

Stressed?

How to experience a calmer life.

By Scott Morton



Illustration by Ken Westphal
www.kenwestphal.com

I was on the phone complaining to a colleague about how stressed I was. I told him I was “honking at my taillights,” with too much to do and too little time to do it.

Silence.

I waited, eager for the call to end so I could get back to my busy schedule.

Chuck was breaking a custom. Usually when one Christian tells another Christian how stressed he is, the listener responds by describing how much more stressed he is, which prompts the original busy person to “outstress” him once again. Stress face-offs, I call them.

Silence.

Chuck was not playing the “how stressed I am” game.

Finally he spoke. “Got a verse for you,” he said.

Oh great, I thought, a Bible verse to patch up my shattered nerves. “Go ahead,” I said halfheartedly. “What’s the verse?”

“1 John 1:9,” he replied.

I recognized the passage immediately and was stunned. It says, “If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” Did Chuck think I was sinning because I had too much on my plate? Didn’t he know that everyone is stressed? It’s not a sin. It’s just a way of life from which there’s no escape.

“Thanks,” I replied weakly. “That helps.”

That conversation was years ago, but it was a wake-up call. It made me realize I had lost the peace I’d found as a new believer. Since then, I’ve done a lot of thinking about why we fall so easily into the stress trap.

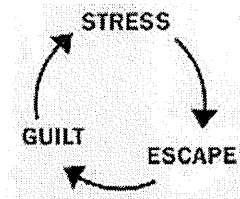
First, we must realize that stress is not always negative: It can help us focus and do our best. And some stress is caused by events we cannot fully control. When my son was hospitalized after a severe car accident, I experienced intense stress. When your boss surprises you with a

layoff notice, you'll be stressed. Even Jesus endured stress in the Garden of Gethsemane as He prepared for the crucifixion.

How can we learn to live in peace in the midst of a busy, stressful culture? Let's begin by examining several strategies for dealing with stress that won't help.

Coping Strategies That Don't Work

When stress hits, we tend to employ ineffective coping habits that produce guilt. This only adds to the stress. The diagram below shows how ineffective strategies—such as escape—amplify stress.



Escape is perhaps the most common coping mechanism. A recent TV ad showed a harried father running to his new car to avoid noisy kids, broken plumbing, and the bill collector. With the windows up, he leans back in his leather seat, closes his eyes, and enjoys the car's premium sound system, oblivious to his daughter tapping on the window. But TV fathers weren't the first to try this coping mechanism. During a raging storm, Jonah slept in the bottom of a small ship to escape his responsibility to go to Nineveh.

Overdrinking, overeating, overworking, overmovieing, and preoccupation with sex are common stress-evacuation routes. A more subtle escape is preoccupation with hobbies. During one stressful period, I sought solace by gazing hour after hour at a peaceful tank of tropical fish.

Another coping mechanism is the "deer in the headlights" syndrome: freezing under stress and just staring at the problems careening toward you. When this happens, I still go about my daily work, but I move as if in a daze, unable to attack my responsibilities with zeal. I shuffle along numbly, hoping the stress will pass.

A third tactic is to attack. If a coworker brings stress, criticize. Neighbors cause stress? Return snide remarks. Boss causes stress? Gossip.

The fourth tactic, changing circumstances, is similar. If a coworker won't be kind, change jobs. Neighbors a problem? Move. Husband creates tension? Change husbands. Changing geography, jobs, or relationships brings an immediate sense of peace, but it is not God's peace. You feel better because you have removed an irritation. The relief, however, is only temporary, and the pain is merely postponed.

The fifth coping tactic is "gutting it out." We reason: If I can just make it through the next tax season . . . this school year . . . the job review. Unfortunately, like waves of the ocean, one stress after another crashes into our lives. We go from stress to stress without a break.

Hoping that your stress will dissolve without making inner changes is wishful thinking. If these coping mechanism won't work, what will? What does the Bible say?



Illustration by Ken Westphal

Make a strong commitment.

Recently, I discovered these verses:

Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

1 Thes. 4:11–12

Note the word ambition. The King James Version says “study to be quiet” (emphasis added). This word, *philotimeomai*, is also used in Romans 15:20 where Paul says he “aspired” to preach the gospel where Christ is not named (NASB). Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words says that it means to “strive earnestly.” Reducing stress requires a commitment to change the way we live. We will not lead quiet lives unless we strive for it in the way Paul describes here.

Why lead a quiet life? Paul said, “so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders.” Think about it: Are you attracted to people who are overstressed? Why would nonbelievers be attracted to the Jesus you serve if all they see is busyness and stress?

Pray specifically about your responsibilities.

One cold November Saturday in Madison, Wisconsin, I awoke with a heavy heart, a long “do” list, and several unresolved issues. I had a crucial talk to prepare for our intern staff; misunderstandings between coworkers gnawed at me; I had to plan an important conference and was three weeks behind. And the garage needed painting. I was frantic. I’d start one project and then feel guilty that I wasn’t working on another.

Though I had little hope it would improve my day, I decided to take a walk and pray about each item on my “do” list. Phil. 4:6 was on my mind: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything . . . present your requests to God.” As I walked, I told God my feelings about every responsibility, every worry, every due date, and the garage.

The more I walked through the crunchy maple leaves of our neighborhood, the more I poured out my heart to God. Forty-five minutes passed. Every item on my list was still undone, but my heart felt refreshed. I had peace. Isn’t that what Phil. 4:7 promises? “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Sometimes God does change our circumstances in response to our prayers. But often He doesn’t. Instead, He changes us as we trust Him. That morning, He changed me, not my problems.

Resolve relationship problems.

In my opinion, relationship problems are the biggest cause of stress. You can do the right things—exercise, keep a sane schedule, pray about your responsibilities—but none of it will decrease your stress if you have an open wound in a relationship. And it doesn’t have to be big.

I once had a coworker who was extremely talented and likeable. But after a year of working together, Dean (not his real name) had become constantly tired, touchy, and defensive. He was not the joyful, happy person I once knew. I began to feel tense around him.

For Labor Day that year, I decided to go bird-watching, a hobby that lets me “escape.” That morning, I surrendered my stress about Dean to the Lord, asked Him to give me a good day of relaxing, and was off. Within five miles, I saw a pair of bald eagles, the rising sun striking their majestic white heads. What a sight! But as I drove off, I found myself thinking about Dean. Again, I tried to surrender him to the Lord.

At a little roadside swamp, a sora rail and a common snipe appeared. But soon Dean intruded upon my thoughts again. It was almost like he was in the backseat.

By noon, I had identified 45 species. But I’d identified Dean 45 times, too. Even though I’d turn Dean over to the Lord, I couldn’t shake my anxiety about our relationship. The refreshing day I’d hoped for was slipping through my fingers. I knew what I had to do.

That night, I wrote down my expectations for Dean and how I felt he was coming up short. I also considered the ways I might be disappointing him. Then I prayed over both lists. The next day, Dean and I sorted it out. We each confessed our frustrations. He also shared other stresses he was fighting.

“Birding with Dean” taught me a powerful lesson: Stress won’t go away if an unresolved conflict exists. It’s like painting primer over rotting wood. Acts 24:16 describes the attitude that should guide our relationships with others: “So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.”

Take time off—even when you are busy.

Most of us know we should take a day off each week to rest. But when it’s crunch time, we skip our Sabbaths because of busyness. Often we just don’t take a rest until it’s too late and we’re burnt out. Exodus 34:21 instructs us to rest, regardless of our external circumstances: “Six days you shall labor, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even during the plowing season and harvest you must rest” (emphasis mine).

Farmers know they must get the planting and harvesting done when the weather is good. Miss those windows and there will be no crop. But Exodus says we are to rest during those busy times as well. My father took this command seriously. I admired that in him. Though the neighbors might be plowing on a warm, dry Sunday if rain was expected Monday, my dad would not. He rested. And God blessed him with 50 years of nonpanicked, profitable farming.

When was the last time you had an uninterrupted hour of solitude? Today, the “rest” many people take is just another form of busyness. Get the boat to the lake, fix up the cabin, travel to a distant town to “rest.” Instead, try doing nothing. Be alone. “Waste” time being by yourself with the Lord, even if it’s only for an hour.

Learn to say no.

You may be stressed simply because you have overextended yourself. I admire the honesty of a friend who confessed at a recent Bible study that she can’t say no. Why not? “Because I feel guilty if I turn people down.”

Jesus said no to opportunities to serve, even when others begged. For example, the healed demoniac wanted to join Him (Mark 5:19). The disciples wanted Him to return to Capernaum to continue the healing ministry of the night before (Mark 1:38). Jesus said no to both requests.

Walking with Christ doesn’t mean that you must serve every time you are asked. It’s not a sin to say no. Here’s a helpful response when you’re asked to serve: “Let me think and pray about it for a week. I tend to overextend myself and end up not doing a good job at anything. If you need an answer now, it will have to be no.” This will help you avoid “impulse serving.”

Learn life-management skills.

We can also create stress in our lives when we fail to deal with some very practical issues. Here are some areas that might need to be addressed.

Turn off the cell phone. Recently, a friend of mine facetiously listed in his annual Christmas letter everywhere he might be reached: his home phone, work phone, cell phone, pager, home e-mail, work e-mail, home fax, work fax, wife's work phone, wife's cell phone, wife's pager, and wife's e-mail. All to make life simpler!

We once went out to supper with friends who took cell-phone calls during the meal. Accessibility through technology can be useful. But will the world end if you can't be reached for 60 minutes?

Do it now. Need to change an address in your Day-Timer? Do it now. Need to adjust the sprinkler head? Do it now. Postponing simple tasks creates a tidal wave of deadlines that gathers momentum as it crashes toward you. You won't have any more time later than you have right now.

If you're a parent, don't let the kids set the tone of your life. Your home should be adult centered, not kid centered. Too many parents are stressed out because their children have become czars.

Your spouse and God must take priority over your children. Some parents have not been out together without their children in years. Others are exhausted, chauffeuring kids to gymnastics, soccer, Awana, and karate. One couple I know took time off from Bible study after their baby was born. The husband asked me for counsel on when to rejoin the study. "How long has it been," I queried. "Five years. We don't want to neglect our child." I suggested that neglecting their walk with God would hurt the child more than leaving him with the baby-sitter once every two weeks.

Delegate. Don't do it all by yourself. Ask the question, What am I doing that someone else can or should do? You may respond, "Oh, but that person can't do it as well." But if you taught him how, could he do it 80 percent as well? If so, delegate.

Even Moses struggled with delegating. His father-in-law, Jethro, observed the Israelites lining up around him to get his decisions. He said, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you" (Exodus 18:17-18).

Get rid of stuff. Most of us have more stuff than we need, including some things that get very little use. Yet they still require time, energy, and money to maintain. Do you use your boat more than once a year? Do your possessions really add value to your life, or do they just eat up your resources? Clean out the garage. Get rid of stuff you haven't used for two years. Give yourself enough time to enjoy being a believer, not an overstressed, hollow shell nobody wants to be around.

From Stress to Surrender

Let's add to the diagram we began with.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

SCOTT MORTON is vice president of development for The Navigators. He enjoys personal evangelism among friends and discipling other believers both one on one and in small groups.

Scott explains why he wrote this article:

“Someone told me recently that I ‘run on a cool engine’ in the midst of a stressful job. I determined to discover what I’d been doing that helped or hindered my level of peace.”