

The support of others

It is appropriate that we finally turn our attention to the role others play in supporting us in times of stress and excessive pressure. There is mutuality in this – the support we hope for and solicit from others is also the support we offer to them. What form might this take?

Spiritual: Someone who prays with us and for us.

Emotional: A shoulder to cry on; someone who is ‘there for us’; a ‘safe’ person to tell how we feel; someone who believes in us; a close friend or family member who loves and accepts us.

Logical: Someone to help us think through our situation; a wise counsellor; a person skilled in problem-solving techniques; a spiritual director or mentor.

Practical: This person might take some of the tasks off our hands, or see more effective ways of getting the job done.

Concluding thoughts

God may use our stress to teach us something more significant than simply how to avoid it. We may need to learn about liberation and spiritual flourishing, about forgiveness and repentance, about learning to hear what God is saying, and about finding shalom (wellbeing) in the maelstrom, not just escaping from it.

We will benefit by considering the words of Jesus Christ that guide us all to a place of peace in the midst of our times of trouble and stress (Matt. 11:28–30).

*Peace I leave with you; my peace
I give you. I do not give to you as the
world gives. Do not let your hearts
be troubled and do not be afraid.*

(John 14:27)

A BRIEF INSIGHT INTO

STRESS

Understanding Stress

What is stress?

Stress is our emotional, psychological, physiological and spiritual response to the pressures of life. Pressure in itself is not a bad thing, unless it becomes too intense. We can determine the level of pressure we are facing now by considering the common reactions that occur as pressure increases.¹

Chill out: At low levels of pressure, nothing much needs doing, nothing much gets done!

Work out: Here the pressure increases; we think more rapidly, move faster and make decisions more quickly. The key aspect of this zone is that it is sustainable.

Stretch: Now the adrenalin is flowing, we are pulling out all the stops, and we are delivering. But we are aware that we cannot carry on at this pace indefinitely.

Strain: We have gone past the maximum effective pressure point and are heading down the slippery slope. We feel unable to cope; life is getting out of control. Should the pressures continue we are at risk of damaging ourselves physically and emotionally, and harming relationships.

Burnout: People experiencing ‘burnout’ often feel angry, helpless, trapped and totally depleted. Usually they have been under considerable pressure for a prolonged period. ‘The major defining characteristic of burnout is that people can’t or won’t do again what they have been doing.’² Resentment and negativity often accompany the burnout experience.

1. Stephen Williams and Lesley Cooper, *Managing Workplace Stress* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2002).
2. Harry Levinson, ‘When Executives Burn Out’, *Harvard Business Review*, July–August 1996.

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Recognising the signs of stress

It is important to identify where we are on the pressure/performance curve because by the time we have reached the higher end of stretch and are moving into strain, we have very little energy for taking remedial action. No two people have the same symptoms, and the effects may vary considerably. We need to learn to monitor our own stress reactions and develop a personal 'early warning system'.

Physical: When we react strongly to the irritations of particular colleagues or family members, traffic congestion, our workload, or the level of our bank balance then we are likely to develop certain physical symptoms over time: muscular tension, aches and pains, loss of appetite or overindulgence in sugar, alcohol or nicotine, high blood pressure, headaches and continually feeling tired. Our immune system becomes depleted and we are vulnerable to every cough, cold or flu bug.

Emotional: Possible emotional reactions include irritability, anger, depression, impatience, loss of confidence and worrying excessively.

Social: Some people withdraw as a result of stress. Others, however, become frenetic, filling every moment with activity, in an effort not to have to think.

Intellectual: Just when we need to be thinking clearly, we find it difficult to concentrate. We lack judgment and reason, and decisions seem impossibly complicated.

Spiritual: Spiritual responses can include the inability to pray, loss of purpose or hope, doubting God's goodness, blaming, withdrawal from other Christians, and feeling victimised and helpless. However, others are drawn closer to God.

Stress pressure points

Stress is a reaction to pressure. It's like a warning light on the dashboard of a car, alerting us to something that is wrong.

The metal spring: We can use the picture of ourselves as metal springs with weights on the bottom end. Our weights are our pressures. We are designed to carry some weights (pressures), to extend as we do so, and then to go back into shape when the weights are removed. Life is a sequence of *extension – relaxation – extension – relaxation* and so on. Our problems arise in three main ways:

1. The spring becomes weak;
2. The weights are too heavy, or stay on the spring too long;
3. Support or help in carrying the load is non-existent or removed.

The weights represent the different pressures we each experience. Here are five common 'weights' we carry:

1. Change and uncertainty

This includes 'life events' such as birth, marriage, death, moving house, changing job, family illness. We may welcome some degree of change. However, change moves us out of our comfort zone. It brings us into the unknown. It can be more difficult if the change is unwanted or painful to us.

2. Demands and expectations of others

Workload, deadlines, roles at church, family expectations and the never-ending 'To Do' list ... When we feel compelled to meet these demands and expectations, pressure builds. We need to stop, reconsider, and seek God's wisdom. What is He asking us to say 'no' to?

3. Self-expectation (drivenness)

Often self-expectation is one of the primary factors in stress because it is not just another 'weight on the spring'. It multiplies the effects of the two preceding weights. These types of people may experience drivenness:

- **the activist** who consumes too much energy struggling to live beyond the constraints of time;
- **the perfectionist** who views anything less than perfect as a failure;
- **the people-pleaser** who fears rejection and criticism;
- **the 'saviour'** who does not want to let people down;
- **the 'striver'** who always has to be hard at work and put in more effort: they cannot relax.

4. Lack of purpose (demotivation or resentment)

Lack of purpose can be both a symptom and a cause of stress. Any task that we resent doing becomes a significant weight. When we see little point in what we are doing then it becomes hard going.

5. Personal, physical and spiritual attack

In the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesian church in the Bible (Eph. 6:12) we are informed that we are all involved in a spiritual battle. Christians believe we battle against:

- The buffeting from the enemy of our souls - Satan;
- The fallenness of our own human nature;
- The harmful actions and attitudes of others.

Because we live in a broken world, these pressures can arise at any time. And because we are integrated beings, these experiences may impact us physically, psychologically, emotionally and spiritually.

Preventing stress overload – 'strengthening the spring'

Physically

It is not good to be preoccupied with our bodies, and yet our bodies are entrusted to us – they are where we will live for the rest of our lives. The principles here are well known: healthy diet, drinking plenty of water, exercise, sufficient sleep; fresh air and daylight.

Emotionally

The heart, as a bodily organ, is central to life. Our emotional heart serves an equally important role (Prov. 4:23). We *are* able to choose our response to our hurts and disappointments. We can focus on all the negative experiences, or we can respond in gratitude for those things which have been positive. Past wounds need to be cleaned out through forgiveness and then prayerfully healed – releasing our pain to God and receiving His comfort.

Intellectually

We can also strengthen our spring through learning new skills and widening our thinking and reading. Going on courses or being coached by others is also important. There are excellent resources on the internet and in other multi-media that strengthen our understanding and abilities. God has promised us His wisdom when we ask, and challenges us not to lean on our own understanding (Prov. 3:5).

Spiritually

Strengthening our spring spiritually is about becoming mature as a Christian. Maturity is not gained through the number of years we have been a Christian, it is dependent on our spiritual diet during that time, and our willingness to allow God to renew our minds.