

# Why Are We So Stressed?



by Michael Peterson

**W**e're stressed out! Life's a constant struggle. We just can't seem to get a break. Stress has become overwhelming for many of us today. Why are we so stressed? And why is it that no matter how hard we try to avoid stress and make a life that is "stress-free," it never happens? It is as if the more we try not to be stressed, the more stressed out we become.

## What is Stress?

Although stress has been defined in a variety of ways, it can be summed up as follows—stress is a state of being that goes beyond a person's normal state of equilibrium. It is reflected physically when we push our bodies beyond a normal, balanced state of health.

Exercise by definition is physically stressful—so is sickness. Emotionally, stress is expressed in joy, grief, sadness, depression, elation, anxiety, worry, frustration, guilt, disappointment or any other emotion that goes beyond the normal sense of being.

Stress is often used as an umbrella term for all the physical, psychological and emotional states of being that go beyond the normal state of equilibrium. When someone says they are stressed, they could be frustrated, anxious, depressed or overjoyed.

And what are we stressed about? To put it bluntly—LIFE. A stress-free life is a life void of challenges, emotional intensity and growth. It is a very dull life indeed. But an appropriate amount of stress can lead to tremendous benefits. For

example, when we exercise or stress our bodies physically, we attain higher levels of fitness. We literally adapt to higher levels of physical performance and improve our ability to handle more. This is how an athlete becomes faster, stronger and tougher. However, too much physical stress, especially long term stress, can have a detrimental effect on the body. This analogy also holds true for us emotionally, mentally and spiritually.

## The Value of Stress

For Christians, the issue of stress is very real. In fact, stress is a necessary part of a Christian's life (1 Peter 1:3-7). Trials and tribulations, sufferings and blessings, all produce stressful states and serve to build character, godly love, forgiveness, self-control, kindness and faith.

Suffice it to say that a Christian's life will be stressful because God uses our emotional and behavioral responses to stressful life experiences as a means to edify, correct, discipline, nurture and transform us. It can be a way to build our faith and draw us closer to him (James 1:3-4).

While there are benefits we can realize from some of the stress we experience, we also increase the amount of stress we experience by the way we think, believe and approach our lives. We can literally

suffer from self-inflicted stress which can sow the seeds of doubt, fear, anxiety and guilt.

## What Causes Self-Inflicted Stress?

**1. Co-Creator Perception Disorder (CCPD).** CCPD is a condition in which we think we either have or need total control over our lives, or we believe we have no control over our lives. A belief or need for total control is often a trait of high achievement, or "Type A" individuals. It can lead to behaviors and actions that seek to control every event, person or outcome. And when that event or outcome does not occur as desired, or that person does not respond in the manner in which we desire, we become distressed. This mindset often has a distressing ripple effect in that it produces anxiety and suffering in others.

A person with CCPD has a difficult time relinquishing control of their lives to Jesus Christ, because that would make them vulnerable and less a master of their own destiny. It also produces a life in which everything must be battled—life becomes a constant struggle.

There is an old saying that "the reed can't tell the wind what to do." When we stand like a stiff reed against the winds of life we will break. It is the wise reed that learns to bend in the wind trusting that its roots are firm.

When we have Jesus Christ as our foundation we are able to stand no matter how hard the wind blows. It is that trust and faith in Jesus Christ that allows us to stand.

The other form of CCPD, thinking we have no control whatsoever, leads to a life of inaction, indecision and fatalism. When opportunity comes knocking, and blessings are presented for the taking, we stand idly by under the misguided notion that we can't do anything, and

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whatever will be will be—it must be God’s will.

**2. Health-Wealth Doctrine.** At the core of this belief is that hard work leads to success, prosperity, well-being and the good life. Work leads to the accumulation of material wealth, and is proof of our inherent righteousness (because God wouldn’t bless an evil person). A person with a big house, expensive car, large salary and excellent health who lives in a nice neighborhood is often viewed as somehow being better, or closer to God than a person who has inferior or diminished health and wealth.

It is this misguided belief that leads people to relish “doing” as the dominant form of activity. Hence some are constantly active, busy and working as a means to prove their divine favor, without ever questioning whether all of this doing and work is really necessary or worthwhile.

This unbiblical teaching also breeds a trust in physical things. We assess each other’s value based on what we are doing and what we have done. As a result we become overly distressed when we don’t achieve, don’t gain wealth and don’t maintain our health.

The natural stress due to the lack of these material things is compounded by an underlying guilt and doubt that God is not in our corner. By assessing our value based on what WE do, and what WE have, we fall prey to overwork and over-commitment, and judge ourselves according to what can be seen by man rather than what is really important to God. God’s grace defines our relationship with him, and it is faith in that grace that gives us peace (Matthew 11:28-30).

**3. Time urgency.** A focus on the here and now, rather than hope in the future, produces an urgency to attain and do as much as possible in the time that we have. It is the antithesis of patience and longsuffering. This mindset also produces a hurried and harried lifestyle that has become a hallmark of the 21st century. We only have so much

time to get all the things done that we need to get done, so we rush from one event to another, one after-school program to another (God forbid our children should miss out on any activity that would put them at a disadvantage).

We are forever doing, constantly rushing to and fro, restless and anxious, looking for the shortest route between where we are and where we want to be, and woe to that person who gets in our way when we are racing to our next activity.

When we are so busy doing the immediate, we forget about the important. We become frustrated when things are not done quickly because we only have so much time on this earth and we need to make the most of it—so get out of my way!

When our focus is on the terrestrial rather than the eternal, we lose perspective. We become self-focused rather than God-focused, and we become impatient and unkind to our neighbors which only serves to produce more anxiety, stress and guilt.

**4. Competition and comparison.** In democracies we all may be born equal, but we sure don’t intend to stay that way. We seek the best schools, the most fashionable styles and looks, the highest paying jobs, the trendiest neighborhoods in an effort to be better than the other guy or gal. Competitive one-upmanship also thrives in churches as we are tempted to spiritually compare ourselves with others. We fall into the trap of performance-based Christianity.

Spiritual competition and comparison is a perception that if we do not have the right things, or act or think a certain way, we somehow are not as good. On the other hand, it is a perception that having, thinking and acting a certain way makes us better than others. The end result is discord, envy, jealousy and hate—all of which are manifestations of stress.

Contrast this with Godly love and humility. It is not what we have, where we live or what we do that makes us better. If we glory in

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anything let it be in Christ Jesus, for we are all equally sinful before God. The mind of Christ in us (Philippians 2:1-5) reduces stress and promotes peace.

**5. Confusing suffering with sin.** Although sin does produce suffering, not all suffering is related to a sin we have committed. And suffering does not mean God is punishing us. In fact, our suffering is an opportunity to draw closer to God—to increase our faith and better understand his unconditional love towards us even when our lives are distressed. When we understand that suffering and sin are not always one and the same, we are less apt to feel guilty and doubtful. Rejoice in trials, for they can be God’s way of forming us into his image.

## Conclusion

Stress is a natural and real part of a Christian’s life, but we can reduce the amount of stress we perceive and experience, and improve our ability to manage our stress by yielding to Christ who lives his risen life in us (Galatians 2:20). Christ in us is the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27), and it is the mind of Christ that empowers us to battle the false beliefs, mindsets and behaviors that cause distress in our lives. The mind of Christ produces the hope, faith and love that lead to peace.

The more we relinquish control of our lives to God, the better able we are to withstand the stresses and strains of life. We can take comfort in the fact that God will never leave us nor forsake us, and that there is nothing that will separate us from his love (Romans 8:31-39). □

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