

Dealing With Your Stress in 2016

Contrary to the way it feels, stress doesn't come from the outside - it happens inside you. When we are stressed we generally blame our circumstances but stress is mainly in your mind. It's how you personally react to circumstances. You can put two people in the exact same situation and one will be stressed and the other not. Why? It's the way each one thinks about it. Stress comes from your thinking processes.

If I told you there was credible intelligence that a terrorist bomb was going to go off somewhere in New Holland within five minutes you'd be stressed. But just the thought is stressful whether it's true or not. Stress comes from anxiety, worry, guilt, fear, anger, tension - all consequences of our way of thinking. To deal with stress, change the way you think.

2 Timothy 4:5, says "...you should keep a clear mind in every situation." When stressed you don't think clearly, but we're covering some things today I think will be encouraging.

The first kind of stress is the stress of pressure to **Compromise Your Values** - when you're pressured to do something you don't want to do or something you know is wrong. With young people it's called peer pressure. Whatever age it's questions like "Do I go along with the crowd or do I do what I think is the right thing." Or "Do I do what I'd rather do or what know I should do." You have a choice to make and at that moment you are under stress.

This can happen any time. You're constantly making decisions like, "Am I going to tell the truth and lose points and prestige or tell a lie and look good?" Ethical, moral decisions confront you every single day. What are you going to do?

The Bible says that when you're in these situations there are two things that'll reduce your stress over the long haul.

1. Do the right thing. Always do the right thing. In the short term it may seem it's the hard way, but long term doing the right thing is easier. It's less stressful. When you do the easy thing and compromise your convictions or integrity, you carry guilt or fear or both for the long haul. Once you've crossed the line and done something you know you shouldn't, your stress continues long after a person who did the right thing would have forgotten the whole incident.

Here's how the devil works in your life: He wants to make you miserable, so he'll try to tempt you into thinking, "I should just go ahead. No one's ever going to find out." Then the moment you do it he changes to, "Someone's going to find out. Everyone will know." You're wondering if the skeleton's will come out of the closet and you'll be found out.

Proverbs 10:9 says, "*People with integrity walk safely, but those who follow crooked paths will be exposed.*" What you sow you reap. If you follow a crooked path, that's going to cause stress.

Integrity is the only way to stay on track in life. One of the by-products of integrity is confidence. You don't have to remember who you said what to. You just tell the truth. "What you see is what you get. My life's an open book. Go ahead. Check it out." Because you're walking with integrity.

Few things destroy integrity faster than greed. People have a strong tendency to bend their values and integrity for money. A fundamental decision you have to make in life is what's more important to you, truth or things? Those are the options. If truth is more important, then when you come to a potentially compromising situation you'll do the right thing. If things are more important you'll give up truth to get or save money. Do the right thing no matter what anybody else is saying or whatever the cost of doing it.

Once you've done that, the second thing is, **2. Trust God with the outcome.** Proverbs 23:17-18 says, "*Don't envy sinners, but always continue to fear the Lord. You will be rewarded for this; your hope will not be disappointed.*" When you do the right thing and make choices based on integrity, it may seem like people who don't have much integrity are prospering. It can kind of get you. They take advantage of people; don't play by the rules but are prospering... for now.

But what goes around comes around. Judgment just hasn't happened yet. Don't envy those who are dishonest, who made their wealth in shady, unscrupulous or unfair ways. There are so many ways to cheat - it's a major theme in human life! I wrote down just a few words from the dictionary: swindle, defraud, dupe, trick, fleece, con, exploit, manipulate, take advantage of, bilk, bamboozle, hoodwink, rip off, scam, deceive, mislead, take in, fool... that's just a few of them!

Don't envy people who are getting wealth or advantage by deceitful or unworthy means. They'll be found out. What you sow you reap. God gives you a hope beyond those people.

God told Isaiah the prophet to do something very unpopular. He told him to say things people didn't like and tell people to do things they didn't want to. Isaiah didn't want to do it but he did anyway. It was unpopular and he wasn't

happy about it. He was discouraged and had doubts afterwards. He said, "I know it was the right thing to do but I just don't feel good about it." He was second-guessing. But what did he finally do?

He kept on believing God, kept on trusting God. In Isaiah 49:4 he said, "...my work seems so useless! I have spent my strength for nothing and to no purpose. Yet I leave it all in the Lord's hand; I will trust God for my reward." He kept believing and left it in God's hands.

If you stand for anything in this world, you're going to be knocked. Count on it. If you are a leader; if you call the shots you're going to take the shots. If you are an innovator you'll be criticized. Pastors know this very well. People are going to judge your motives, misinterpret your reasons, put down your methods, say critical things about you. Don't get stressed out. Just trust the Lord and leave it all in the Lord's hand; I will trust God for my reward.

As a leader I get criticized a lot. People say things about me. They say some things that are true and some that are untrue – all kinds of critical things. People ask, "How do you handle that kind of stuff?" I'll tell you it's not easy for me – that's the hardest thing for me, but the answer is, "*I'll leave it all in the Lord's hand; I will trust God for my reward.*" Really, you only need to live for an audience of one – God – and that requires integrity. If you're doing what God tells you to do, you're in the majority. I will choose what God says to do.

But let me say this. Some of you have done the right thing but haven't seen a reward yet. You did the right thing in your marriage, the right thing with your kid, the right thing in a relationship, the right thing at work, you didn't do the unethical thing... but you don't have any happy ending yet. What do you do in those kinds of situations? You trust God. You let God work in your life. I've known people who've done the right thing and lost their job over it, and still trusted God for their future. Do you think God honors that? Absolutely!

There's a second kind of stress: the kind that comes from **Conflict in Your Relationships**. God made every one of us different and because of that we're all wired differently, so we get into conflict. Conflict's not fun; It's tough; Not many people like it. In fact, if you do, you probably need to see a therapist.

Unfortunately most of us never learn enough tools or skills for conflict management – not from our parents or school – so we go through life not really able to resolve issues effectively. A lot of times we make matters worse and make little things into bigger conflicts.

The Bible gives us many principles on resolving conflicts - conflicts with parents, children, friends, spouses, other people, even enemies. Let me just mention two principles that are great stress relievers when you go through conflict.

1. Change Your Focus. That's intentionally switching your focus from your point of view to looking at the situation from their viewpoint. The biggest step in resolving conflict is simply understanding where the other person is coming from. The more you understand where they're coming from the less you have to argue about. You need to understand their and the motivation behind them. What's their personality? How are they wired? What's their background and hurts from the past. The more you understand, the easier it is to communicate.

Philippians 2:3-6 points out this change: "*Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to.*"

First it says, "Don't be selfish." When I'm selfish and you're selfish, we're going to butt heads. If we can get rid of that, we're already more than half way there.

Second it says, "Be humble". That's another reason for conflict – pride. When I'm full of pride and you're full of pride, we're going to have conflict. Get rid of selfishness and pride and we get rid of most conflicts. We all tend to want things the way WE like it – the way that works best for us. When we act out of pride, we're demanding. We hold grudges against people and have resentment. If you see people complaining, being resentful, holding grudges, that's a sure sign pride is in the middle of things. Those are the symptoms of the disease.

Pride makes it hard to admit mistakes. Have you been in an argument where you figured out you were wrong but tried to get things to where you didn't have to admit it? Instead of just saying, "That was stupid. I shouldn't have said that." you say, "What I really meant was..." If you want to get rid of conflict, if you want to reduce stress in your family, your neighborhood, your work, your church, be humble.

But what's humility? Humility is often misunderstood. It's not putting yourself down – "I'm no good. I'm worthless." That's false humility. Humility isn't thinking less of yourself; it's thinking less about yourself. It's thinking, "What are other people's needs? What are their hurts? What are their interests? How can I minister to them?"

Of course, the ultimate example of that is Jesus Christ. It says, *"You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to."*

In America we're taught to stand up for our rights and privileges at any cost. Yes, it's important that we defend the rights of all people in justice. But on a personal level as a believer there's a different ethic where you give up your rights.

When you become a Christian, you commit your life to Christ. He gave his life for you, so you give your life to him. When you do that, you give him your needs, your hurts AND your rights. They belong to God anyway. It's just accepting the truth. In exchange God gives you the chance to be a child of God. If you're a Christian, your rights belong to God.

How do you know when you've taken your rights back? There's a real warning signal: anger. Anger is a major warning that you've taken back rights you've given to God. You say, "I have a right to this! I deserve to be treated in this way! I have a right to decide how things should be!" What do you mean, you have a right? You gave your rights to God when you became a believer. When you give your rights to God takes responsibility for them and is your defender and fulfiller. You can either defend your rights or God can? Who can do it better? When you get angry you're on the defensive and it's a warning sign that you've taken back your rights.

Beyond that, we often take our wants and needs and try to turn them into rights. We think we have a right to them. "I have a right to be appreciated... I have a right to be listened to... I have a right to be understood..." Those are wants and needs we have as human beings, but they're not rights. In any case, God appreciates you, listens to you and understands you; so you can put it in God's hands.

People say, "I have a right to have things the way I like them, I shouldn't have to give up what I like for other people." Wrong! When we become Christians we give up our right to have things our own way. We do things in ways that will help others come to Christ and grow in their commitment to Christ.

Here's an assignment for you today. Go home and make a list of all the things you think you have a right to and then take those things and give them back to God. What happens if you give up any rights to the one who's righteous? I bet you'll see the anger and conflict in your life go down if you really do it.

Another reason you may have conflict is when you expect other people to meet needs only God can fulfill. When you expect others to meet those needs, you're expecting them to be God. They're bound to fail and disappoint you.

This happens in all kinds of relationships. People expect their parents to meet their needs, their children, their spouse, their pastor, their church. Turn it around. Ask how you can help meet the needs of other people, family, your spouse, your church.

The second thing is you want to **2. Watch your words.** Believers need to be attacking the problem not attacking each other. Proverbs 18:20 says, *"What you say can preserve life or destroy it; so you must accept the consequences of your words."* How many relationships have been destroyed because of a careless word spoken in the heat of anger? Words hurt. Words wound.

The Bible is very clear that there are some verbal weapons you should never use. Just throw them out. It's kind of like during the cold war when both Russia and America had an arsenal of atomic weapons. But neither of them used them against each other in all those years because of what they called MAD - Mutually Assured Destruction. If they used them they'd destroy the world. There are certain weapons that if you pull them out in your relationships, you're assuring destruction of that relationship. Ephesians 4:29-32 is very clear about it. It says, *"Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them. And do not bring sorrow to God's Holy Spirit by the way you live. Remember, he has identified you as his own, guaranteeing that you will be saved on the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you."*

God says these verbal weapons are out of bounds. Decide now that these are taboo. You won't use them no matter how mad or upset you are. We're not going to talk that way to each other - even in our worst arguments because all that's going to do is make things worse. If you mess up, stop and say, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." And learn to remove those verbal weapons from your arsenal.

There's a third kind of stress - from **Competition with Other People.** We live in a very competitive culture. Whether you consider yourself a competitor or not you're affected by it. We're always looking at each other, how we dress, how we act, what we drive, what we have, what our homes are like. Everyone's looking at each other. We compete

for attention right from the beginning: competing for grades, recognition, being first in line. The problem is everyone can't be number one. So it leaves most of us upset we're not.

In our culture we live with the constant stress of being good enough, doing well enough, seeming good enough, keeping up. How do you reduce this stress of competition in your life?

The Bible again gives us some practical steps:

1. Don't Make Comparisons. Just stop the habit of comparing yourself to others. This is America's favorite sport. We love to compare... you name it, we compare it! There are Top Ten lists for everything – Who's the best and the worst dressed and so on and so on. It's foolish to compare. Why?

First, because you're unique. There's no one like you so you really can't compare yourself. God custom designed you to be you and doesn't want you to be anyone else. God designed you. If you won't be you, it's a loss. The problem is people start off as originals and end up as copies. We say, "Look at the way she wears her hair... Look at the car he drives..." and we do it too and lose the uniqueness God meant for us. When you start comparing, you start competing.

When you compare, you'll find someone who's doing better than you and you'll feel discouraged and think, "I'll never be that." Then when you find people you're doing better than you feel prideful. Either way it's a problem! Discouragement and pride are both wrong and counterproductive. Don't compare spouses, kids, talents... because you're unique. No one else can be you. Why would you want to be anybody else?

The second reason you shouldn't compare is it makes people miserable. It's the source of envy and bitterness. Nothing depreciates your car faster than a neighbor getting a newer one. Stop comparing.

Galatians 6:4 says, "*Pay careful attention to your own work, for then you will get the satisfaction of a job well done, and you won't need to compare yourself to anyone else.*" You don't have to be the best. You just have to do your best. When you get to heaven, God isn't going to say, "Were you the best?" God's going to say, "Did you do your best with the talent, abilities and opportunities I gave you,?"

If you're tired of that trap of always trying to measure up and it's never good enough, then recognize your uniqueness and stop comparing yourself to others.

And even more vital: **2. Remember God's love and grace.** Remember God loves you unconditionally. It's not based on performance. You don't have to prove that you're something - God already knows what you are. God made you. Jesus died for you. God loves you. That means you're something. You don't have to prove it to yourself, your dad, mom, neighbor, wife, husband or anyone else.

There are lots of verses in the Bible on this but this is one of the best: Romans 5:8 "*God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.*" So when did God start loving you? When you got it all together and had it perfect? You haven't even done that now!

When did God start loving you? While we were yet sinners. While you were turning your back on God. When you said, "I'm going to call my own shots." God loved you even then. In the middle of the worst you've ever done, God loved you. God's love is based on his grace, not your accomplishments.

I heard about this guy who died and gets to heaven and he goes up to St. Peter and Peter says, "Let's take the test and let you in." The guy says, "Test? I didn't know there was a test." "Oh, yeah and you've got to get a thousand points." Peter says, "Tell me what you did on earth." He gets a little prideful and says, "I served for twenty years with Mother Teresa in the streets of Calcutta." Peter says, "Ok, one point." "One point!" "What else have you done?" "One point???" "Uh, I raised six kids who all ended up being missionary doctors." "Ok, one point." "One point! That took half my life!" "Anything else you've done?" "Before I died I willed my entire inheritance to my church to be used for feeding the poor." Peter goes, "Great! One point." The guy says, "I'm not going to make it! All I've got left is the grace of God." And Peter says, "Bingo! One thousand points!"

You can't be good enough. You just can't. You can't earn your way. You need to accept the unconditional love of God.

Some of us are on the way to burnout - stressed out by one of these things we talked about or some other thing in our lives. There's no reason for you to carry that stress. 1 Peter 5:7 says, "*Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you.*" God will care for you if you will trust.

I want to pray for you about that. Let's take a moment to talk to Jesus about **our stress.**