

Finding Peace when Life Is Stressful

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | May 15, 2019



Do you ever get stressed, worried, tense, keyed-up?

In this world, we cannot avoid moments of stress because stressful events occur. When such events do occur, our bodies have an adaptive response to provide us quick energy and activate our body's defenses (immune system) to protect us from injury or infection.

This quick reaction to a sudden stressful event is helpful when the stress is real (as opposed to imaginary) and when the problem causing the stress is resolved in a relatively short time.

However, many people today live in an almost continual state of mental stress. They are always worried, always on edge—feeling a sense of urgency as if in crisis mode all the time. This type of unremitting stress is quite damaging to our physical and mental health. The long-term activation of the body's stress circuitry, with its continuously keyed-up immune system, causes chronic inflammation that damages insulin receptors, contributing to adult-onset diabetes mellitus, increased risk of heart attack and stroke, mood disorders (such as depression), and Alzheimer's dementia. Additionally, such chronic stress interferes with normal neuronal signaling, causing fatigue, malaise, concentration problems, sleep disturbance, and unhealthy alterations in appetite.

Chronic unremitting stress is unhealthy, but regardless of life's stressors, there are practical actions you can take to enhance your resilience, reduce stress, calm the body's systems down, and promote healthier body and mind. Here are some general principles and actions that will help better manage and reduce your stress response:

- **Healthy lifestyle** — eat a plant-based or Mediterranean diet, get regular exercise, and sleep eight hours each night (for adults). Good stress management starts with a good physical health foundation, so taking care of the body's basic physiological needs is the first place to start.
- **Healthy spirituality** — develop a trust relationship with a trustworthy God of love. Many people believe in God but have views of God that actually incite fear—this is unhealthy! Neuroscience shows that only the belief in a benevolent God is healthy and reduces our fear and stress. Remember, the Bible says that “perfect love casts out all fear.” If we have views of God that do not reduce or take away our fear, but instead incite it, something is wrong with our view of God. Trusting in a God of love who is our Creator leads to our next principle.
- **Understand reality** — embrace design law, learning how reality actually functions, and choose to live in harmony with the laws upon which God built life to operate. Know what your responsibilities are (and what isn't your responsibility) and choose to fulfill them while trusting God with how things turn out. Finally, give others the freedom to have their own ideas, perspectives, beliefs, including their attitudes toward you. In other words, give people freedom not to like you as long as you are living in harmony with God's will for your life.
- **Be truthful** — don't deny your life's problems but address them in the largest context possible; i.e., in a trust relationship with God, allowing for possibilities beyond your current understanding.
- **Get mental rest**—God prescribed one day in seven to rest the mind and spirit in a love relationship with Him. Don't neglect this restoration time!
- **Organize life** — establish routines and structure such that most of life's responsibilities are not new problems to be solved each day but merely duties to be done routinely; e.g., Tuesday is bathroom cleaning day, Friday is laundry, Monday is vacuuming, etc. Making certain things routine will keep your life from piling up stress.
- **Set boundaries** — learn how to say no in a firm from respectful manner.
- **Live a little** — schedule recreation time, hobbies, and other interests for enjoyment into your regular routine.
- **Avoid toxins** — alcohol, drugs, and destructive behaviors designed to alter mood transiently (pornography, impulsive shopping, gambling, excessive gaming, etc.) actually damage and destroy, increase guilt and shame, which increase stress.
- **Build healthy relationships** — connect with mature people, join healthy groups, and become involved in helping others.
- **Seek professional help** — a trained counselor or psychiatrist can help you manage overwhelming moments and offer specific strategies for dealing with crises.

Life is filled with stressful events. We cannot control what happens around us, but we do have control over the decisions we make in governance of ourselves. It is our responsibility to decide how we will respond to life's many stressors. I encourage you to make healthy choices in harmony with God's design for life and then trust God with how things turn out.