

Coping With Stress

ILLUS – Imagine you wake up one morning, you're about to go to work, you step outside on the way to your car, and you are confronted by the hugest Bengal tiger imaginable. What would your response be? a) Take out your mobile and dial 000? b) Stand there saying, "Here pussy pussy?" or c) Run for your life?

This is what happens inside your body: Your muscles tighten, adrenalin makes your heart beat faster, your blood pressure rises, your digestion is interrupted, your salivary glands dry up, you breathe more deeply and more quickly, you sweat, your face goes pale, and your blood sugar level increases.

You are now ready for action.

This is called the fight or flight response where your body prepares you to stand your ground and fight, or run away.

This stress response prepares us for action; it's for our own protection.

Stress is normal; it's a part of life's survival kit.

In fact, you've experienced stress all your life.

ILLUS – Once upon a time, you were snuggled up in the cosy comfort of your mother's womb. It was so nice and warm in there while you sucked your thumb. And suddenly you think, "Hey, where's that draft coming from?" Then you feel like you're being squeezed through a narrow pipe, out into the atmosphere. And it's cold out there! Then someone picks you up with cold hands, and paddles you on the bottom.

That's stress, and it's been there since Day 1.

You could never completely remove stress from your life.

In fact, you wouldn't want to because we need stress to function.

ILLUS – Psychologists say that not having enough stress (hypostress) hinders your performance as much as having too much (hyperstress).

We need a healthy level of stress (eustress) as a motivator.

So not all stress is bad.

Short-term stresses like speaking in public ... boost your immune system.¹

Research: Manageable stress prompts the body to produce adrenaline and cortisol, which improve memory function. These substances "enhance how nerve cells handle information and put it into storage."²

The problem is when stress gets out of control.

Stress is such a huge problem that it's estimated "that if all the people on tranquillisers were banned from driving or operating machinery, the world's economy would collapse overnight."³

It's true.

In fact, the US FDA [Food and Drug Admin] has approved a Prozac-type drug for depressed dogs. This is good, because it's hard for dogs to get therapy – they're never allowed on the couch.⁴

Sources of stress

ILLUS – Here's a surprise one. In San Francisco some years ago, researchers asked businessmen to wear a pulse counter on their wrists, and at set times during the day to note down their pulse rate and what they were doing at the time. These men were battling deadlines, involved in important business deals, arguing with competitors and

generally living at a frantic pace. Yet the time when they were most stirred up, as measured by their pulse rates was when driving to and from work.

PowerPoint – Life Event Rating Scale by T H Holmes and R H Rahe

You might have noticed a few things on this scale:

1. Personal relationships provide the highest scoring events; our relationships are extremely important to us
2. Many of the events are positive ones – marital reconciliation, pregnancy, holidays, marriage, Christmas – they still bring stress
3. Many of the events are beyond our control

Each event has points.

If in one year you score more than 300 points, the chance of experiencing a serious health problem in the next two years is more than 80%. If you score 150 – 300 points, you have around 50% chance of a serious health problem developing.

Here are some stress indicators – symptoms that tell you if you're experiencing too much stress.

Stress Indicators – PowerPoint

Ignoring these symptoms can be dangerous.

ILLUS – Heart attacks are becoming increasingly popular so here are some guidelines on how you can join the Heart Attack Club.

1. Never say no.
2. Insist on being liked by, and trying to please everyone.
3. Never delegate any responsibility – insist on doing all the work yourself.
4. Never plan a day off.
5. Never plan a night at home.
6. Never plan enough time to drive comfortably to an appointment – this will do 2 things – show people how busy you are & protect your reputation as a lead-foot.
7. Consider it your civic duty to be a member of every club in town.
8. When your doctor advises you to slow down, ignore him and brag about the fact that you would rather wear out than rust out.

Stress symptoms are little messages that we need to do something before it's too late.

ILLUS – A student who suffered an arm injury during a basketball game went to the doctor and had his arm X-rayed. No bones had been broken, so after a few days rest, the student went back to basketball and his job lifting heavy boxes. Over the next few weeks, the pain in the arm got worse. The student returned to the doctor – his wrist was now completely broken.

If you're experiencing symptoms of high levels of stress, do something before you end up with a more serious problem.

How to manage your stress levels

If you don't learn to manage stress, eventually it will all come crashing down around you.

1. Get to know yourself.

We are all different, we are created physically different, and we are also designed to handle different workloads

ILLUS – John Wesley, the great 18th century preacher, preached three sermons a day for 54 years, preaching more than 44,000 times. He travelled by horseback and carriage more than 320,000 kms (around 8,000 kms a year), knew ten languages, published a four-volume commentary on the Bible, an English dictionary, five volumes on natural philosophy, four volumes on church history, histories of England and Rome, grammar books on Hebrew, Latin, Greek, French and English, three works on medicine, six volumes of church music, seven volumes of sermons and other papers, edited a library of 50 books, got up at 4 am each day and worked solidly to 10 pm. Are you getting tired listening to this? Wesley said, "I have more hours of private retirement than any man in

England.” At 83, he was irritated because he couldn’t write more than fifteen hours a day without hurting his eyes. On his 85th birthday, he wrote that he felt no weariness while travelling or preaching. But at 86, he was ashamed that he couldn’t preach more than twice a day. He complained in his diary that he increasingly slept in – till 5:30 am!

But guess what: We don’t all have that capacity for work.

It is essential that we learn what our capacity is and work within that.

There may be times when you have to push yourself, but generally, we have to recognise our limits.

If we understand ourselves, then we can keep our workload at a manageable level.

That means being wise in what we do outside of work which also contributes to our stress level.

It’s also important to remember that some personality types are more vulnerable to stress than others.

You may have heard of Type A personalities:

1. Set themselves harsh deadlines and quotas
2. Heavily achievement oriented
3. Push themselves and others to their maximum
4. React to frustration with anger
5. Always appear pressed for time
6. Are highly competitive in everything they do

Whereas type B personalities

1. Maintain realistic quotas and deadlines
2. Don’t value work status as highly as Type A
3. Appear more organised
4. Are less driving and more relaxed
5. Make fewer mistakes
6. Live longer and have a lower disease record

So get to know yourself – it may save your life.

2. Eat a balanced diet

Your diet can make a big difference to how well your body handles stress, so it’s important to eat well.

A good diet should contain all the major food groups:

1. Meat and other proteins
2. Vegetables
3. Fruit
4. Dairy products
5. Chocolate
6. Bread, cereals, and other grain products

3. Plan times of relaxation and recreation

Even Jesus used to take a break.

He understood that nobody can give out indefinitely without putting something back in.

Here’s something for you pet owners – you apparently have lower blood pressure than non pet owners.

Partly because of the extra exercise they get; but also, expressing affection through stroking and patting helps to reduce stress levels.

It’s been suggested that we’d all be a little more relaxed if we showed a little more physical affection towards our loved ones – and we’re not talking about sex.

Laughter is also a very important part of your recreation.

Prov 17:22 A merry heart does good, like medicine...

Laughter releases chemicals in the brain called endorphins, which promote feelings of well-being.

ILLUS – Author Norman Cousins helped himself recover from a debilitating disease by watching old comedies and cartoons, allowing himself to laugh every day as part of the healing process.

4. Get plenty of sleep

Not enough sleep produces irritability, lower concentration, makes you more depressed, more critical, work less efficiently, and enjoy life less.

Researchers have found that sleep:

- Boosts your immune system⁵
- Consolidates your memory and helps with learning⁶
- Prolongs life⁷

The recommended average is around 7-8 hours, although younger people generally need more sleep than older people.

5. This is important – exercise regularly.

Let's go back to that tiger.

When you've finished either fighting it, or running for your life, your body reverses all the chemical processes it went through.

How does it do that? Through physical activity – fighting or fleeing.

Stress prepares your body for action; action reverses the stress response.

Our problem is that in our daily situations, depending on how stressed you are – our bodies have the same reactions as when we're facing the tiger.

Your muscles tighten, adrenalin makes your heart beat faster, your blood pressure rises, your digestion is interrupted, your salivary glands dry up, you breathe more deeply and more quickly, you sweat, your face goes pale, and your blood sugar level increases.

When you are physically threatened, the stress reaction isn't a problem.

Your body produces all these weird reactions, and when the threat disappears (and you've either fought or run) the body reverses the process.

But most of us come under stress from perceived threats where there's no physical danger whatsoever.

If you're an inactive person, there's nothing to reverse the stress response.

And that's what causes problems.

We should exercise at least three times per week – aerobic and strengthening.

Exercise helps keep your heart healthy and your blood pressure down.

The most consistently recommended forms of exercise are walking and swimming, because you get the benefits of the exercise without the dangers associated with many other forms of exercise.

6. Deal with unpleasant tasks immediately.

Procrastinators: Why do today what you can put off till tomorrow?

But it's much better not to put off the things you don't like to do, because that produces more stress.

Procrastination increases your stress levels.

7. Have regular breaks

How heavy is a glass of water?

ILLUS – The absolute weight doesn't matter. It depends on how long you try to hold it. If I hold it for a minute, that's not a problem. If I hold it for an hour, I'll have an ache in my arm. If I hold it for a day, you'll have to call an ambulance. In each case, it's the same weight, but the longer I hold it, the heavier it becomes.⁸

ILLUS – The great enemy of human health is not danger, emotional upheaval or the occasional crisis. Rather, it is the prolonged unrelieved state of worry, anxiety and arousal.⁹

It's like a car being revved up and going nowhere.

Eventually this constant state of distress affects your whole life.

Take a break from your burdens occasionally.

8. Pray: Put your trust in God

Isaiah 26:3 You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.

That word "stayed" means leaning upon.

So if you're leaning on God and trusting in Him, He'll keep you in perfect peace.

Take the back seat and let God take the front seat: He's a much better driver.

Remember this: You and I are not the General Managers of the Universe.

Jesus said, "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble." (Matthew 6:34)

ILLUS – It was 28th April, 1988 and flight 243 was en route to Honolulu with 89 passengers. Twenty-three minutes after take-off, a small section of the roof was suddenly torn away. The sudden decompression caused the entire top of the aircraft – from behind the cockpit to the forewing – to tear away. When the captain looked behind him, all he saw was blue sky.

Despite everything, ten minutes later they made an emergency landing. The only fatality was flight attendant Clarabelle Lansing who was sucked right out of the plane. A full-scale investigation was launched. What caused this plane to start disintegrating? The problem was metal fatigue. Metal fatigue is the "progressive, permanent structural damage"¹⁰ that occurs when metal is subjected to normal stresses over a prolonged period.

That's what unrelieved stress does.

We need to be wise and recognise what normal stress can do over a long time – and do something about it.

Just as in flight 243, something quite ordinary can have drastic results.

Managing your stress could save your life.

¹ *Time* 19-7-04 p 54; *Reader's Digest* November 2004 p 175

² *Reader's Digest* November 2004 p 175

³ Stanton, Dr Harry *The Stress Factor* p63

⁴ Colin Quinn on Saturday Night Live as quoted in *Reader's Digest* October, 2006 p 41

⁵ *Time* 19th January, 2004, p94; *Reader's Digest* July 2006 p 124

⁶ *Sunday Mail* 12-10-03 p36

⁷ *Time* 19th January, 2004, p94

⁸ *North Lakes Messenger* 4-9-06 p10

⁹ Stanton, Dr Harry *The Stress Factor* p30

¹⁰ Wikipedia