

You Can Manage Stress!

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Everyone feels stressed sometimes. It's easy to feel like we're failing in the Christian life if we don't feel joyful all of the time, but the reality is this: life is hard. Jesus said: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). How can we live like we really believe what He said?

Since anything or anyone can trigger a stress response, it's important to know what's happening in your body when you feel upset, stressed out, or uptight. In "The Stress Myth," Dr. Richard E. Ecker said, stress is "a physical response that the human body invokes in order to deal with a perceived threat to its stability. Stress is not a force in the external world; it is a response in the body." In "The Stress of Life," author Hans Selye, M.D. defined stress as "the sum of all the wear and tear caused by any kind of vital reaction throughout the body at any one time" (p. 274). Selye added, "Man should not try to avoid stress any more than he would shun food, love, or exercise." Identifying what stress is can help you transform its impact on your life!

As long as we blame people, circumstances, or events for internal, physiological responses, we'll remain "stressed out," looking for stress relief or some form of intervention in all the wrong places. Instead, we can train ourselves to manage the body's stress response, preventing stressors' dominance over our lives. A biblical perspective such as Philippians 4:13 ["I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"] can motivate us to remember that God promises transformation for His children. And sometimes saying "yes" to His transforming power includes saying "no" to others' demands or even to our own expectations.

Here are a few practical changes to help you manage life's stressors in God's power, peace, and design:

Change 1: Reduce the *impact* of stress by remembering that God cares for you and knows your needs. In the midst of stressful situations, we can remind ourselves to live in the peace God promises to provide. Colossians 3:15 (AMP) describes the peace of Christ as "the inner calm of one who walks daily with Him." We experience God's "peace that passes understanding" [see Philippians 4:7] when we trust Him with the circumstances, people, and concerns of our lives.

Change 2: Respond instead of reacting. Since many circumstances and/or people simply can't be changed, we can train ourselves to respond to stressors instead of allowing them to control our lives. The body's stress response occurs in the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS), which is designed by God. Knowing His design is good, we can be confident God has provided healthy ways to tackle life's day-to-day challenges.

If stressors are long-term and/or severe, healthy responses could include making time for rest and exercise, finding Christian fellowship [at church, in Bible study, etc.], and asking others for practical help, per Galatians 6:2.

Change 3: Observe your body. If you're experiencing physical concerns like difficulty breathing or tightness in your chest, get a medical evaluation. If your physician tells you, "It's stress, not a heart attack," or "It's anxiety; you're having a panic attack," you know it's time to choose to learn how to manage stress instead of being dominated by it.

Instead of simply learning how to "cope" with stress, you can prevent it from taking control. Stress triggers the ANS to prepare itself for fight or flight, your limbic system releasing hormones to prepare you to deal with perceived danger. Activated by any of your five senses, your amygdala operates as the brain's alarm system, sending rapid-fire messages to the hypothalamus, activating your Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS). All this occurs in just a fraction of a second.

Even when there is no danger, continuing *perception* of danger can diminish your quality of life. Often without your conscious awareness, SNS dominance “hijacks” rational thought and instigates one or more of the 5 Fs: Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fornicate, or Feed. Resultant discomfort can push people into complex, confusing emotional and relational upheaval.

Change 4: Learn how to leave your past in the past. Stress is often driven by past learning, and until you identify what, if any, past experiences are fueling your current stress response, a state of emotional “auto-pilot” could be driving your choices without you even being aware of it. Praying Psalm 139:23-24, you could ask God to lovingly help you recognize when past painful events, people, or situations are driving you into a SNS state of high alert.

How can you recognize if you’re being driven by an over-active SNS, steered by the brain’s “HOT” system? If you’re sleeping without feeling rested, experiencing persistent insomnia, overeating, undereating, living with muscle tension, chest pain, difficulty breathing, or tingling fingers, it could be that you’re living with unresolved stress. If you’re numbing out your emotions with addictive behaviors, erupting with anger or rage, feeling a relentless sense of out-of-control danger or fear, experiencing persistent depression, anxiety, or panic attacks, it could be that your SNS is “chauffeur” you in the wrong direction. Be aware: we need the SNS to alert us of danger; we also need to know when it’s time to give it a rest!

Change 5: Chill out. Really. When you realize you’re functioning in your brain’s HOT system, you can choose to rapidly move away from that state into the brain’s COOL system, the Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS). With PNS dominance, you give yourself time to make healthy choices. You train yourself to think rationally as you inhale and exhale deeply, allowing your body to decrease its heart rate, while maintaining normal body temperature and making the choice to respond to life’s pressures and problems rather than reacting to them.

With just one second of consciously relaxing any of your body’s muscles, you can move from the SNS to the PNS. Try this simple exercise: lace the fingers of your hands together and place them behind your head for a gentle stretch, or stretch some other part of your body. Then, allow your muscles to relax, noticing the release of tension throughout your body. While continuing to complete a gentle stretch, notice your breathing. Proverbs 14:30 says, “A heart at peace gives life to the body,” and that is true! When we’re stressed, we’re usually “chest-breathing,” not inhaling deeply. When we relax, our entire beings—bodies, souls, and minds—benefit. You can manage stress by daily living at peace, trusting God to be your Good Shepherd!

Meditating on God’s Word can increase your ability to relax and enjoy life. As you prayerfully think about Truth throughout the day, you’ll notice that your breathing continues to be relaxed. Any time you unconsciously move into SNS dominance, you can consciously, rapidly choose to move back into PNS dominance, enjoying the rest God provides for your mind, soul, and body as you choose to respond rather than react to life’s ongoing stressors.

If you’re unable to apply this information because of debilitating emotional challenges, it could be time to ask for help. Just as those with serious physical illnesses find appropriate medical care, those with ongoing emotional concerns can ask for professional help without embarrassment. It would be absurd to tell someone with a broken bone to “fix it yourself,” and it’s equally ridiculous to expect someone experiencing severe depression, anxiety, or other emotional concerns to just “get over it” without specific help. With nearly 600 different forms of therapy available, be prepared to ask a prospective counselor questions so you can find someone equipped to help with your specific needs [ccef.org/counseling/choosing-a-christian-counselor, offers some general ideas]. Some places to look for a Christian counselor in South Florida include the South Florida Association of Christian Counselors: www.sfacconline.org; or throughout the United States, at: www.aacc.net; www.ccef.org; and www.focusonthefamily.com.