



## The Balanced Life

**Awareness:** Be aware of stress traps that you set for yourself. Do you have a hard time saying No, setting boundaries, or recognizing when overload is occurring? Managing stress involves making choices, forming priorities, adopting attitudes, and taking actions that enable you to maximize your potential without overloading your abilities.

- **Decide** which issues are worth engaging your physical, emotional, and mental energy, and which ones are better left alone or related to in a low-key manner. Many situations resolve themselves with time and patience. Being intense does not always improve a situation—but it can actually compound a problem, intimidate others, and incapacitate you. It is often the case that the way we relate to a situation is more exhausting than the situation itself!
- **Watch** for early signs of burnout before they become incapacitating. Some of the symptoms of burnout are inability to focus on a task, feeling rundown and drained of energy, constant negative thinking about your job or role, inability to cope with daily frustrations; interpersonal conflict.
- **Change** your routine when feeling burned out. It may be time for physical, mental, and spiritual renewal. Give your brain and body a refreshing change. If you are sedentary and do a lot of heavy mental work, enjoy a day at the zoo (without reading the facts about every animal). If you work heavy construction or work at a monotonous job, enjoy taking a class in an area of interest, or enjoy a day relaxing at the park with a challenging book. Remember that in God's view, there is nothing unimportant about your life. He has a plan for you.

- **Choose** ahead of time how you will relate to anticipated stressful situations. Most of us can identify emotional weak spots. We can strengthen weak areas by rehearsing better ways of meeting challenges and putting them into practice. Dealing appropriately with people and situations is a great stress saver. Decide that you will do your best, then let God do the rest.

- **Mentally rehearse** calm and appropriate responses and practice putting things in perspective. The knowledge that you have dealt in a calm and thoughtful way to a situation instead of engaging in a lot of energy-draining, emotionally charged reactions helps you to gain strength to respond to the many demands of the day. You are helping others to think things through, as well as preserving your own resources!

- **Take time out** to reflect and pray about a problem before you act. Look at the big picture, and try to find the positives in every situation. There is always a big picture to consider in every situation; a long-term goal as well as short-term plans. Consider what is best for the overall picture, and resist the temptation to go mountain climbing over molehills!

**Balance:** People who are chronically stressed often feel their lives are out of control. To many, life seems like a frantic relay race as they fly from project to project, playing catch-up, and putting out fires instead of setting their own pace and schedule. Balancing your life puts you back in control and helps you avoid unnecessary stress. Here are some tips:

- **Limit** the number of decisions you make in a day and when you make them, as far as possible. Making decisions late at night and when you are hungry stresses the nervous system. Some decisions cannot be delayed; but others can be prioritized and attended to when you feel prepared. Some people have a character trait of needing to solve everything, understand everything, and direct everything right now! Learning to let go of this kind of control can be a good thing and make you a more pleasant person to be around.

- **Monitor** your schedule, including the amount and intensity of your activities. Even children in this age complain of having so many items in their schedule that they have no downtime, no time to relax. From soccer to cello, their days are more overscheduled than many adults, and they are suffering from stress as a result.

- **Avoid clutter.** Houses today are built 20 percent larger than just a decade ago, and we are filling them with more stuff than they can hold! That may be why self-storage and storage shed sales are such thriving businesses in America. The more we accumulate, the more we have to focus on the care, management, and expense of all that stuff. This drains time and energy that could be used for more useful, important, and refreshing enterprises. Simplify your life by getting rid of useless stuff!

- **Eliminate** personal debt, especially credit card debt, and don't buy on impulse. It is easy to rack up debt from impulse buying or buying when under stress. Denying an impulse purchase takes discipline and forces you to deal with stress in a more productive way. But remember that it only adds to stress to lie in bed at night wondering how to pay all those bills! One minister put it this way: "If the Lord doesn't send it, I don't spend it!" Many families commit to waiting 24 hours before making any purchase over a given amount, such as \$100. This is a great way to avoid needless spending and stressful debt!

- **Get there on time.** It is a great source of frustration and stress to always be running late. It affects those who are depending on you, as well as your own sense of control. If you habitually run late, remember that there are people just as busy as you who get to their appointments on time. What is the secret to being on time? Don't overestimate how much you can squeeze into the time before your appointment, and don't underestimate how much time it will take you to pack, prepare, and travel to your destination. Be realistic in your assessment of what you can and cannot do in a given period of time, and plan to be at your appointments early! You will be more relaxed and in control when you get there.

- **Regulate** the rate of change taking place in your life at one time, including jobs, moving, travel, and even holidays. Set a realistic schedule, and build consistency into your life.

- **Identify** your most important goals and prioritize your time accordingly. Pare down, or you'll wear down! Remember: Good is the enemy of best. There is no end of good things to do, but maybe we need to focus on what is best and give ourselves some breathing room!

- **Take time** to help others—it's a good way to put your own life in perspective. A self-centered life is an exhausting and stressful life. Taking an interest in the

needs and goals of others can be a source of joy, fulfillment, and fill a vital role in your community.

**Lifestyle:** Nutrition and lifestyle play a vital role in stress management, disease prevention (both mental and physical), and quality of life. Someone once said that we spend the first half of our lives ruining our health to make money, and the second half spending all our money to get our health back. Don't get caught in the stress trap of neglecting your health.

- **Eat nutritious food** at regular mealtimes. It lowers stress, boosts immunities, and punctuates your busy day with pleasure and satisfaction. It reduces cravings for unhealthy snacks between meals. Avoid eating on the run. Battling indigestion is a poor way to get through your day! Plan a wholesome breakfast, a fiber-rich lunch, and a light, healthful supper into each day! (See Lowering Stress ... One Bite at a Time.)

- **Drink plenty of water** between meals to keep the blood free flowing and to help nutrient transport. Drinking plenty of water instead of caffeinated beverages keeps you alert naturally and helps you avoid fatigue and irritability.

- **Exercise regularly.** It will not only improve physical health but also lower stress and improve your mood. Just a 10-minute brisk walk can help improve your mood for an hour. Exercise throttles up mental processing while throttling down anxiety and stress! It helps you feel invigorated, refreshed, and lowers tension while boosting your immune system and helping you achieve your ideal weight. Remember: Motion balances emotion (See Exercise: It Goes to Your Head.)

- **Get plenty of sleep.** Determine how much sleep you need, and make sure you get it. Going to bed early is the best way to get deep, refreshing sleep. Just a few hours of sleep loss a week can lower immune health, elevate stress hormone levels during the day, and also make blood sugar control more difficult. A good night's sleep helps your body and mind recharge and refocus for each new day.

- **Relax.** Find a relaxing, stress-reducing hobby or pastime that refreshes and distracts you from your daily routine. Switching gears mentally and physically is like taking a mini-vacation and keeps your life interesting, varied, and balanced.

- **Connect.** Spiritual needs, as well as physical needs, must be met. Take time with God in His Word, and connect with others of like faith. Spending time with

God, taking time to pray, and making sure your life is in harmony with what you know is right is never time wasted.

- **Take a break** from stress by reading a good book, particularly true stories of noble, self-sacrificing individuals.
- **Spend time** visiting a retired friend whom you admire for his or her positive, optimistic attitude in spite of difficulties.

**Stress Savers:** There are times that mental, physical, or emotional energy seems exhausted. So much attention has been spent on a problem that there is no energy left to solve it or even focus on anything else. At such times, stress savers come in handy. Diverting attention away from the stressor can help renew mental and physical energy, revive the faculties, and enable you to respond with increased ability and efficiency. Here are some stress-saver ideas for special times of need:

- Go on a hike or canoe ride without your cell phone.
- Visit a museum or take in a symphony.
- Plant a small vegetable or flower garden.
- Treat yourself to a special (healthful) Greek, Lebanese, or Italian meal at a cozy restaurant.
- Reach out to someone you know who needs encouragement.
- Take a soul stroll—find a new place to walk, and talk to God about all the things you are thankful for.

The television is on 7 hours a day in the typical American home. Watching television has become a major leisure activity; but, ironically, sitting in front of the tube is more likely than other leisure activities to leave people passive, tense, and unable to concentrate.<sup>1</sup> In fact, sitting in front of the TV for long periods of time leaves people in a worse mood than when they started watching.<sup>2</sup>

Try some of these great alternatives to television, and watch your tension melt away!

- Visiting with family and friends
- Family worship
- Playing musical instruments
- Reading
- Crafts, hobbies
- Home projects
- Cooking, baking
- Gardening
- Sightseeing
- Helping with homework
- Attending church, community programs
- Exercising
- Playing, having fun
- Enjoying your pets
- Doing nothing for a change!

*“Unless we substitute true leisure for our hectic amusements, we will destroy our culture-and ourselves.”<sup>3</sup>*

1. Kubey R Csikszentmihalyi M. Television and the Quality of Life: How Viewing Shapes Everyday Experience. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc, 1990).

2. Ibid.

3. Winters R. Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment. (Downer’s Grove, IL; Inter Varsity Press, 2002) p. 126.