

STEPS TO WELLNESS – LESSON 2

Coping With Stress



We live in a world of rapid change and an increasing pace of life. More people seem to be moving into the fast lane, or being pushed into it. According to a survey by the advertising agency D'Arcy Masius Benton & Bowles, three-quarters of Americans say their jobs cause them stress. Stress is known to be a major contributor, either directly or indirectly, to coronary heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidental injuries, cirrhosis of the liver, and suicide, which are six of the leading causes of death in the United States.¹ Some experts list the overall cost to the economy as high as 150 billion dollars a year.²

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is a demand made upon us that causes us to adapt or perform. It often comes in three forms:³

1. **Interference** (*which blocks us from achieving our goals*): work assignments, interruptions, time restraints
2. **Change**: birth of a child, new job, new school
3. **Conflict**: relationship problems, conflicting time priorities

Tension is usually looked upon as harmful, but even positive events may be stressful such as promotions, moving, marriage, birth of a child, vacations and holidays. Stress by itself may or may not be harmful; it is how it affects us that determines whether it is a positive or a negative stress.

Stressors can be categorized into four areas which help us to better deal with them.

1. **Physical** – which refers to the demands that affect the body, such as extreme temperature, overextending ourselves without adequate sleep or rest, injury to the body, pregnancy.
2. **Mental** – refers to situations such as overload, fear of deadlines, financial problems, concerns resulting from competition.
3. **Social** – involves situations of interaction with others like marriage, relocating, death of a loved one, public speaking, angry neighbors, relationship problems.



4. **Spiritual** – involves the deepest part of our being: how we view ourselves, our values, how we deal with problems and how we maintain our integrity; and finding true satisfaction in life. Spiritual stress often interacts closely with mental and social stress.

RATE YOUR STRESS

How much stress is too much? It is hard to measure stress precisely, but researchers Thomas Holmes and M. Masusu have given us a rough scale by which to estimate the amount of stress that is created by various experiences in life. To measure the stress you experienced over the past year, select each event that applies and total the stress points.

NATURE OF THE EVENT	POINTS OF STRESS
Death of a spouse	100
Divorce	73
Death of a close family member	63
Personal injury or illness	53
Marriage	50
Change in the health of a family member	44
Pregnancy	40
Gain of new family members	39
Change in financial state	38
Change to a different line of work	36
Change in responsibilities at work	29
Change in living conditions	25
Change in work hours or conditions	20
Change in residence	20
Change in recreation	19
Change in church activities	19
Change in social activities	18
Change in number of family get-togethers	15
Change in eating habits	15

Holmes and Masusu found that only one-third of those who scored less than 150 stress points were likely to become seriously ill in the following two years. But one-half of those who had accumulated more than 150 stress points, and four-fifths of those who had more than 300, were likely to have significant health problems within that time.

HOW WE RESPOND

Whatever the stressors may be, how we are affected by them, will determine how we handle them. Hans Selye who, until his death, was looked upon as the world's leader in the study of stress, said, "stress depends not upon what happens to an individual but upon the way he reacts." We may respond to stress in a variety of ways. We may try to rise to the challenge or withdraw from it. We may feel fear, anger, anxiety, tension, or frustration; or we may respond with excitement, exhilaration. Our mental, physical, social, and spiritual responses may interact and may themselves become factors in causing stress. It is when stress is prolonged or exceeds an individual's level of tolerance that it becomes harmful or "distressing."⁴

WARNING SIGNS

Being aware of what things stress our body is vital for maintenance of good health. Oftentimes tension or strain may sneak up on us without our knowing it. Fortunately, there are warning signs that can help us to identify at what point good, challenging stress becomes unhealthy distress. These symptoms may include chronic anxiety, chronic fatigue, depression, insomnia, extreme appetite changes, increased chemical dependence (alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, pain relievers, other drugs), inability to concentrate, extreme restlessness, apathy – "It just doesn't matter" attitude. If we recognize our warning signs we can take the necessary precautions to prevent further problems.



SEVEN STEPS FOR MANAGING STRESS

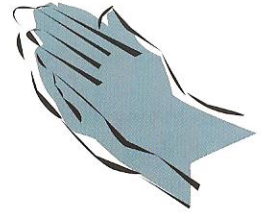
There are many ways that people find to deal with the burdens and stresses in life. Here are seven simple steps in ABC form to help.

Awareness – Know the warning signs. Being aware of the physical symptoms is a great preventive step. Sometimes it is hard to recognize the warning signs in our body, but we may try listening to the people close to us who can help us to see when we are under too much strain. Another area to be aware of is our environment; many times when under pressure our homes may become dirty or neglected, or our work may not be getting done properly.

Break up stressors – Make a list of all the tasks that need to be done. From a written list it is easier to select our priorities. We can ask ourselves the following three questions when faced with a task that may be stressful.

1. Does this have to be done?
2. Do I have to do it?
3. Does it have to be done now?

Call for Divine assistance – The most effective way to relieve stress is to acknowledge that we cannot cope with everything, and to call out to God for help. In the Scriptures, the Psalmist wrote, "He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him and honour him." (Psalm 91:15) Calling for assistance may also include a friend or loved one who can give comfort and understanding in times of tension.



Develop good health habits – Dr. John Howard of the University of Western Ontario, who is a stress researcher, said, "The most effective means [for dealing with stress] is building physical resistance." Having a regular time for sleeping and



rising is essential for helping the body's immune system deal with stress. Most researchers agree that one of the best ways for immediate stress relief is a regular exercise program. Getting outside and becoming physically active increases the heart rate and is soothing to the mind and nerves. Also staying free from harmful substances like tobacco, alcohol, and caffeine will help the nervous system to be better able to function in dealing with stress.

Educate yourself to be adaptable – We are sometimes looked at as living inside a circle called our living space. When something, or someone invades our living space we have stress. But when we allow our minds to be open to change, we often experience much less stress. Remember, "stress depends not upon what happens to an individual but upon the way he reacts."

Find time to relax every day – our bodies were not made to be constantly under pressure. We need time to let the work or school problems go. A walk outside or spending time with family or friends may help us to reduce our tension. Regular "outings" or trips away from the usual bustle of everyday activities will prove a great remedy.

Golden rule – "... Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself." Romans 13:9 People who practice the Golden Rule have fewer colds, digestive upsets, and headaches, and are less subject to all types of serious diseases. People who are the least subject to illness tend to be more concerned with the welfare of others, more trusting of others, more charitable of people's faults, more outgoing in their general outlook on life. They are more at peace with themselves and easier to get along with.⁵



Everyone experiences stress. Stress can be a stepping stone or stumbling block depending on our reaction to it. By recognizing when our stress is turning into distress, we can apply one or all of the diffusing stress steps.

The following words are an excellent source of stress-free thinking. "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? But seek first His [God's] kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." Matthew 6:25,33,34 NIV



References

- 1 Stress: Can We Cope?, TIME, June 6,1983, p48
- 2 Stress on the Job, Newsweek, April 25 1988, p40, But what is stress anyway?
- 3 Stress: a life factor, Shirley L. Baugher, Milken Publishing Co., 1980, p.1a
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 National Institutes of Health, Cornell Medical Center (Found in Family Weekly, Sept 22, 1974)

REVIEW QUESTIONS

T F (True or False)

- 1. Mental stress is not really related to physical diseases.
- 2. Stress only comes from negative events.
- 3. How we react to a "stressor" does not influence the amount of stress we experience.
- 4. Becoming aware of stress warning signs in our body is a good way to prevent distress.

Multiple Choice Questions

Indicate your answer by checking the letter you think is most correct

- 5. Most researchers agree that, one of the most effective means of dealing with stress is
 - A. listening to music
 - B. mid-morning nap
 - C. building a physical resistance, which includes regularity and exercise.
 - D. none of the above
- 6. When someone comes to us with a potentially stressful request, we might:
 - A. not consider it until they ask someone else
 - B. keep an open mind and make a list of our priorities
 - C. tell them yes regardless of what the request is
 - D. ignore the request
- 7. When we are especially stressed we might:
 - A. take a long walk
 - B. spend some time with family or loved ones
 - C. go on a "outing" for a day or two
 - D. all of the above

Comments _____

