

“When I remember You on my bed,
I meditate on You in the night watches.
Because You have been my help, ...”

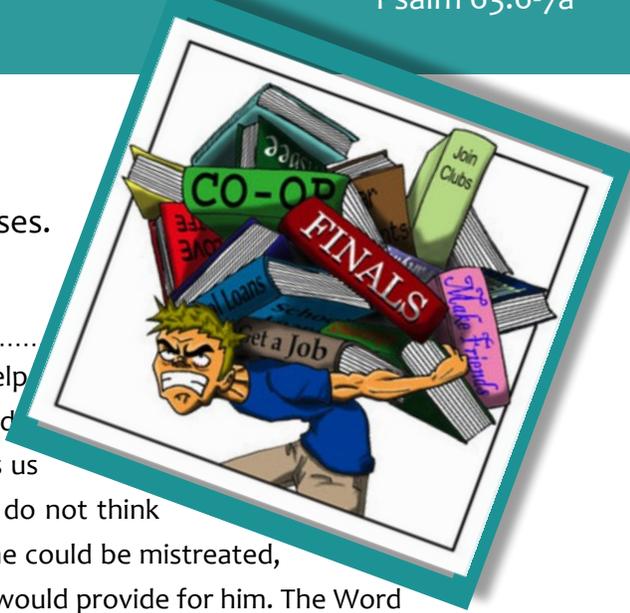
Psalm 63:6-7a

Help! I'm Stressed Out (part 1)

Theme: God's wisdom on how to prevent stress-related illnesses.

Review of Lesson 18

We all go through times in our lives when we need some comfort to help make us feel better. When King David's heart was overwhelmed, he cried to the Lord because that was his only source of true comfort. God gives us the ability to find joy in life, lifts up heavy hearts, provides hope so we do not think things are hopeless, and makes us feel better. The Apostle Paul taught he could be mistreated, suffer wrongly, and lose all things yet rejoice because he knew the Lord would provide for him. The Word of God provides us comfort because it is God's wisdom, and the Holy Spirit uses those words in our lives. We are comforted by the Lord, and He in turn asks us to comfort others. As a new person in Christ, you can be satisfied with who you are and confidently reach out to others.



Stress Basics

Introduction

Stress is the body's heightened reaction to a change that requires physical and mental adjustments. It is a form of pressure (the need for extra ability) in the face of a perceived danger or special need. Some stress is a normal part of life and essential for well being. The stress of an exam can help a person be extra alert and do his/her best (often called good stress). The mind recognizes danger or perceives a special need and signals the body for help. The mind (our thoughts and emotions) is primarily responsible for creating stress levels. Our stress levels in turn strongly impact our long-term health. So the thoughts and emotions we have today affect how we feel physically in the future. That is why it is reported that 75-90% of doctor visits are stress related. Thankfully, God's Word teaches how to reduce stress in order to have a healthy mind and body, which helps us enjoy life and serve Him better.

If there is real danger, high stress levels are good because the body uses the extra strength and energy to meet the

challenge. In addition to real danger, stress also results from being rushed, yelled at, bullied, painful experiences, frustrations, and hurtful events; these things create powerful emotions with the resulting high stress. However, with emotional or mental stress there is no outlet for the extra energy and this constant state of elevated stress damages our bodies.

Why Care About Stress

Hormones are chemicals made by the body as part of God's design. These chemicals are controlled by the brain and are produced in tiny amounts to act as messengers in the blood stream. These messengers tell various parts of the body to perform needed functions. The stress hormones are made to help during times of danger; that is, they are emergency hormones that help us survive (to be either extra strong or super fast-called the "fight or flight" response). The stress hormones create powerful, rapid reactions in the body and mind. However, when these

hormones are always present in the body, they will cause great harm and illness.

The two main stress hormones are adrenaline (also called epinephrine) and cortisol. They are called stress hormones because stress (real or imaginary) causes their release from the adrenal glands. The whole body quickly responds to them. These hormones are great when used as God designed. When they are in our system in high amounts for too long, bad things begin to happen. It does not matter if the stress is considered a good type (like performing in a play) or the bad type (an attacking dog), both release the same hormones and the body reacts the same way.

What Causes Stress

The situations that cause stress are many. We usually think of stress as coming from negative things such as an exhausting schedule or a bad family relationship. However, anything, positive or negative, real or imaginary, that puts high demands on us or forces us to adjust can be stressful. Typical factors that cause high stress, and for which we may have little control, are:

- being bullied, abused, or exposed to violence
- family conflicts (arguments, divorce, moving...)
- broken heart (death of a loved one, wanting to belong, break up with friend...)

- ongoing problems with school (grades, peer pressure, learning disability...)
- crammed schedules (no time to rest or relax...)
- major life changes (friends, illness, part-time job, college concerns...)

Our mind is more of a factor in creating stress than our body. Our emotions (how we feel about something) and our thoughts (the things we think) are the key factors in stress matters. It turns out that our negative emotions (anger, rage, hate, fear, guilt, shame) and negative thoughts (“I’m stupid”, “No one likes me”, “Everyone treats me wrong”) create a large release of stress hormones.

We can have control over some mind-related factors that produce stress hormones, such as:

- inability to accept uncertainty
- negative ways of thinking
- belief you can't satisfy God
- unrealistic expectations
- perfectionism
- secret sin

Discussion: Talk about the things in your life that are stressful. Maybe you can help each other find unrecognized sources of stress.

Biblical Truth

The Psalmist says, **"I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made..."** (Psa. 139:14). We will get a glimpse of His wisdom when we further consider His design of humans.

Closer Look at the Body's Stress Response

When in a threatening situation, your nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones. These hormones prepare your body and mind for emergency action. Your heart pounds faster, muscles tighten, blood pressure rises, breathing gets faster, and senses become sharper. During the emergency, the blood flow to the less

needed areas (digestive tract and skin) gets less so that extra blood can be sent to the most needed areas (muscles and senses). These changes increase your strength and endurance and prepare you to either fight or run from the danger. If a person is about to be attacked, digestion is not as important as having extra strong muscles. Less blood flow to the skin is designed to reduce bleeding due to an injury.

Stress hormones are wonderful when used as God designed. Stress is a normal and desired response to events that threaten or upset us. It occurs whether the

danger is real or imaginary. The body and mind perceive either threat as real. So if a person is alone at night and sees a spooky shadow (which is really only the shadow of a tree branch), the stress response will be the same as if the person were in real danger. The stress response is one of God's ways of protecting us. It helps maintain focus, provides extra energy, and heightens senses. It has saved many lives.

The stress response also helps you rise to meet challenges. Stress is what keeps you on your toes during a presentation at school, sharpens your focus when attempting a game-winning free throw, or helps you study for an exam rather than watch TV. However, beyond a certain point, when the stress hormones are always present, stress stops being helpful and starts being hurtful.

What Stress Can Do to You

Stress is not the only factor in causing illness, but it can be a major factor. Some common problems resulting from

constant stress are: digestive problems, heart disease, early aging, sleep disorders, obesity, skin problems, memory loss, inability to concentrate, feeling overwhelmed, depression, aches and pains, frequent colds, addictions, and nervous habits (nail biting, pacing, twitching). Stress leads to chronic fatigue and the inability to cope. If you have several of these factors, then it is especially important to pay attention to this lesson.

Discuss: Why do bad things happen (see paragraph above) as a result of prolonged stress? (Thoughts: Long periods of reduced blood flow to certain areas results in digestive problems, early aging, skin problems, etc., since it is not adequate for long-term good health. Constant preparation to fight or flee causes unrelenting pressure on the heart and blood vessels causing serious damage. Constant stress causes worry, anxiety, sleep problems, and eating disorders.)

Life Applications

Taking Action

It is always wise to avoid excessive stress and to take action when you are overwhelmed by what is happening in your life. If you have several of the problems associated with stress (see above, "What Stress Can Do to You"), then follow the Lord's leading so you can reduce it. That means taking charge of this portion of your life and getting control of your thoughts and emotions. It also means not letting your schedule and the way you deal with problems control you. Here are some common things we all should follow.

1. Positive Thoughts and Emotions. The good news is that positive emotions and thoughts do not release stress hormones. So instead of negative thinking, take serious steps to think on the right things. Philippians

4:8 tells us to think about the things that are true, noble, just, pure, lovely, and of good report. This was not written because it is "good Christian talk," but because God knows how harmful negative thinking is. **"A merry heart does good, like medicine, But a broken spirit dries the bones"** (Prov. 17:22). In addition, **"Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, Sweetness to the soul and health to the bones"** (Prov. 16:24). Thankfully, God has a plan to help us think properly (called **Transformation**, Lesson 13). Remember, positive thoughts and emotions promote good health; they are God's prescription for good health.

Negative thoughts lead to negative emotions (anger, envy, hostility, despair, or fear). So each of us has to develop a habit of changing our thoughts to

something positive. The Bible teaches us to capture the bad thoughts and make them obedient to what Christ would expect, **"...bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ"** (2 Cor.10:5b). That means we must not allow ourselves to think negatively for long—the consequences are too serious. The moment we find ourselves thinking negatively (and that includes thinking about the true things that upset us) we need to get rid of that thought (capture it) and replace it with something positive.

Discussion: Our reaction to something that was said can be more harmful than what was actually said. "Fuming" over what was said (constantly thinking about it) creates a constantly stressed condition. Such thinking captures the mind and creates harmful negative emotions (anger, bitterness, and revenge). Our reaction to an event is the thing that actually causes long-term health problems, not the event.

2. Recognize Who Controls. The good thing is you can tell Him your innermost problems and fears, those you could never admit to any other human—not even your closest friend. The Scripture says, **"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication (to humbly ask), with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God"** (Phil. 4:6, parenthesis added). As you commit your problems to Him in prayer, you share your burdens with Him. He lifts the load of your burden off your back, which greatly helps you. You should also acknowledge sin in your life and truly seek His help to overcome secret (hidden) sin. He already knows about your sin and problems, but it helps to acknowledge them (silently is fine) to the Lord. You can rely upon the Lord to guide and direct you, but that does not mean you can sit back and do nothing; you must do what is instructed in the Word. Also, for some problems it is

wise to seek professional help, asking for His direction in the whole matter.

It is a relief to know you can tell Him all your fears because fear and anxiety (feeling of terrible uneasiness) cause harm. All people have some fears and worries, but they should not control your life (since your life is in His hands). You may not see the way out of your dilemma, but He certainly does. The Lord will provide in ways you do not understand or even know about. He gives you exactly what is needed, even though you may not ask for it. He may not change the circumstances or people in your life (that is what we want). Instead, He gives something beyond our understanding, **"...and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus"** (Phil. 4:7). He gives inner peace which guards your heart, regardless of what is going on in your life. This is a peace that can't be explained, but it is real and exactly what is needed when suffering fear or anxiety.

3. Treat your body well. Experts agree that getting regular exercise helps people manage stress; it provides a way to use up the energy resulting from excess stress hormones. Exercise should be in moderation; excessive or compulsive exercise can contribute to stress (Phil. 4:5). Eat a well balanced diet high in vegetables, fruits, and whole grains. A diet of whole foods, not processed or fast foods (chips, cookies, candy, French fries, soda, donuts, pizza,...), will help your body and mind have the right fuel to function their best. It's easy when you're stressed out to eat on the run and eat the wrong foods. However, under stressful conditions, the body needs vitamins and minerals more than ever. Some people may turn to substance abuse as a way to ease tension, making the mistake of thinking alcohol or drugs ease the stress—they are addictive and eventually promote more stress.

4. Relax, study, and meditate. You can't completely eliminate stress from your life, but you can control how much it affects you. It is important to take time to have fun and relax. You will find it is relaxing to study and meditate on (think about) the Bible (Psa. 63; I Tim 4:15). David found when he could not sleep because of worries that it was good to think about the Lord, **"When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches. Because You have been my help..."** (Psa. 63:6-7a). Soothing music, reading a

good book, and being alone to reflect are helpful in reducing stress. Turn off your electronic devices and be silent with the Lord.

Discussion: Someone said something very hurtful to you. What should you do? (Thoughts: take it to the Lord in prayer; calm down and then talk to the person; see if forgiveness is needed; bring your thoughts into captivity; do not let this control your life; get your mind on positive things; do not hang on to it...).

Take 2 Heart

Summary

We are designed by God with a wonderful stress-response system that helps us in times of danger and special need. The mind senses the danger or need and causes a release of stress hormones. Those hormones are powerful and act quickly. However, if constantly in our system at elevated levels, these hormones cause health problems. They were only intended for rare use. The problem is our thoughts and emotions can release the same stress hormones. Negative thinking and emotions release stress hormones just as if in real danger. Positive thinking and emotions do not. If we follow God's directions, we can develop correct ways of thinking and emotions—with reduced stress and better health. Pray for the Lord's help to: have positive thoughts and emotions; recognize God's control; treat your body well; and find time to relax, study, and meditate.

Gospel

The good news is that there is nothing difficult about becoming a Christian. If you believe that Christ died for

your sins, that is all that He asks. **"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Rom. 6:23). Each person is a sinner, and the wages (what you earn) of that sin is death (eternal separation from God). On the other hand, God offers eternal life as a gift through faith in Christ, Who already paid the penalty for your sins.

Encouragement

When the four "Life Applications" are practiced regularly, they will help reduce everyday stress levels and boost feelings of peace. They will also increase your ability to stay calm and collected under pressure. Thank you for your desire to honor the Lord and to follow His Word. May He give you victory over excess stress and provide in unexpected ways. As you share the truth of what you have learned, you will be able to help many others. What a wonderful testimony it is when teens honor the Lord in all they do. May His love empower you in marvelous ways.