

### Are You Absorbing Too Much Stress?

I think there is a real application here to how we live. We can absorb and soak up a lot of crud and collect a lot of misery. We can hold on to the pains that are bound to come, almost cherishing them. We also do this with depression and other crummy stuff. We can cling to this until our bag is full, and then we may dump it—usually on somebody else.

Or we have the option of blowing all that negative thinking away—the criticisms and grudges, the self-depreciation that leads to compulsive behavior designed to please others. We can ask God to remove it completely, replacing darkness with His light, sweeping us clean of unforgiveness, bitterness, greed, and social ambition. He can make a springlike freshness in our hearts if we will know and practice the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Where are you today? Are you going through life sucking up grudges and grievances that turn into pressure and stress as you remember all the wrongs done to you? Are you carrying around other bagfuls of dirt from old sin areas? We often have the mistaken idea that stress is something other people and outside forces cause in our lives. Stress can be caused by external factors, but very often *we cause our own stress*. We can let God blow away our stress—get it out of our path, out of our lives. Then we can stand clean before Him with the assurance that He can keep us from losing our minds. Not only that, but He can help us renew our minds daily.

### You Can't Control It All

Something that helped me cope with my stress instead of continuing to collect it along with a lot of other mental barnacles was realizing that *If there is no control, there is no responsibility*.

Dr. Harold Greenwald has co-authored a book called *The Happy Person*. He believes there are at least six realities in life that we can't change and we must accept. Getting older is one of them. Getting old is inevitable, but according to Dr. Greenwald, if you consider the alternative, it is a process you can learn to enjoy. (More on that in chapter 9.)

Also, there are always things in life that will not be fair. And there will be some people who won't like you no matter how kind, good-natured, and charming you might be.

You must keep in mind that life is a constant struggle. Some people think that if they can just get over the particular hump or through the particular tunnel in which they are struggling now, that everything will be smooth sailing from then on. That just won't happen. Better to see life as a series of problems that are opportunities to learn and grow, and then you won't get nearly as stressed out when the struggles come.

Above all, remember that you can't change people. That was a hard one for me because I always wanted to change Larry. But I had to let Larry do his own changing, with God as his motivator and power source. Once I stopped trying to change him, most of the stress went out of our relationship.

### Use Laughter to Cope with Stress

With all its pain and problems, life is no joke, but as I explained in chapter 5, learning to laugh can help you cope. I agree completely with the professor of psychology who believes laughter is the best way to relieve stress and get yourself in a new frame of mind. In an Associated Press release (I don't know the date), Dr. Robert Leone of United States International University says, "When you're laughing your attention is focused. You can't do anything else. Everything else, whether it's depression or stress, stops." Dr. Leone also says a good laugh can cleanse your emotional state and make you feel better about going on. He lists all kinds of ways to put a little more laughter in your life:

1. Try listening to a humorous record by one of your favorite comedians, or go see a funny movie. It's a temporary lift, but just the release of laughter will make you feel better.
2. Try expanding your activities. For example, maybe you never sing in the car because you don't want people next to you on the freeway thinking you're weird. Try it sometime, and then you can chuckle over the funny looks you get.
3. Quit making excuses for why you aren't happy. "At some point," says Dr. Leone, "you have to take responsibility

for your own happiness. People . . . settle for 60 or 70 percent happiness, but they could be a lot happier."

### Singing Can Work Wonders, Too

I mentioned above that singing in the car might produce some weird looks and a few laughs, but there are even better reasons to sing. I often sing as I ride my exercycle, take showers, or do housework. The experts say you can live longer with a song in your heart. In one case, doctors put twenty professional opera singers, ages twenty-eight to sixty-five, through eight minutes of rigorous breathing exercises. Every singer did it in a breeze, but a group of forty nonsingers *under forty years old* struggled to finish the test and their heart rates soared.

Psychiatrists sometimes urge their patients to sing away tension and anxiety. When you sing, you get rid of energy, and this can take your mind off your troubles, spark pleasant memories, and ease physical tension. Try singing in the shower to get ready to face the day or singing in the car, especially when traffic is bumper to bumper. Pick songs that are inspiring and motivating. For me, hymns and gospel songs do that the best. Some of my favorite are "Amazing Grace" and "When Answers Aren't Enough, There is Jesus." And I also like the chorus that says: "In moments like these, I sing out a love song . . . I sing out a love song to Jesus."

### How to Survive the Rat Race

One of the major causes for stress in daily life is PRESURE. Recently I met Tim Hansel, author of a great book on dealing with pain called *Ya Gotta Keep Dancin'*. We were both invited to speak at the same conference, and I got a chuckle when Tim said, "I'll bet both our schedules are somewhere to the left of WHOOPEE!" That reminded me of one of my favorite bumper stickers:

JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT  
YOU WERE WINNING THE RAT RACE  
ALONG COME FASTER RATS.

We all have to run the "rat race." The trick is to try not to drop out of the race, but to pace ourselves so we can LAST. I've learned to be thankful for my diabetes because it has forced me to avoid stress and eat properly. I look at it as a positive thing—something that's good news instead of bad.

### God's Advice for Defeating Depression

It's important to deal with stress because it can easily turn into depression. In fact, I once read an article that said depression is often caused by *not learning how to deal with the stresses* in your life. Women especially have to be on guard because their personalities tend to make them more prone to depression than men.

From my own experience, I agree. Almost every week I talk to depressed mothers who feel like the bull's eye on the dart board of life. Many of them just want to curl up and find a hole to hide in (which is what I did the first time Larry left for the gay life). But I urge them to try to keep busy, to keep going. And I also tell them to be patient. It takes time to get over depression, but it does end. It doesn't come to stay; like much of the other pain and hassle in life, it comes to PASS.

I found a wonderful paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 13. It can be a real help, particularly if you're feeling down and depressed. Try reading this paraphrase aloud every morning and evening, and the realization of God's love will start seeping into your life to blow away your black clouds:

#### BECAUSE GOD LOVES ME (Based on 1 Corinthians 13:4-8)

Because God loves me, He is slow to lose patience with me.

Because God loves me, He takes the circumstances of my life and uses them in a constructive way for my growth.

Because God loves me, He is for me. He wants to see me mature and develop in His love.

Because God loves me, He does not send down His wrath on every little mistake I make, of which there are many.

Because God loves me, He does not keep score of all my sins and then beat me over the head with them whenever He gets the chance.

Because God loves me, He is deeply grieved when I do not walk in the ways that please Him because He sees this as evidence that I don't trust Him and love Him as I should.

Because God loves me, He keeps on trusting me when at times I don't even trust myself.

Because God loves me, He never says there is no hope for me: rather, He patiently works with me, loves me, and disciplines me in such a way that it is hard for me to understand the depth of His concern for me.

Because God loves me, He never forsakes me even though many of my friends might.

Because God loves me He stands with me when I have reached the rock bottom of despair, when I see the real me and compare that with His righteousness, holiness, beauty, and love. It is at a moment like this that I can really believe that God loves me.

Yes, the greatest of all gifts is God's perfect love!

—Source Unknown

### Stress Is in the Eye of the Beholder

I learned from personal experience that one person's "stress" is another person's minor irritation. I can still remember when I was going through my black tunnel of despair and a lady called me to tell me her problem. It seemed that she had "fat pads" on her knees. My own heart was so raw and bleeding that it was all I could do to listen patiently to her complaints. But to her, the fat pads were an all-consuming problem, and she had to talk to someone about them.

Another woman wrote to me about a similar situation which she experienced, saying that she had gotten so frustrated she let off a little steam, which she later regretted. She writes:

Once a lady in my class asked for prayer because her husband would not pick up his socks. I said (and I am ashamed of it), "Would you like to trade places with me? I have a bad heart, a retarded son, and an alcoholic husband given to sporadic violence. I have an illegitimate grandson. A man my husband fired threw a Molotov cocktail into a warehouse we

had just filled with roofing materials on credit, causing the second largest fire (our city) ever had. We had no insurance. After three years of struggling to pay for the burned stock, the recession forced us into bankruptcy.

And people tell me to lose weight when we are living on beans and potatoes."

I was immediately ashamed because the lady had all she could handle with the sock problem, and playing "Can You Top This?" gives the Lord no glory. I have learned a lot over the years, usually too late.

How true! We do learn a lot over the years and often it seems to be too late, but it's never too late to face stress and hassles with a positive attitude. Something can always be done to straighten life out, no matter how full of twists and snares it gets.

### Under Stress at a Rescue Mission

I still say the most positive thing you can do about stress is to learn to laugh. Recently, I was invited to speak at the Los Angeles Rescue Mission on Skid Row. That was stress in itself because this isn't my usual audience. Bill had come with me, and because he had a bad cold, he sat up on the platform behind me nipping at a little bottle of cough medicine. Of course, it looked as if he were nipping at something else!

As I was trying to get into my talk, I noticed one man in the front row who had his hat pulled way down around his ears. Just then, one of the Mission workers came down the aisle with a long pole. It was almost twenty feet in length and had some kind of gripping device on the end. He reached the pole clear across the front row and snatched the man's hat, plucking it right off his head, then turned and walked out. The Union Rescue Mission has strict rules—no listening to speakers with your hat on, but I guess they had no rule about throwing speakers for a loop by reaching across the row with a twenty-foot pole and plucking off hats. Nobody seemed to notice, though. Everybody just kept listening to my story,

which was at a very serious point. And all the while Bill kept sitting behind me, nipping away at his cough syrup.

At a moment like that, you have to decide, "How am I going to react to this?" Well, I just answered my own question. "Hey, this is too ridiculous to cry about, so I might as well laugh." And that's just what I did. The stress drained away, and I got through the talk okay.