

# Stewardship of Self for Cross-Cultural Workers: Stress

From the time they first followed Jesus, Christian workers have faced great stress. Soon after they were called and appointed to ministry, **the disciples** found their ministry to the crowds so pressing that they did not even have time to eat (Mark 3:20). Nearly a year later, the stress was still so great that they still did not have time to eat, and they could not escape the crowds even when they tried (Mark 6:31-33).

**Paul**, cross-cultural worker to the Gentiles, listed some of his stressful situations for us.

- Worked hard, labored, toiled
- Imprisoned repeatedly
- Beaten, lashed, stoned
- Constantly on the move
- Shipwrecked, a night in the sea
- In danger from own countrymen
- Danger in the city, danger in the country
- Danger from “false brothers”
- Went without sleep
- Hungry, thirsty
- Cold, lacked clothing
- Pressure of the concern for the churches (2 Corinthians 11:23-28)

Reading the book of Acts, you will find that **early Christian workers** faced a variety of stressors.

- Physical disability
- False accusations
- Opposition by local religious leaders
- Lies and criticisms of other believers
- Weather delays halting travel
- Headwinds slowing travel

- Theological differences within the church
- Sharp personal disagreements
- Riots
- Limited financial resources
- Evacuations
- Snakebite
- Legal action against them

## What is stress?

**Stress is a process** involving environmental events (stressors), our own reactions to the stress, and the resources we use to cope with the stress. Think of this like the bills you receive in the mail. Example 1: You have \$500 in the bank (resources), and you receive 20 bills totaling \$800 due immediately (events), so you panic (high stress reaction). Example 2: You have \$5000 in the bank (resources), but you receive 20 bills totaling \$800 due immediately (events), but you have little concern (low stress reaction). Note that the stress you feel depends both on the events and on your resources. So to cope with the stress, you want either to decrease the stressful events or to increase your resources or both.

Some **stressors** (events) are always present in the background, such as noise, heat, insects, poverty, discrimination, minority status, and you are not even aware of them. Other stressors are the almost daily irritating hassles of life, such as traffic jams, waiting in lines, fender benders, struggling with language in new situations, loneliness, computers down, difficult co-workers, and bureaucracy. You feel the strain whenever they occur. Still other stressors are major life changes experienced by nearly everyone at some time, such as death of a family member, moving to a new church or field of service,

serious illness or accident, and divorce of close friends (or yourself). You struggle with them when they happen. Finally, some Christian workers experience life-threatening stressors, such as assault, tornadoes, deadly diseases, earthquakes, evacuation, or war. The effects of these traumas can be long lasting.

Even **positive things**, such as marriage, the birth of a child, and promotion can be stressful. They require change or adaptation and draw on a person’s resources.

## How do people react to stress?

Some people react **with physical symptoms**, such as headache, stomachache, diarrhea, and so forth. Others people react **with psychological symptoms** such as anxiety, difficulty concentrating, depression, and so forth. Still others react with **behavioral symptoms** such as driving too fast, picking fights, overeating, going on spending sprees, and so forth. Stress can affect many areas of our lives.

## What can I do about stress?

Remember that to cope with the stress, you want either to decrease the stressful events or to increase your resources for coping with the stress or both.

- **Changing the time** you do things may decrease the stressors. Shopping at a different time may decrease the traffic jams, result in fewer lines at the market, and make a fender bender less likely.
- Stress is cumulative, so try to **space out** stressful events rather than clumping them together. For example, if you have to deal with a difficult co-worker, do not schedule the meeting right after a

shopping trip that is likely to involve long lines and traffic jams. You may even be able to spread out major life change events. If you are due for a change of assignment this year and you have just experienced a death of a family member, your church or agency may allow you to wait another year before that change.

- Background stressors may sometimes be decreased with **things at hand**. If noise is constantly draining away your energy, listening to soothing music through a set of headphones may eliminate that source of stress.
- **Anticipating and preparing** for stressful situations serves to inoculate you against the stress reactions. If you are going to change assignments, read about the new assignment and plan how you will fill it. If you are in a situation that may call for an evacuation, develop a plan for knowing the time to evacuate, evacuation routes, and alternative means of evacuation. If kidnapping is likely, take steps to avoid it, and learn how to act when kidnapped.
- **God is our major resource** for coping with stress. Do not neglect reading God’s Word because the Holy Spirit often illuminates passages of Scripture relative to the stressful situation you are in. Search the Scripture for what God has already said about your situation.
- **Pray for yourself** in stressful times. Prayers of intercession for others are wonderful, but at times you need prayers of petition for yourself. Christian workers who spend much time in intercession need not feel guilty for petitioning God for their own needs.
- Meditate after you have asked God for direction. **Listen** for the answer.

Sometimes the Spirit uses a memorized passage of Scripture, a word from a fellow Christian, or an event that occurs in your life to direct your coping efforts.

- **Ask others to pray** for you. These may range from unspoken requests to detailed explanations. Ask people to commit to pray for you by name during specific days or specific times of great stress.
- Research shows that **social support** is the single most important human means of increasing resources to combat stress. The fellowship of believers in Christ is an invaluable source of strength for the most difficult stresses you face. The positive supportive relationships of Christian community are great resources, so do not hesitate to draw on them. Ask for help and accept it.
- Use your **problem-solving** skills to help reduce your stress. Read about the stressful area in your life. Talk with others who have experienced the same types of stress. Brainstorm solutions yourself, comb books for ideas, and ask others for possible solutions. Select a potential solution, try it out, and evaluate whether or not it works; then adjust it if necessary or try a new solution. Repeat the process as often as necessary.
- Take time for a **healthy diversion**. You may need time to cool off a while or recharge before trying to cope any more. You may need a time to rest in addition to your Sabbath each week. Spend some time on reading, listening to music, enjoying a hobby, playing a favorite sport, or doing other things that you enjoy.
- On the other hand, **don't procrastinate**. Procrastinating can also cause increased stress, so set reasonable deadlines for yourself to complete your personal and professional responsibilities.
- Get some **exercise**. God gave us reactions to stress that prepare us for flight or fight. Running, swimming, walking rapidly, or playing active sports are analogous to flight. Throwing or hitting balls with your hands or with bats or paddles are analogous to fighting. Both disperse the biochemical buildup that prepares us to cope with stress. Fresh air and sunshine (but not heat) are also usually helpful.
- Take time for adequate **rest and relaxation**. Remember that God made the Sabbath for us as humans, and be sure you take that day of rest, relaxation, and restoration each week, whether it is on Sunday or another day of the week.
- **Sleep** is a major coping resource for dealing with stress. Take time to sleep, and if you are having difficulty sleeping, learn about ways to get better sleep—see our brochure in this series.
- Monitor your self-talk. Be sure you have **helpful thoughts** so that you are an encouraging “coach” to yourself. A mean, cruel, discouraging coach may say something like, “That is really a dumb idea. It’ll never work. There’s no point even trying it.” A caring, hopeful, encouraging coach would say, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”
- Pour out your soul. **Express your thoughts and/or feelings** in any of several ways. These include journaling, writing letters to friends, praying, composing poems or songs, singing songs or reading Psalms that reflect your thoughts or feelings, creating art, and sharing with another person. God created us to communicate with others and to

express our thoughts and feelings. This provides a healthy release and may help us understand ourselves better as well as help others understand us.

- Use **relaxation techniques** of stretching and/or breathing, and/or imagining one of your favorite places as described in our anxiety brochure.
- Learn how to appropriately say, “**No**,” to reduce lower priority demands on your time. God’s people can appropriately refuse the requests of others. At times Jesus himself dismissed the crowd and went off by himself to pray, and he even often withdrew for prayer when people came to hear and be healed (Matthew 14:22-23, Luke 5:15-16). He chose to say, “No,” to one kind of request to meet a higher priority.
- **Delegate** some of the responsibility to someone else, such as Jesus did when he sent out the disciples (Matthew 10).
- **Ask** for what you need from others. Jesus told his followers to ask, seek, and knock to get things they needed (Matthew 7). Asking for help from others may be a blessing to them. Sacrifices on their part may be spiritually helpful to them.
- **Read good books** on stress management, such as *Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook* by Martha Davis, Matthew McKay, and Elizabeth Eschelman. Read good books on managing your time such as *Organize Yourself* by Ronni Eisenberg.
- You may want to explore the **Internet** for further suggestions (we do not have any specific recommended web sites at this time).

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