



We're living in a stressed-out world.

While we can't eliminate the stressors of life, we can learn to navigate them with courage and grace. This timely resource is a practical guide for anyone who feels the creep of stress, who desires freedom and peace, and who wants to *Stress Less*.

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What Stress Is

*Stress is the trash of modern life—
we all generate it, but if you don't dispose of it properly,
it will pile up and overtake your life.*

DANZAE PACE

In late 2019, a strange virus began to afflict millions in China. I'm a news junkie, so I followed the story daily (or more like hourly). The year prior, my wife, Sherryl, and I had scheduled a vacation to Jamaica for February 2020. As we get older, we plan to take one nice trip each year until our bones get so creaky that we can't travel anymore.

When we arrived in Jamaica, everything seemed perfect, except one issue. The resort provided free Wi-Fi everywhere—not good for a news junkie on vacation. I couldn't restrain myself and followed the unfolding story online.

News outlets began to report increased Covid shutdowns in many countries. I told my wife that I believed the Canadian government might soon shut down churches. That thought gave me stress because I knew that as a pastor, closing our church would bring significant stress-fueling uncertainty not only to me, but to the congregation as well. Closure would hinder our ability to serve the church and limit the congregation's ability to experience the growth and joy that comes when we gather to worship each week.

We enjoyed our vacation and after a week we flew back home to Canada into Pearson Airport in Toronto. Since the terminal for the airline didn't connect to the main one, the airline provided a bus that ferried us back to the major terminal that housed the luggage carousel.

However, something felt odd during this five-minute ride to the terminal. In hushed tones, people kept whispering the phrase "toilet paper." I soon found out why. I checked the news on my iPhone and learned that the Canadian government had announced a massive nationwide shut-down of everything except essential services. That announcement created a rush on toilet paper. Those quiet conversations? Toilet paper was MIA. Grocery stores' limited supplies dwindled. My thoughts about no toilet paper added another layer of stress.

After we gathered our luggage and loaded our car, we drove to the nearest grocery store. I walked/ran through the store to the paper goods aisle and hoped I didn't telegraph to other customers what I was doing. As I rounded the corner, there it sat at the end of the aisle: one last six-pack of toilet paper. Since I ran track in high school, I immediately put that skill to use. I sprinted down the aisle and snatched it from the shelf. Crisis averted. We had our toilet paper. I felt happy.

The next day, our city became a ghost town because the government had shut down everything except services deemed essential. Now I was forced to lead a church of one thousand through a tiny webcam in my home office. I felt afraid, very afraid. I told myself (or maybe I told God), "I didn't sign up for this." My last few years in ministry were ending, and I had planned a smooth retirement. I didn't expect a pandemic to get in the way. I realized my plans would soon change. Church income dropped dramatically. We slashed the budget and cut salaries. I wondered if we could survive as the church we once were.

More stress.

During those first months we shut down, an anxiety-filled hole grew

in my soul as I pondered our church's uncertain future. In one sense, those uncomfortable feelings were normal because the brain doesn't like uncertainty. When we experience uncertainty, the brain evokes the stress response, as it did in me. However, because I stayed in a stress state, I fell into a depression. After I consulted my doctor, he prescribed a depression medicine called an SSRI (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor, think Prozac). An SSRI drug helps regulate one of our feel-good neurotransmitters (brain chemicals) called serotonin. Over the next six months, the drug helped pull me out of my depression as I led our staff to minister virtually.

My stress began to abate.

About that time, after a regular blood test, my doctor noticed an increasing blood level in a marker that could indicate prostate cancer. After an appointment with a specialist and a later biopsy, the diagnosis confirmed my fears. I had cancer. Boom! Stress spiked again. Ironically, a few months prior, I had begun my PhD studies on stress resilience. I thought, "Maybe these experiences will bring a human touch to my research." However, I didn't plan to become a lab rat.

The surgery went well, and today I am cancer free.

A few months after my surgery, I scheduled our next annual vacation for the following February. This time, we took a cruise to the Caribbean. The ship we chose sparkled with newness. The scrumptious buffets tantalized our palates. (I love buffets.) And the white beaches we visited highlighted the blue Caribbean waters. We planned to relax and de-stress.

At one of the island stops, we splurged and bought an excursion to a well-known beach. It included transportation, lunch, and beach chairs with an umbrella to protect us from the sun. That morning, an intense workout in the ship's gym had overheated my body. Later, after the bus took us to the beach, we discovered that the other guests had taken all the umbrellas. That forced us to bake in our beach chairs with nothing to block the scorching sun.

About an hour into our stay, I felt lightheaded and could barely walk. I dragged my chair to a tiny shady spot beneath a palm tree. My heart felt like it was trying to jump out of my chest. I then remembered that my smartwatch could detect an irregular heartbeat. So I took several measurements. My heart rate was bouncing all over the place. I was experiencing what is called an A-fib episode, short for atrial fibrillation, an irregular heartbeat. I didn't know if that would lead to a heart attack. If I had a heart attack, the island's limited medical facilities wouldn't help much. I told my wife, and she quickly found the excursion guide. The guide then found a wheelchair and wheeled me back to the bus and then onto the ship, where the ship's doctor examined me. By then, my heart rate had dropped back to normal.

Over the next two months, cardiologists performed extensive tests. So far, all the tests show that my heart is in good shape. But that experience had placed another layer of stress on me. I often have wondered if another heart episode lay just around the corner. Besides that experience, another blood test revealed I had pre-diabetes.

So, over an eighteen-month period, I faced stress from multiple directions—my health, my pastoral leadership during the Covid lockdown, and my doctoral project. Before that stress trifecta hit, I had coped well with the normal day-to-day stresses most people face. Those circumstances, however, reminded me to prioritize stress resilience as I aged.

In retrospect, I now see God's hand at work through those difficulties. Those ordeals helped me approach my PhD research on stress resilience at a different level, not just as a sterile researcher removed from life, but as a fellow struggler.

What Is Stress?

None of us can insulate ourselves from stressful situations. We all deal with regular stress. You may care for a chronically ill family member, with

no end in sight. A health issue or pain may nag you. You may experience prejudice due to your skin color or accent. You may work in a stressful job with few prospects for a better one. Inflation may have placed your finances in a precarious position. A difficult marriage or relationship may weigh you down. A deep loss may have thrown you into an emotional hole. Political polarization may gnaw at you.

Stress is inevitable.

We often can do little about the circumstances that cause it. Yet a commitment to grow resilience gives us hope as we apply the proven stress-reduction skills explained in this book. Stress need not bury us or bleed us dry. We can learn from it. And with new skills and insight, we can grow through it.

As you read this book, it's crucial to lay a foundation for stress, because all new learning is based on prior learning.¹ As you understand some basic brain-based knowledge, the specific practices will make more sense, will stick better in your memory, and will help you use them effectively. So, in this chapter and the next two, you'll learn some brain basics, how to define and contrast stress and resilience, and what each does to the body and brain. You'll also understand what causes stress and what Scripture tells us about it. These insights will provide a strong objective foundation as you create your personal Stress Resilience Growth Plan and apply the nine practices.

A BIT OF HISTORY ABOUT STRESS RESEARCH

In the 1930s, Hungarian endocrinologist Hans Selye developed the modern theory of stress as a response. Whereas Selye highlighted the stress response, Western researchers focused on the stimulus, the issue that caused the stress response.² In the late 1960s and early 1970s, psychiatrists Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe developed a scale of forty-one stressful life events, called the Holmes-Rahe Stress Inventory. It included

major life stressors such as the “death of a spouse, divorce, incarceration, severe illness, and being fired.” It also “included positive events like getting married, vacations, and retirement.”³

One researcher found that stress created a dynamic relationship between people and their environment. How they appraised the situation influenced their coping skills. He found that ordinary life events might do more harm than major life events. He wrote, “The seemingly little things that irritate and upset people, such as one’s dog throwing up on the living room rug, delays in the commute to work, having too many responsibilities, being lonely, having an argument with one’s spouse, may get out of hand.”⁴ Their research found that not only do harsh life events (like my cancer) cause stress, but the small daily life stuff that accumulates over time (like your computer constantly crashing) does as well.

Finally, although we can’t avoid many stressful situations that life brings us, we can respond to them in ways that strengthen our walk with God and protect our physical, emotional, mental, and relational health. That’s what these practices can help you do.

THREE CAUTIONS

As we delve deeper into stress resilience and how to grow it, consider these three cautions.

First, avoid an unhealthy response to chronic stress called stress avoidance. When we try to avoid stress, it can generate even more stress. Health psychologist Kelly M. McGonigal, PhD, writes this about stress avoidance:

It’s the ironic consequence of trying to avoid stress: You end up creating more sources of stress while depleting the resources that should be supporting you. As the stress piles up, you become increasingly overwhelmed and isolated, and therefore even more likely to rely on avoidant coping strategies, like trying to steer clear of stressful situations or to escape your feelings with self-destructive distractions. The more firmly

committed you are to avoiding stress, the more likely you are to find yourself in this downward spiral.⁵

Second, don't expect a cure-all, a magic wand to zap away your stress and its effects. However, as you read *Stress Less*, plan to learn new skills and attitudes that can help you minimize your stress reactions and grow your resilience.

For example, when we regulate our emotions (Practice 2: Reveal How You Feel), we increase cognitive flexibility, the ability to keep options open in stressful situations. When we reappraise stressful situations in a more positive way (Practice 4: Audit Your Thoughts), we can calm our fear center and think more clearly. Sleep and exercise (Practice 9: Sleep Smart) can put us into a better mood to handle stress and help release the brain's fertilizer, called BDNF (brain derived neurotrophic factor). And optimism (Practice 6: Cultivate Certainty) and gratitude (Practice 7: Grow Gratitude) foster better relationships, which can lead to a safe relationship environment (Practice 8: Safeguard Safety), all significant skills that build resilience.⁶

Third, avoid using stress-resilience development just as a tool to help you feel better. If we approach resilience in a self-centered way, we'll become selfish, and growing our stress resilience will become all about us and our needs. Although we must take care of ourselves by managing stress, we also must serve others. That often requires sacrifice and stepping into stressful situations. However, research tells us that when we serve others and become more cognizant of their needs (called pro-social behavior), we actually feel better.

FOUNDATIONS FIRST

You might wonder why learning about the brain enhances stress resilience. Should you just skip those parts and go directly to the practices? You could, but if you did, you'd lose the positive benefits from a relatively

new field called neuroscience pain education (NPE). NPE proposes that as we understand how the brain processes pain, we not only can manage physical pain better, but we can also manage social and emotional pain better. Physical, social, and emotional pain all cause stress. Multiple studies on patients with chronic pain⁷ show that when they learned how the brain processed pain, outcomes improved and stress decreased.⁸

Researchers have also found that social and emotional pain engage the same brain circuits as physical pain. Learning about these brain processes can moderate the emotional and social pain associated with stress.⁹ So, when we learn about the brain and stress resilience, we grow our resilience.

One of the leading experts on resilience, Dr. Amit Sood, affirms this idea about brain education. He developed a stress reduction program at the Mayo Clinic called SMART, Stress Management and Resiliency Training.¹⁰ He designed this research-backed program around three key concepts: awareness, attention, and attitude. As we understand these concepts,¹¹ we can build resilience.

Building stress resilience does for our brains what physical exercise does for our hearts. When we don't train our hearts through exercise, our heart muscles fatigue more easily. In the same way, not training our brains (like learning how it works) may cause more mental fatigue and less of the cognitive reserve we need to manage stress. When we learn how our brains work, however, we build a more resilient one. As we learn more about our brains, stress, and resilience, we will gain a good foundation to apply resilience to stressful situations. Below, I give more detail about how the brain works when we experience stress.

THE TWO FLAVORS OF STRESS: ACUTE AND CHRONIC

We need not view stress as a big bad wolf, because not all stress is bad. God designed our bodies and brains to experience it. Researchers have

found an upside to some kinds of stress.¹² Healthy stress increases focus. It can help us become more social as we connect with others. It can enhance learning as we replay a stressful situation in our minds to make sense of it and learn from it so that we can better handle a similar situation in the future. Learning from stressful experiences is a resilience trait.

Neither should we view stress as poles of a single continuum from bad (threat/distress) to good (challenge/eustress). Rather, both challenge and threat can occur in a single event. For any given stressful experience, both a positive and a negative response can simultaneously occur. When we appraise an event negatively, we see it as a threat, a bad thing. When we appraise an event positively, called eustress, we can see it as a challenge, a good thing. “Eustress reflects the extent to which cognitive appraisal of a situation or event is seen to either benefit an individual or enhance his or her well-being.”¹³

For example, let’s say on your way to work you wreck your car. No one gets hurt, but you total your car. During the few seconds leading up to and during your accident, hormones and neurotransmitters flood your brain and body and you experience significant stress. Yet as time passes, the stress chemicals in your bloodstream and brain dissipate. As a result, you will think more clearly to reappraise the situation and to tell yourself something like this (if you are well-insured): “This is bad, but I needed a new car, anyway. This gives me a good excuse to get one.” So, although you initially felt threatened (you could have gotten hurt and your stress chemicals skyrocketed), you also felt challenged (it’s not all bad because you get to pick out a new car). We’ll learn more about the power of reappraisal later.

We experience acute stress, also called transient stress, when stressful conditions pass rather quickly. Educators Oakley, Rogowsky, and Sejnowski write, “Transient stress releases hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol in the brain. In moderate amounts, these molecules enhance the connections between neurons—almost like greasing a pan to prevent

fried potatoes from sticking to the bottom.”¹⁴

In fact, acute stress can improve our performance without harming our bodies or brains. It motivates us to action to get things done, meet deadlines, focus on a task, pay attention in class, and react quickly in a threatening situation (like slamming on your brakes to avoid a wreck). Although a life situation may instantly evoke the stress response, our stress levels will usually return to baseline after the event. God created us this way so that we could survive when threatened.

However, chronic stress is the big bad wolf. Chronic stress means stress caused by unremitting threatening conditions and events (real or imagined) when we are on high alert for long periods of time. It creates distress, which causes negative thoughts, memories, and emotions, as well as negative body and brain effects, to stick with us longer. It also lowers our tolerance to normal stress events that we usually could process well. “Too much stress, even if it’s just transient, changes the effects of the hormonal oil. Instead of greasing the connections, the excess stress causes neural connections to burn and stick, so nothing flows.”¹⁵

Scripture says much about stress and its effects. Each chapter that follows includes insight from Scripture about stress, its effects, and its solution. Below, I introduce what Scripture says about the subject.

What Does the Bible Say About Stress?

Humanity has experienced stress since the fall. Many key figures in the Bible experienced it, including Elijah, Jonah, Esther, David, Peter, Martha, Paul, and Jesus Himself. Even though the word itself does not appear in the Scriptures, similar words describe the idea. Words such as trials, tribulations, troubles, hardships, ordeals, difficulties, distress, persecution, affliction, suffering, adversity, pressure, disaster, and discipline mirror the idea behind stress.¹⁶ We must frame it within a biblical perspective to best deal with it.

The chapters that follow describe the nine practices and how to use them. You'll see how key figures in the Bible responded to stress. And as you learn about stress resilience, it's important to anchor your understanding in God's Word.

Unhealthy stress responses that engage the brain's emotional accelerator (the sympathetic nervous system, more on that later) were consequences of the fall. Perhaps God initially wired Adam and Eve's stress circuits to only respond to pleasurable experiences that evoked good stress (eustress).

We experience positive emotions from eustress, for example, when we feel challenged to complete a task at work and finish it well. Such a task may have challenged us, but responding to the challenge satisfied us because completing a task evokes the release of dopamine, one of the brain's "feel good" chemicals, into our brains.

Although Adam and Eve felt the challenge to care for the garden, they experienced no threat to their safety. So they didn't need any brain circuits to initiate the fight-or-flight response. Yet after the fall everything changed. The fall apparently rewired their brain circuits or brought to life existing survival circuits that lay dormant prior to the fall. As a result, sin in Adam's and Eve's hearts now evoked new stressful emotions—fear and guilt—and they hid from God.

Stressful difficulties and tests in life give us opportunities to rewire those damaged threat circuits we inherited from Adam and Eve. When we apply the practices, respond to stress in God-honoring ways, and yield to the Holy Spirit's direction in the moment, God will change our brain circuits to better match their original intended purpose prior to the fall.

Human flourishing, a meta-theme in the Bible, describes God's purpose for us. Jesus calls it the abundant life. Seminary professor and human flourishing expert Dr. Jonathan Pennington says that our goal in following Jesus is to glorify God and to experience human flourishing ourselves, but

also to promote it. Resilience not only evidences human flourishing but develops it as well. He writes,

Our theological reflections and their practical outworking must be to bring true human flourishing [and resilience] to individuals and society as a whole. This must be motivated, informed, and colored by the reality of God's coming kingdom, centered on Jesus the Son, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Without this anchoring, the pursuit of human flourishing is not biblical. But this spiritual understanding does not make it less physical and practical. . . . At its core and in its very essence, God's saving work, his redemptive activity, his goal for humanity and all creation is precisely this: that we flourish fully even as he himself flourishes perfectly, completely, and with overflowing abundance. We should cease thinking of spirituality and godliness as something that has nothing to do with human well-being and flourishing, including in a physical, economic, psychological, and relational sense.¹⁷

God wants us to experience the abundant life, human flourishing, and personal well-being, of which resilience composes a major part. Peter reflected this when he wrote, "His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (2 Peter 1:3). Peter (and Dr. Pennington) explain that stress resilience must be Christ-centric. And one way we release God's power in our lives is to wisely steward our bodies and brains by handling stress better. We handle stress better when we grow our resilience to it.

The Scriptures place a high value on our bodies, and by inference, our brains, since they are part of our bodies. The clearest arguments on body care come from the apostle Paul. He used the human body as a metaphor. He called the church the body of Christ (Eph. 1:22–23). He described spiritual gifts by using a body as a metaphor (1 Cor. 12). He told us to "offer your bodies as a living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1).

He even describes our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit. "Do you

not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit . . . ?” (1 Cor. 6:19). In verse 20, he commands us to “honor God with your bodies.” These words *honor*, *temple*, and *sacrifice* reinforce our responsibility to make wise choices to keep our bodies (and brains) healthy. These choices also include other habits like eating a good diet and regular exercise.

However, we must add to that healthy habit list this one: growing our stress resilience. God gave us a human body for life on earth (and we get a new one in heaven), and since our bodies matter to God, they should matter to us as well. As we learn to respond to chronic stress with resilience and lessen the negative effects from stress, we show we care for our bodies. When our bodies and brains work better because we have responded in healthy ways to stress, we can serve God more effectively, love others more consistently, and grow our faith most optimally.

Dr. Wayne Oates (1917–99), a psychologist and religious educator, coined the word “workaholic” and paved the way for the modern pastoral care movement. He wrote extensively on stress and burnout and emphasized that stress management requires us to examine our assumptions about faith, ourselves, and God. He is one of the few who developed a theology or biblical framework of stress. I summarize his ideas below.¹⁸

Oates wrote that certain concepts and words (tribulation, faith development, burden, testing, temptation) give a biblical interpretation of stress.

1. **Stress as it relates to the word *tribulation*.** Jesus and Paul both spoke about the tribulation and difficulty we will face in this world (see John 16:33; Rom. 5:3-4; James 1:2-4).
2. **Stress as it relates to faith development.** Oates writes we should view stress as developmental, and if we avoid it or ignore these teachable opportunities to grow our faith, they will accumulate into “distress.” He wrote, “Faith means having the courage to move through times of stress without shrinking back.”¹⁹

3. **Stress as it relates to the word *burden*.** Paul uses this word in Galatians 6:2 when he tells us, “Carry each other’s burdens.” Oates writes, “The word *responsibility* is a good synonym for both the biblical word *burden* and the contemporary word *stress*.”²⁰
4. **Stress as it relates to the words *testing* and *temptation*.** The word *peirasmos* means trial, test, or temptation. Satan can use stressful experiences to draw us into sin, whereas God allows them as opportunities to further develop our resilience. Oates writes that stress is the “forge in which our real theology is hammered out.”²¹

Ultimately, stress events fit within God’s eternal plan that weaves eternal meaning into our lives. Oates counsels us to “put personal stresses into the context of the sovereignty of God, the redemptive participation of Jesus Christ, and the Presence of God in Christ in the Holy Spirit.”²²

In the next chapter, we’ll continue to build the groundwork for stress resilience as we consider these topics: how the brain’s stress response works, how stress harms our bodies and brains, signs of burnout, and how stress management differs from resilience.

APPLICATION

1. In what ways do you resonate with my stress experiences?
2. How would you describe your current stress experience, acute or chronic? Why?
3. How could you honor God if you strengthen your resilience to stress?
4. What one commitment about developing stress resilience could you make to yourself and to the Lord?
5. Write it down and post it where you will see it for the next seven days.

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