, we have to learn to measure how much is left, or develop a “sense” of how full the tank is at any given time. Without developing this ability, many people, especially people in ministry, “commit to a 120 percent life and wonder why the burden feels so heavy. It is rare to see a life prescheduled to only 80 percent, leaving a margin for responding to the unexpected that God sends our way” (92).

Swenson asks what we would think of a publisher who refused to use margins when printing a book. The result would be a text hard to comprehend, even chaotic. Once margin is gone we tend to go into survival mode, lose our joy in serving and become enamoured with ways of escaping overcrowded schedules. That is why he argues that we have to work at re-establishing margins.

- G. Focus on Your Circle of Influence:** In his book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen R. Covey says that focusing our efforts in areas where we have influence instead of spreading them over all the areas where we have concerns will sap us of energy plus make us ineffective



PROACTIVE FOCUS
 (Positive energy enlarges
 the Circle of Influence)

Within our Circle of Concern there is a smaller Circle of Influence, areas in which we have the possibility of doing something about. If we focus on our Circle of Influence we will find ourselves energized and we will find our Circle enlarging. If we focus on the Circle of Concern in areas we have no control over, we will tend to have negative attitudes and generate negative energy. As a result our Circle of Influence actually begins to shrink.

H. Focus on Important, Non-Urgent Tasks: Another concept I find useful for reducing stress is Covey's Time Management Matrix.

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	I ACTIVITIES: Crisis Pressing problems Deadline-driven projects	II ACTIVITIES: Prevention, PC Activities Relationship building Recognizing new opportunities Planning, recreation
Not Important	III ACTIVITIES: Interruptions, some calls Some email, some reports Some meetings Proximate, pressing matters Popular Activities	IV ACTIVITIES: Trivia, busy work Some mail Some phone calls Time wasters Pleasant activities

- Activities in Quadrant I are urgent and important. They relate to crises or pressing problems. While we all have some Quadrant I activities, some people are consumed by them. "They are crisis managers, problem-minded people, deadline-driven producers" (152). Some people feel beaten up all day as they respond to one crisis after another. The only escape they can think of is to pop over to Quadrant IV once in a while to do things that are not important and not urgent.
- Other people spend a lot of time in Quadrant III, doing things that seem urgent but are not really important. They think they are in Quadrant I, doing important things, but if they would stop to think about it, most of their activities really are not very important and make little difference to anybody. Those who spend most of their time in Quadrant III and IV are basically living irresponsible lives.
- Effective and stress-balanced individuals focus on living in Quadrant II, doing things that are important but not urgent. They spend as much time as necessary in Quadrant I, but quickly go back to Quadrant II. Working in this environment reduces stress because you are focused on non-urgent work, but work that will have long-term effect. Here you can go about your work with a relative degree of calm. I am convinced that if we as ministry persons would spend more time in Quadrant II, our levels of stress would diminish significantly and we would become more effective in our work.

- I. Regain Health through Simplicity:** If it is true that our modern lives are generally overloaded, it would seem appropriate to find ways of simplifying our lives.

If overload is sabotaging our equilibrium, simplicity can help. If we find ourselves being detailed to death, simplicity can restore life. If we find ourselves overextended in our emotional, financial and time commitments, simplicity is one of the best ways to reestablish margin. “Do not underestimate the delight of real simplicity in your life style,” advises stress expert Hans Selye, M.D. (Margin 201).

Historically, Anabaptists were committed to the “simple life.” They took Jesus quite seriously and literally when he admonished them to be content with the basic necessities of life (Matt. 6:25-33), and that where your treasure is, there your heart will also be (Matt. 6:21). In our modern context talk of the simple life is fairly muted. As material prosperity has increased so has our appetite for the “good life.” And it is a rare occurrence to think of the “simple life” and the “good life” in the same context.

It is easy to find arguments against the concept of the simple life. It will lead to legalism. It leads to “reverse pride.” It tends toward asceticism. It can be motivated by guilt. Or it is an escapist philosophy that disengages one from “real” life. But, argues Swenson, instead of being a means of escape, simplicity is a way of transcending the overload syndrome. It unclutters life. It is natural, creative, authentic, focused, disciplined, and — perhaps most importantly for our times — it offers margin and health as a reward (Margin 208).

- J. Keep Physically Fit:** One of the down-sides of progress is the fact that we have less need to keep physically fit. We keep warm by adjusting our thermostats. We draw water by opening a tap. We open car windows with a finger. We get around by sitting still. Of course, there are occupations that still require strenuous exercise, but their number is decreasing rapidly. Our generation sits more than any generation before us. It is no coincidence that the more sedentary we become the more stressed we become.

Our bodies are designed to be active. But people in ministry often do not exercise their bodies. Their minds, emotions and spirits get regular work outs and are often overloaded, while their bodies are sorely out of shape. I am convinced that a good deal of stress can be overcome through keeping physically fit. “It is widely recognized among health professionals that cardiovascular improvement through exercise is a life and brain extender. And effective exercise program can reduce your brain stress and body stress, improve health, firm muscles and help you lose weight” (Stress Workbook 231).

In the final analysis, however, it all depends on whether we think it is important or not. If we are convinced that it is, we will find ways of being more physically active. Walk more, take stairs instead of elevators, join a fitness club, begin a physically active hobby — anything to get you out of your chair! And it is not enough to do this occasionally. It should be as regular as breathing, eating

and sleeping. If our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, one of the ways of honoring God with our bodies is to keep them in shape (I Cor. 19-20). And in the process we will find ourselves managing stress better in our lives.

- K. Get to the Back of the Boat:** There is a dramatic story in the gospels of Jesus sleeping in the back of a boat during a storm (Mark 4:35-39). The disciples are frantic and afraid because they felt the storm was about to consume them. Jesus was not carried to the back of the boat, bound and gagged. He went there on his own to rest. Had all the needs in Palestine been met? No. Would his disciples have been less afraid if he would have remained awake? Probably. But Jesus was tired and he took responsibility for his own respite. He gave himself permission to rest (Jones, 11).

How unlike Jesus we often are. How could we go to the back of the boat to sleep when a storm is approaching? We live with the myth of our own *indispensability*. “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 our temporary absence...Feeling consciously or unconsciously that we are the essential, indispensable element of a program or institution is a terrible liability and lie...The lie, and an idolatrous one at that, is to bow down to the god of personal irreplaceability” (11).

The ability to “get to the back of the boat” is something that we must learn. It does not come naturally. And 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.

Each one of us is on a unique journey in our search for “holy rhythm.”

- Actually some of us are still not even searching because we have not yet felt the effects of “unholy arrhythmia.” I encourage such persons to consider their life patterns carefully and make necessary adjustment.
- Some of us have in fact found a good rhythm with relation to stress. I ask you to be available to teach the rest of us the secrets you have found.
- Some of us may be living in a state of withdrawal with not enough stress to make life meaningful and fulfilling. I ask you to allow yourselves to experience the occasional shot of adrenalin.
- Some of us are aware of some preliminary physical symptoms related to stress. I recommend that you make some serious adjustments in your life.
- Some of us feel like we are on the edge, ready to explode. To such I say that the best thing for you to do is to stop, find some rest, talk to a trusted friend, and begin a long journey back toward equilibrium with the help of God.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. On a scale of one to ten, one being *Poor* and ten being *Excellent*, how would you rate your rhythm of life?

Poor 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Excellent

Why do you say this?

What could you do to improve your own rating?

2. Which of the ideas to help us find a “holy rhythm” discussed in this paper are particularly suited for your situation? How could adopting these ideas help you?
 - A. Learn to Accept Limitations
 - B. Learn to Manage Adrenalin
 - C. Get Enough Rest
 - D. Find Healing for Unhealed Wounds
 - E. Establish Clear Boundaries
 - F. Re-establish Margin
 - G. Focus on Your Circle of Influence
 - H. Focus on Important, Non-Urgent Tasks
 - I. Regain Health Through Simplicity
 - J. Keep Physically Fit
 - K. Get to the Back of the Boat.

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