

by Ron Benson

We took an alternate route with our bikes because we wanted to push ourselves. The road was a mile out of our way, with no pavement, but it made for a good proving ground for our physical ability.

Not that I had much physical ability. I was out of shape. But I wanted to get healthier, so Jon and I took to riding our bikes around our rural community. On this particular day, we chose a new route.

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rewards: svelte body, new vigor, and maybe a hot fudge sundae if I put in the miles. So I pedaled away, pushing myself to accomplish my goals. There was stress, but it was a happy stress.

And then there were dogs. Rottweilers. Big. Three of them. They came charging at Jon and me from an isolated farmhouse. The dogs were in better shape than I, and they were gaining on me. Jon was in better shape than I, too, and he put some distance between himself and the dogs. For me,



Can Religion Help With Stress?

that distance was shrinking.

The canines were yapping at my rear tire, and I was pounding the pedals as hard as I thought I could. Stress compounded.

And then I hit the sand.

The road turned into a soft, shifty surface and my tires sunk. The dogs nipped at my heels. My heart was exploding. I pumped that bike with everything I had, pushing my legs beyond any level of exertion I'd ever known, trying to extricate my bike from the sandy bog and get away from the angry hounds. Stress reached critical proportions.

Somehow, some way, I made

it out of the sandpit and away from the dogs. I survived. I never went past that house again. But the feeling of stress has never left me.

Stress = Being Human

Stress is as common as life itself. It's not possible to remove all stress from our lives, since life involves experiences and situations that can produce stress. In fact, stress is important to the way we function.

Some stress can be a little fun (read *roller coaster*).

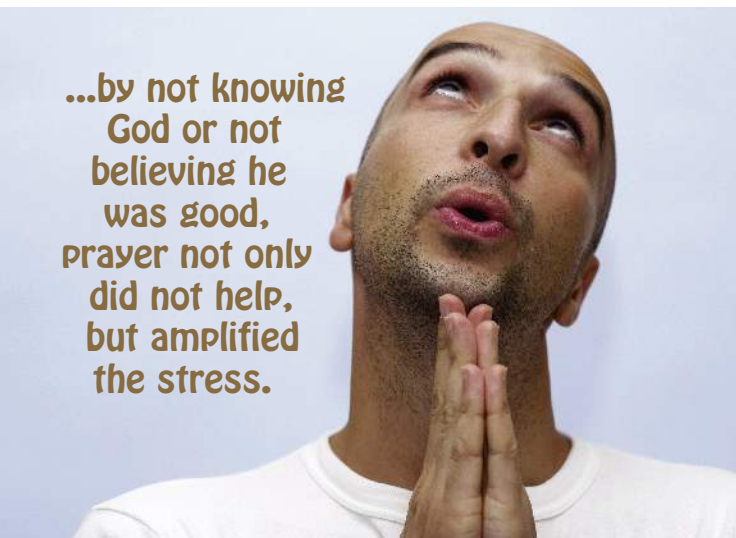
Dr. Michael Peterson, Professor and Department Chair in Behavioral Health & Nutrition at the University of Delaware, defines stress simply: "Stress is often our negative



emotional reaction to life events. Stress management is really life management." Stress comes with being human.¹

Stress that gets unmanageable and harmful, however,

...by not knowing God or not believing he was good, prayer not only did not help, but amplified the stress.



You see where this is going. Rather than relieving stress, the push to perform more and more tasks for Jesus in order to make him happy with us can lead us right into the stress we're trying to avoid.

our management of stress?

My personal experience as a pastor for over thirty years suggests that, while some

religious practices may indeed offer relief, people can be fooled into thinking that the harder they "practice" religion the better off they will be. We may be convinced that doing the right things, joining the right ministries, spending more time in Bible study, prayer, church attendance, meetings, and working hard to make more and more sacrifices for

seize the opportunity to gain from this scenario. They can offer stress relief through any number of legalistic activities, and when those activities create more stress instead, they can guilt us into thinking it's our fault. What do they offer to help? More legalistic activities.

The research is not conclusive about whether religious practice helps or compounds stress. Many clinical observers find that religious practice has a beneficial effect on stress. Other studies, however, show the opposite. What's going on? How could one study show that religion helps stress management and another study shows the opposite?

Polar Opposite Results

Behavioral scientists at Baylor University set out to understand how both of these results could be true. The research dealt specifically with prayer, since that spiritual practice seems especially useful when it comes to stressful living. The goal of the study was to find out why some people found prayer to relieve stress and others found prayer to magnify stress.³

The answer hinged on how the individual perceived God and their relationship with him. The study used the word *attachment*.

If a subject in the study perceived that they had an attachment with God that was real and they were confident of

becomes a problem. When we feel like our lives are out of control, or when we experience minimal return for large expenditures of effort, we can get "stressed-out"—reaching the limits of our abilities to cope.

Stress takes a toll. 77% of people say that stress causes physical symptoms in their lives, and 73% experience psychological symptoms. It is

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estimated that the annual costs to employers in stress related health care and missed work approaches 300 billion dollars.²

Lots of information is available that offers remedies for stress. Things like exercise, meditation, hobbies, even riding a bike can help take the steam out of a stressed life. A common perception is that religious experiences such as attending church, observing rituals, practicing spiritual disciplines, and other activities may be healthy stress relievers.

Religion and Stress

What role does religion play in

the cause of religious perfection will alleviate the stress in life. Sure.

You see where this is going. Rather than relieving stress, the push to perform more and more tasks for Jesus in order to make him happy with us can lead us right into the stress we're trying to avoid. Add to that the pressure of doctrinal fear—end-times threats, hell-fire warnings, "you-don't-have-enough-faith" teaching—and you've got a whole pack of angry dogs nipping at your toes, creating more stress than you can imagine.

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that reality, prayer seemed to help with the stress. If, on the other hand, the subjects viewed themselves as detached from God in any way, either by not knowing him or not believing he was good, prayer not only did not help, but amplified the stress.

Let’s say I was riding my bike around my rural neighborhood and I spotted my wonderful dog, Shadow the Cockapoo, jogging toward my rear wheels. Shadow was a warm friendly

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pooch, and never met a soul she did not love. Shadow’s presence during my ride would not have created stress at all; in fact, it would have made my ride more enjoyable. I may even have made a habit of inviting my beloved pet to come along with me on my rides.

What if, however, the dog chasing me is mean, drooling, ferocious, hungry and quite possibly rabid? Be sure I will not be inviting that animal to join me in my routine.

If using animals as an analogy is disturbing, let’s change it up. Let’s talk about the “man behind the door.”

You’ve had a stressful day.

It’s easy to see how abusive and manipulative leaders can seize the opportunity to gain from this scenario... they can guilt us into thinking it’s our fault.

Someone knocks on the door. If you know who the person on the other side of the door is, and delight in your relationship with that person, and if you are looking forward to being with him and enjoy having him around, you’ll be happy to see him and you’ll share a meal and your stress

level will go down because you opened the door.

But if you don’t know who’s knocking, and if you believe that opening that door is either unhelpful or even a little dangerous, the whole idea of there being a person on the other side of that door will not help your stress one little bit. It will magnify it.

Dr. Peterson makes it clear that there are elements of religious experience that can benefit our stressed-out lives. Having caring, understanding people around us, for instance, can provide a respite to the

chaos of our jobs or the stress of dysfunctional families. But he warns that legalistic religion often offers a carrot to the horse of our stress, setting in front of us a prize that we can never seem to obtain. Religion urges us to do more and more things, and offers us little in return.

According to Peterson, the church says: “To attain God’s blessing, you need to master these ‘behaviors,’ but the ‘carrot’ of God’s blessing always seems to be just a little too far ahead of what you’re

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able to achieve. When you realize it’s rigged against you, guilt and shame and stress are the result. This can lead someone to question the very existence of God, since the reality never measures up

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the Baylor study showed is that **our perception of God is critical.** If we simply don't believe in God, or believe that he isn't important to our lives, religious practice is going to do nothing to help with stress. And seeing God as a spiteful, judgmental authority figure will clearly amplify stress.

But knowing that God is loving and kind, that he cares for us and understands us, and believing that he desires a deep relationship with us will mean that our active participation in our faith can provide substantial help in relieving stress.

The answer is found in learning more and more about the unconditional love of a grace-motivated God and becoming intimately involved with him.

If you're tired of the big dogs biting your heels, and if you can't seem to find your way out of the sand pit of stress, get to a place where you can relax in the presence of The God of All Compassion. In the end, grace is the answer to toxic stress. □

1. Quotes taken from personal interview with Dr. Michael Peterson, January 18, 2016.
 2. Source: Statistic Brain Research Institute, American Institute of Stress, NY. Research Date: October 19th, 2015.
 3. Christopher G. Ellison, Matt Bradshaw, Kevin J. Flannelly, Kathleen C. Galek, *Sociology of Religion* 2014, 75:2 208-233.

Ron Benson is still afraid of large dogs and legalistic sand traps. He does what he can to steer clear of both whilst pastoring at Grace Christian Fellowship in Bay City, Michigan. You can find more of Ron's writing at ronbenson.net and connect with him on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/ron.benson.16>

against the promise.”

But doesn't church provide structure, in the form of rules and regulations, which can reduce stress in our lives?

“Of course,” Dr. Peterson answers. “Religion provides roles and rituals that can give a perception of stability and structure to our lives and reduce stress....

“But so does prison...and you really don't want to live there.” Religion can put bars on our freedom in Christ.

Stress or Rest?

Maybe not always, and perhaps not for everyone, but religion causes stress. And if you're already stressed-out, legalistic religion is not going to help. It's going to make things worse.

of the gospel of Jesus is a myth.

A couple of practical questions spring from this truth.

First, how do you know when your church or religion is making more stress in your life? According to Dr. Peterson, the answer is pretty simple. Ask yourself these questions:

- What is my emotional response to church?
- Do I need church to feel good about God?
- Does church make me uneasy, or frustrated?
- Is there anxiety when I think about church and religious activity?

Your honest answers will reveal whether church attendance is helping with stress or causing it.

Another question:

If we're getting stressed beyond what is healthy, what help can our faith provide?

One thing that

