

UNDERSTANDING & MANAGING STRESS



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Understanding and Managing Stress

Hi!

We need to understand what stress is about before we can consider managing it.

I Definition - What is Stress?

According to:

The Webster's New World Dictionary:
Stress is...

- (a) *force exerted upon a body that tends to strain or deform its shape*
- (b) *the opposing reaction or cohesiveness of a body resisting such force.*
- (c) *urgency, pressure, etc. causing this (tension)*
- (d) *mental or physical tension or strain (what you feel)*

According to:

The Oxford Advanced Learner's
Dictionary:
Stress is...

Pressure, tension or worry resulting from problems in one's life ... to be under stress or suffer from stress

1. Generally

Stress is the amount of pressure (physical, mental, emotional or spiritual) that makes a particular person feel he is 'out of control', whatever the intensity of feeling may be. It is a subjective feeling of discomfort. In this booklet, we are not discussing the objective measurement of physical stress in the clinic of a cardiologist, for example.

STRESS *can be invigorating or debilitating*, depending on when, where, how much & how pressure reaches us and who is receiving the pressure

e.g. for some students, no examination pressure, no serious studying...

e.g. no family to feed, no saving for rainy days...

2. Threshold for stress feeling

Various people may react differently to a same situation.

This means that the

stress threshold varies with each person

→ the amount of pressure that makes a person feel out of control varies from individual to individual e.g. it may take one crisis to push me over to feel under stress while it may take ten for you.

However it does not mean that, one year from now, I will still be bowled over by the same one crisis. Other factors such as changes in resources and maturity of personality may have enabled me to withstand that one crisis. I may then be bowled over only by two or three or four crises.

3. When are we likely to face stress?

Stress *exists when* demands meet us with our having less than enough resources to meet them e.g. availability of funds for a project, examination results for entrance into college.

Therefore,

Stress = Demands >> Resources
(spiritual, mental,
emotional, social
and / or physical)

Briefly, therefore, one essential aspect of management/treatment for stress is to have a realistic sense of:

- What we *have as resources* and what we *do not have* i.e. the *limits of our resources*.

plus

- The *demands* that *can be met* by the resources and what *cannot be met* by my resources.

II

Focus on How to Assess Debilitating Stress Intensity?

1. By the nature of the situation faced
e.g. marriage (75 units), death (100 units)
[Stimulus orientated theory]

2. By your response to a situation e.g ...
procrastination of homework →
reprimanded by lecturer → increases
tension → rushes to library →
produces slip shoddy work → fear of
failure → more increase in tension
[Response orientated theory]

3. By personality forecast i.e. your
personality determines your response
to an event, as to whether that
particular stress will be invigorating
(i.e. energising) or debilitating.
[Interactional theory]

III

Focus on Factors Influencing Personal Stress Threshold

(i.e. Before we are unable to function fruitfully within our personal norms.)

1. **Our backgrounds** - especially childhood experiences e.g. family upbringing, loss of loved ones i.e. our emotional baggage due to living in a fallen world.

Example

It has been documented by psychologists and psychiatrists that those who suffer from pathological grief in childhood have a higher tendency to become clinically depressed in later life when another loss occurs, if the earlier grief has not been healed or resolved yet.

2. **Our theology** – what/who we think and feel God is really like. Whether we like it or not, our beliefs do guide our life-direction, for better or for worse.

Example

All human beings have a vague idea of a higher being who is in control, needs to be in control or ought to be in control of the universe. Further, if there is no higher purpose than just living and dying in this world, I think

we are to be pitied ... for we might as well eat, drink and be merry, do what we like ... for tomorrow we die and become non-existent, we hope. Thankfully, this Higher Being is still merciful to us ... and waits for us to seek to know Him! If He is truly good, as He surely is to many through the ages, surely He will let Himself be found.

3. **Our personal sins and failures**

(who does not have them?)

Example

When under stress in a crisis, ask yourself whether you are confused or avoiding the issue of your responsibility in that situation.

Do you *behave in the same way* even if it causes unnecessary conflict with others?

Do you *look for your own solutions*, shunning advice from others?

Do you *look for help from others*, including, especially the all-wise God who created and knows you best?

IV

Focus on Treatment

Why should I take care of myself?

It is to be a realistically faithful steward of my resources.

Example

Following the creation principle, to take good care of your personal computer, you must use it according to the producer's instructions. In the same way, we need to heed the rhythms that our Creator has placed in our spirit, soul and body to function as a whole human being.

However, even if you do not believe that you are accountable to a Creator, at least you are accountable to those around you and we need to live in harmony and peace. To do that, we need to try to understand our strengths and weaknesses so that we may care for one another while we live on planet earth.

General Stress Management Principles

1

Follow the Rhythms of Life

Example

Breath in and out, move and be still, eat and pass motion, sleep and awake, work and play, worship and pray, grow and mature.

You need to engineer your physical health as it is related to your mental and emotional health.

Example

Workaholics may be addicted to high adrenaline levels and feel flat and worthless if they do not keep working. Some work till they literally collapse and die.

Therefore

Pay attention to your daily:

- nutrition
- exercise
- relaxation
- need for enough sleep

Recognise Developmental Needs

a. Individual Life Cycle

- Depends on your age &
- Where you are in the 8 stages of life ...

→ womb → 1st year → 1-3, 4-6
 → 6-12 → 12-20 → 20-40 →
 40-60 → >60 years ?

- Ask yourself: "What am I doing here and now?"

b. Family Life Cycle

Growth involves multiple changes. If change is accepted, pressures decrease.

Examples

- An adjustment period is needed for newly married couples and when their first baby arrives. This is normal. Therefore, if you don't expect things to have changed, you will suffer more!
- If either/both partners are over dependent on his/her parents
 - They cannot grow as a unit
 - They will have excessive phone bills
- To have teenage children → stress++ which is normal as today's middle-aged

parents are pressed on to meet their changing demands e.g. "need" for more clothes, food, time out.

- Stages of couple's relationship:
 - 1st friendship
 - 2nd courtship
 - 3rd engagement
 - 4th marriage → honeymoon,
no children yet
 - when children arrive
 - when teenagers develop
 - when children leave home

Where you are in the marital stage will affect your experience of stress in earthly life.

This means that many factors:

- may go out of our control &
- may affect a normal marriage in this world.

Therefore, when you do not feel so satisfied with your spouse, realise that this is expected and don't blame each other ... too much.

Pause & Reflect

Q. How many factors are out of your control this past week?

Q. How do you view them?

c. What when several cycles collide and produce much stress?

Example

teenage children	(nuclear factor)
+	
middle-age changes	(personal life's stage factor)
+	
arthritis setting in	(personal health factor)
+	
caring for aging parents	(extended family factor)
+	
shaky economy	(world factor)
+	
unfaithful spouse	(extra-marital factor)

**Reflect on the above.
Write down your thoughts.**

3 *Accept Changes*

Change is part of our life here as we know it.

We may not see our lives as a series of changes though every decision we make involves a change. It may be a matter of:

- a routine change e.g. a choice of food and clothes, time you leave or reach home
- a new change e.g. an experience of the empty nest syndrome when no child comes home for months and years
- an expected change e.g. when the first child attends school
- an unexpected change e.g. a spouse dies in an accident

The outcome of our mental and emotional health much depends on how we view changes

4

Do What You Can

Manage External Factors

- Practise time management and set priorities.
- Avoid overloading situations – learn to say “NO”.
- Delegate responsibility (be mutual in helping one another).
- Reduce the task into manageable parts.
- Enlist the aid or support of others.
- Accept fallibility of self and others ... remember ... “You are not God”!
- Determine your optimal stress level.
- Avoid exposure to stress.
- Do not be ashamed of stopping at your personal limits.

Adapt to Stress

- Establish routines whenever possible.
- Use time-blocking techniques.
- Establish a day of rest in a week.
- Relax during vacations.
- Avoid or minimise other changes during times of massive change.

Manage Your Frustration

Find alternative goals to your frustrated goals.

Prevent Excessive Stress

- Plan ahead to avoid potentially stressful events.
- Adjust and Accept Reality ←OR→ Get Depressed or Emotionally shut down (e.g. blame spouse/lecturer/ boss, not accepting the possibility that the problem may be due to our over reactions to their words or actions.
- See cup 1/2 full? ←OR→ See cup 1/2 empty?



- Procrastination
 - increases tension
 - rushes to work when late (fight or flight stress)

5

Take Seriously Personality Factors in Stress

These are the factors which are internal and personal to you. Therefore they are manageable to you unless you are undergoing burnout or depressed.

Temperament + Character = Personality
J.I.Packer ²

To a great extent, your personality determines your reaction to an event, as to whether that particular stress will be invigorating or debilitating for you.

Understand that:

Stress maybe neutral e.g. Like laughter, which may be taken as a means to express good humour or a jeer/sneer.

“Stress is also a matter of perspective, depending on your philosophy of life and beliefs.”

It can become a friend to urge you to grow in maturity or an enemy to flee from/fight with.

There is often a thin line between creativity and craziness in handling stress.

Some people want to control everything, even those they cannot control and are not meant to control. They live in an atmosphere of the fear of losing control.

Example

To some people (individuals / families / societies ...)

"Time is money!"

"Let's go for it!"

Over competitive and hostile spirit e.g. in sports and games.

Such an attitude is contagious to those near them.

These people make stress for themselves by rushing to achieve more and more in less and less time.

Some may have more cardiac problems.

Therefore,

Watch out for the virus of Perfectionism!

A perfectionist holds a worldview that perfection can be achieved in everything if only we try hard enough. Perfectionism is not mere diligence, which is to be encouraged. It is the opposite of grace and excellence in a broken world. It is like a salvation by works approach ... a works righteousness belief.

To other people (individuals / families / societies), perfectionists tend to be:

- Timid, naturally less expressive in public
- Tend to have a negative view of the world and life
- Tend to see the darker side of an event

Consider ...

- Excellence →
- View life as a challenge
 - Realistic of one's abilities
 - Could or would like to do some things
 - Freedom from self
Concerned with the process of reaching goals, not just the end.

Contrast with ...

- Perfectionism → ought, should ("shouldistic"), striving for the impossible

Example

A perfectionist mother wants a perfectly clean living room even with toddlers running around. This thought pattern leads her to "*tear her hair out*" because she cannot maintain the cleanliness of the lounge long enough.

She is more concerned with the product than the process of production. She always compares herself with others by asking:

“What will other people think of me?”

Such a person becomes a slave to self and lives with disappointment her whole life through (because she can't fulfill her plans 100%).

Therefore, she feels constantly condemned (because she can't be perfect), frustrated and a failure, even if she obtains high salaries/academic results.

This means that *“Life is a curse!!”*
Nothing is enough for her!!

The Tape Recorder in her mind says:

“You never can do anything right!”
“You never do enough.”

This worldview is often due to significant adults (e.g. parents/teachers/religious leaders) whom they admired in childhood but who did not accept their uniqueness and kept picking on them.

Cure for Perfectionism?

*A deep experience of the grace (undeserved mercy)
and love of God through ...*

- Knowing who you are and whose you are.
- Knowing what started this damaged world-view off in you.
- Being realistic regarding achievements in order to omit false guilt.
- Handing over to someone else who can do whatever you cannot control/do

Note the prayer of a catholic priest:

“Lord, grant me the serenity to accept
the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can
and wisdom to know the difference.”

Ask yourself:

1. What are some of the things *you can change*, more or less e.g. if your fellow students are too noisy for you ... *do something about it* (e.g. shift house or use ear plugs while studying).
2. What are some of the things *you cannot change* e.g. your girlfriend or boyfriend ... accept it and do something about it (e.g. give a gracious and friendly farewell or pray harder for change if you want to marry him/her later).

Remember

Your general natural appraisal of things (worldview) determine your perspective of events.

Use your mind to make logical analysis of your problem by:

- Drawing on relevant past experiences and exercising a reinterpretation of events e.g. forgive those who have wronged you, ask for forgiveness from those you have harmed.
- Exercising your will to avoid the bad situation temporarily, if you can't do anything about it, by “*selectively ignoring*” it!

Control Your Emotion in order to cope for the time being by

- Exercising e.g. jogging.
- Practising controlled emotional discharge e.g. gently express yourself verbally to someone you disagree with or do good to someone who has hurt you ... he may not even know he has done so and when he appreciates you, you know you have achieved your goal of reconciliation ... which will bring much peace instead of pent up stress.

- Nurturing your self-esteem and preventing depression.
- Accepting compliments.
- Practising assertiveness graciously.
- Verbalising positive qualities.
- Developing a support group of like minded people to talk to when over loaded.
- Sorting out personal/marital/family problems ...
- Learning to laugh at yourself ++.
- Reaching out to others in your community, especially those needier than you.
- Living within your budget. Give thanks for extras!
- Making 1-2 closer friends and continue the friendship even after you part.

A statement made by a religious teacher, who lived in the early part of the 1st century, encourages us to train our minds to think positively ... and I would add, even in the midst of suffering. He said:

*“...Brothers, whatever is true
 whatever is noble
 whatever is right
 whatever is pure
 whatever is lovely
 whatever is admirable...if anything
 is excellent or praiseworthy
 ... think about such things.”*

Philippians 4:8

6.

Take Your Spiritual Life Seriously

The spiritual aspect of human nature is often ignored in our fast paced materialistic world. We look for the most tangibly profitable most of the time. Without acknowledging the existence of the Holy God, there is no good reason to care for one another ... hence, the rat race takes precedence over team work, for if we really believe that only the fittest will survive, then we will do all we can to overcome others so that we can live our way. Thus, much stress is self-induced. We don't have time to go into this except to encourage you to:

- Pray to God directly, ask Him anything you like and, above all, seek Him till you find Him, for in Him alone is our confidence and rest.
- Be a faithful steward of resources entrusted to you.
- Develop a day and/or periods of fast ... from TV, Internet, work, food, etc ... and rest, to show that God is truly in charge of the world, not you ... and that you depend on Him for life itself.
- Know your strengths and limitations. Handle one task at a time.

- See God's good in the bad.
- Finally, to change debilitating stress to invigorating stress in a world being redeemed ...

“Remember Your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, ‘I find no pleasure in them’ ... ”

Ecclesiastes 12:1

Shalom in Jesus Christ who is our Peace with God and man!

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Booklets in this series:

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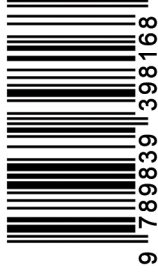
Having heard God's call for her to write in 1992, Bee Teik has penned books on prayer, pastoral counseling and her experiences as a Malaysian Christian woman.

This series of 18 titles, classified under the overall theme, *On Being Human*, is drawn from the positive feedback from her seminars.

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