

Success over Stress

H. NORMAN
WRIGHT



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Are You Stressed?

“I’m so stressed. Every day ends up the same way. Oh, they start out all right, but it doesn’t take long for the wiring in my body to tense up. By evening I feel strung out. I’m not sure what to do—or if anything can be done. It’s like I’m stuck *in* stress and can’t find the *out* door!”

Stress. Is it real or imagined? We talk about it, but does it really exist? Unfortunately, it’s all too real. One description of stress compares it to the modern-day equivalent of the dragons of mythical history that sought to devour humans. The creatures don’t exist, but stress does—and it can be just as lethal. Today’s dragons are our jobs, social conflicts, painful relationships, unhealthy diets, time constraints, and too many electronics. And these modern dragons are more lethal than the mythical ones. Even with all the modern technology and advances we’ve made, no generation has experienced the variety and intensity of pressures and conflicts that we have today.¹ Is it likely to get better? You know the answer to that as well as I do.

What is stress exactly? Here’s a simple definition: “Stress is any life situation that chronically bothers, irritates, or upsets you.” Stress is

any type of action that places conflicting or heavy demands upon your mind and/or body. What do these demands do? They upset your body's equilibrium. Our bodies come equipped with a highly sophisticated defense system that helps us cope with those events in life that threaten and challenge us. When any of us feels pressured or threatened, our bodies quickly mobilize their defenses for "fight or flight." In the case of stress, our bodies release an abundance of adrenaline, which disrupts our normal functioning and creates a heightened sense of awareness. We go on alert. We're like rubber bands that are being stretched. Usually when the pressure is released, the rubber band returns to normal. When it is stretched too much or when it's kept in that position too long, the rubber loses its elasticity and becomes brittle, developing cracks and breaking. That is similar to what happens to us when there is too much stress in our lives.

What is stressful to one individual may not be stressful to another. For some people, stress is worry about future events that can't be avoided and then concern about the events after they've occurred. For others, stress is simply the wear and tear of life.

Although some people think of stress as tension and some as anxiety, not all stress is bad. We need a certain amount of pressure and stimulation to function properly. Stress can be good if it is short-lived. It's when stress is too much that we end up crippled. And the wrong type of stress can wipe out our spiritual joy as well. Good stress is called *eustress*, from the Latin word *eu*, meaning good. It is positive and helpful because it doesn't last and isn't experienced continually. This type of stress can push us to make positive changes. Good stress is a form of resistance that stretches us, but then our body's equilibrium adjusts and returns to a resting state. When our bodies don't return to normal rest and recover, we have bad stress or distress.

Causes of Stress

The stress in your life can be caused when anything happens that—

- annoys you
- threatens you

- excites you
- scares you
- worries you
- hurries you
- frustrates you
- angers you
- challenges you
- embarrasses you
- reduces or threatens your self-image

Most of the time, however, it is not a particular event that causes stress. So what causes the problem? Most situations that produce stress involve some sort of conflict between ourselves and the world at large. For example, if a teen skips school to go to the beach (which fulfills a personal desire), he creates a new problem at school with his absence. If a mother becomes over-involved at church and then has little time and energy for household responsibilities, there are new demands placed on her family. If she doesn't balance the demands from the outside with those inside herself, she will experience negative stress and pressure.

Where does most of our stress come from? Whether we're children, teens, or adults, stress comes from *our own minds*. The most damaging stress comes from threats that can't be acted upon because they exist only in our imagination. Some people imagine the worst in a situation. They worry, which creates the sense of more threats and imagined fears. Even when there is a definite threat to the body, the basic problem is still in the mind. Situations that worry a person can be the most troublesome of all. A person who has learned to live according to John 14:27 NIV: "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid," will be able to handle the pressures of life, real and imagined, much better.

Let's Look at Your Life

How would you describe your most recent experience of stress? Was it an isolated incident or a common occurrence? What do you think

created the situation? Was it something that happened to you or what happened inside of you in response to what occurred? It was probably both, with an emphasis on your internal response. Remember what stress is? Let me share this again:

Stress is *not* what happens outside of you.

Stress *is* what happens inside of you.

It's true that we live with many demands outside of ourselves, but much of our stress comes from the demands we place on ourselves. We can't avoid stress. We all experience it, and some will experience it more than others. In fact, the higher the level of expectations we have for ourselves, and the more we need to be in control, and the greater the need we have to be perfect, the greater will be our levels of stress. Stress is sometimes difficult to define because what is stressful to one person isn't to another. Stress is an individual response and can even vary from time to time for each person. What is stress? Let's consider what others said in response to a survey I conducted.

Women

- Impossible expectations from myself or others, feeling powerless and vulnerable.
- Feeling overwhelmed in circumstances. Difficulties in maintaining calm and peace.
- The result of my expectations of what life should be like getting in the way of what actually is happening.
- Unpleasant feeling of pressure and inability to control surroundings/circumstances.
- That which is on my mind regardless of what I'm doing or saying.
- Amplified noise, financial problems, clutter, family worries, heightened anxiety.

- My lack of ability to fix or control life circumstances that I don't like; mild stress can be a good thing—energizing.
- Pressure to perform or accomplish resulting from a variety of sources—good and bad. Usually experience it with muscle tightness (back/shoulders).

Men

- Not being able to control a situation or environment that is creating a burden on one's behavior or the outcome of such appears to be negative or harmful.
- Discord inside or out.
- The mental condition of knowing that one's situation *could* be different (better) and believing it *should* be different. The *could* and the *should* are both indispensable to the phenomenon. People have always *wished* they were in a better situation; they have always thought they deserve *better* than they experience. But the newly arisen factors of the last 50 or so years are: 1) the unending multiplicity of options many people in the modern world have, combined with 2) the practice of continual awareness of these options.
- Not managing all the “stuff” that happens in life. Most of the time it is self-imposed.
- Dealing with dragons that can't/won't be slain (problems that remain unresolved).
- Tension, pressure we feel when we have to accomplish a project, going through some difficult time such as a loss, conflict, or crisis.
- Differences between our calling and our actual condition in life.

Causes of Stress—Women

- Feeling powerless (vulnerable) not meeting expectations, fear of failure and rejection.
- Things not going the way I think they are supposed to go.
- The hurry illness of life, the hustle and bustle of life, ironically being on the road (driving) and hoping there are no bad drivers close by.
- Trying to be too many things to too many people (mom, wife, pastor's wife, employee, and student!).
- Negative thinking/conflict—kids, husband, money issues.
- Keeping all the “plates” spinning in my life—motherhood, wife, graduate student, work, home, relationships.
- Not being physically able to do all I want to do.
- Feelings out of control and a sense that God has abandoned me. Loss of direction.
- My children and their future, personal life, choices, which way to go.
- Uncertainty of how to handle a situation, loud noises, over-commitment and unrealistic expectations.

Causes of Stress—Men

- Having more than one responsibility at a time.
- Trying to take on more than I can handle at one time.
- Anything where I cannot help solve the problem; I feel helpless—to a guy this is very uncomfortable.
- My failure to love.
- Unscheduled, demanding circumstances.
- Demands of people wanting things done that place pressure on me.

- Taking surveys!
- To feel that I am helpless or a feeling of everyone looking to me for answers, change, or resolve because of who I am —position/title or expectations.

Just like many other issues in life, there are myths about stress:

1. The greatest amount of stress comes from working too much.
2. If you enjoy your work, you can work as long and as hard as you want with no dire consequences.
3. If you exercise strenuously, you'll be less stressed.
4. You'll have more stress with overwork than underwork.

Some of the findings regarding stress are surprising. For example, it's not really the *amount* of work that's the stressor but the difficult interpersonal relationships and conflicts. Enjoying your work can cause you to overlook the fact that you may be pushing your body beyond its capabilities and limits. Some competitive sports increase stress rather than reduce its presence.

When it comes to overwork versus underwork, both are problems. We need a certain amount of stimulation (stress) in our lives for motivation. That means we can actually be under stimulated. This can lead to “rust out,” the states of being bored, alienated from others, distracted, and mentally impoverished.² Overstimulation can lead to burnout or giving and doing too much without replenishing. When this happens, we end up running on empty.

Yes, there are jobs that generate more stress than other occupations, but often the stress is generated by what occurs between the people and their work environment. We need freedom in our work to use our giftedness and abilities and see that what we do really counts for something. Regardless of our profession, if we have little control over what, when, and how we do it, stress occurs.³

The greatest factor involved in what is stressful and what isn't comes down to our attitudes or perspectives, our interpretations of what

occurs outside of us. Often it's what we say to ourselves about the situation and our ability to handle the situation. This is commonly referred to as self-talk.

Personality is yet another factor. You've probably heard of the Type-A personality: the compulsive, time-pressured, often hostile person. Let's describe them a bit more. Don arrived at his office two hours early, as usual. He knew he had more to do today than three people could accomplish. No one piled on this much work; he created it himself. His sense of irritation was already beginning to rise. He wished his staff would arrive early to help. Don was already beginning to walk fast. He made a long-distance call and, at the same time, looked through a report. He glanced at the clock again and hurried even more. As he talked with an associate over the phone, he became irritated and then very angry. He shouted and slammed down the phone. Looking at his watch again, he dialed another number, grabbed another file, stood up to see if his secretary had arrived yet, and asked abruptly for the person he wanted to talk to on the phone. Another day had started very much like every other day. Yes, Don is a Type-A personality.

More and more we are hearing about Type-A personalities. They hold in their hands the potential for multiple crises. The Type-A person deeply affects the lives of others, often producing family disruption, emotional and/or physical abuse, stress, stunting of the family members' self-esteem, divorce, and early death. The Type-A personality can be male or female. The characteristics are very similar regardless of gender.

What is Type-A behavior? A continuous struggle, an attempt to achieve more and more, and participating in more and more activities in less and less time. The Type-A person charges ahead, often in the face of real or imagined opposition from others. Type-A personalities are dominated by an inner, hidden insecurity about their status, hyperaggressiveness, or both. Hyperaggressiveness is being overbearing and overdominating without regard for the feelings and rights of others.

The insecurity that comes out as hyperaggressiveness actually causes the struggle to start. This struggle leads to a sense of time urgency, which has been called the "hurry-up sickness." As the

person continues his or her inner struggle, the hyperaggressiveness and the status of insecurity manifests itself in anger. This anger is often reflected in a free-floating hostility and cynicism. If the inner struggle becomes severe and lasts over a long period of time, it leads to self-destruction.

If the Type-A person, who is insecure about his status, confronts situations that are irritating, status threatening, or frustrating, he may erupt with irritation, abruptness, and internal anger. Perhaps you've experienced this or you have a family member who acts this way. Type-A behavior is not a personality disorder, but might be called a "socially acceptable obsession." Type-A individuals are likely to experience a great deal of stress compared to the more relaxed and easygoing Type-B individuals. However, Type-B individuals can be just as goal-oriented and just as desirous of success and achievement. The Type-B individual works toward his or her goals in ways that don't create psychological and physical stress.

A Type-A person is more likely to develop coronary heart disease than others. There is a definite risk factor. Most of us would like to think we're not Type-A. We'd rather be Type-B. What about you? Circle the words in the following list that describe you best.

- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| 1. competitive achiever | 11. hyper alert |
| 2. relaxed | 12. working steadily |
| 3. more aggressive | 13. explosive in speech |
| 4. easygoing | 14. seldom lacking in time |
| 5. fast worker | 15. tense |
| 6. seldom impatient | 16. social climber |
| 7. impatient | 17. not preoccupied with social achievement |
| 8. takes time to enjoy | 18. always feeling pressured |
| 9. restless | 19. moving and speaking slowly |
| 10. not easily irritated | |

All of the odd-numbered words describe the Type-A person, while the even-numbered words describe the Type-B person. How did you come out?

Warning—Stress Disrupts Your Life

Stress is not usually a neutral experience. In fact, there are more consequences than most of us realize. If stress is creating a physiological response, if we would rather avoid this or turn down its severity, and if we feel out of control, then stress is not being a healthy experience. In fact, it's detrimental. Let's consider some of the consequences.

Those who experience chronic (ongoing) stress have an elevated risk of heart attacks and strokes. That fact in itself can cause stress! It can also weaken our immune systems so we're less able to fight off germs. But there's something even worse. Stress impacts our brains. Minor or minimal stress can help our brains perform better, but intense and chronic stress keeps them from doing what they were designed to accomplish. *Stress can actually hinder our learning ability and affect our memory.* When we are under stress, our brains switch over to survival mode and get stuck there. Whatever gets stuck doesn't get to the portion of the brain that conducts the best thinking. The information we need doesn't get to where it needs to be! Instead, it gets rerouted to the place where we're not thinking so the only options we come up with are fight, flight, or freeze. No wonder we're not at our best when we're under stress!⁴

Stress hormones can disconnect the neural networks in our brains that store our favorite memories. And under extreme conditions, stress hormones can kill cells in this area of the brain. They can stop a portion of our brains from giving birth to new neurons. Stress hormones, which come from the adrenal glands, have a particular liking for the cells in the learning center of the brain. Like a fortress overrun by invaders, enough stress hormones will eventually overrun the brain's natural defenses and can actually turn them off.

One of the worst effects of prolonged stress is that it can push individuals into the type of depression that is overwhelming and can lead to suicidal thinking.⁵ Consider this description of stress:

Stress is a universal human response resulting from the perception of an intense or distressing experience. Stress has tremendous influence on our behavior and can make

us fearful, nervous, edgy. Stress challenges our ability to endure, cope or define ourselves, attacks our immune systems, makes us less capable of fighting disease, makes us less confident. Stress might be referred to [come out as] anxiety, conflict, frustration, pressure and emotional trauma.

This definition illustrates how work stress may affect our general health and ability to fight disease. Obviously, stress responses differ from person to person. For instance, people who have healthy lifestyles are probably more capable of managing their stress. They have healthier immune systems resulting from their good diet, proper exercise, and general wellness.⁶

Stress seems to have more deadly effects on men than on women:

- Twice as many men die from combined diseases of the heart as do women.
- Pneumonia and influenza cause about three times as many male deaths as female deaths.
- Accidents and adverse drug effects kill three times more males than females.
- Men commit suicide at a rate of three to one compared to women.
- More males die from cancer than females do (remember, cancer may be stress related).
- More males die as fetuses, at birth, and as very young babies.
- Men live shorter lives than women.
- Men exhibit more stress-related problems than women, including hypertension, arteriosclerosis, heart attack, and heart failure.

Life is full of potential for stress for both genders. We all face it and have to deal with it. Sources of bad stress can't always be eliminated, so changes must come through our responses. With that as our primary

goal, in the rest of this book we'll work on reducing stress and discovering healthy ways to handle the stress we have to deal with.

Where Do You Go from Here?

We're going to explore how to evaluate our areas of stress and discover the steps we can take to make changes in six key stress areas:

1. *Pace*: Do we need to slow down, catch our breath, and take charge of time?
2. *Expectations*: What expectations by others cause stress? Do our own expectations cause us stress?
3. *Activities*: Do we need to pare down or limit our activities?
4. *Possessions*: Are clutter and disorganization driving us crazy?
5. *Relationships*: Are our relationships healthy? Is emotional baggage creating stress in our day-to-day lives?
6. *Ministry lives*: Do the ministry activities we're involved in match our gifts? Are they what *God* has called us to do?

In the last chapter, you'll find steps to help you set up a plan for reducing stress that will work for you—taking in consideration your needs, your style, your life situation, and your beliefs and values. Attaining a stress-reduced life is a process.

I encourage you to continue reading this book. Hopefully you'll be excited about what the future holds after asking some important questions, taking some small steps in a positive direction, and freeing yourself from the things that are causing you stress.

Some Things to Consider

1. If stress in my life were reduced, I would feel...
2. To me, a "stress less" life means...

3. What keeps me from changing my lifestyle to reduce stress is...
4. If I were to have the life I wanted, I would...
5. Which of the five areas (pace, expectations, activities, possessions, relationships) are you most excited about working on? Is this the area that needs the most work in your life?