



SAMPLE CHAPTER...Lesson 1

Stress - Friend Or Foe?

Stress And Our Bodies

In the world of physics, the word "stress" is used to describe two kinds of force -- one that brings external pressure upon an object and one which exerts internal pressure to balance the external pressure. The same word "stress" is also used to describe similar pressures in human beings. The external force comes from circumstances and people. The internal force is the emotional and physical response from our bodies. When faced with assaults to their security, our bodies have the ability to defend themselves with a protective biological response. This response is called stress and anything that threatens the body is called a stressor.

When a stressor threatens, our senses signal the alarm. We hear, smell, touch, taste, see (or perceive) something that alerts our pituitary glands. In a fraction of a second, they signal our bodies to manufacture adrenaline and other hormones. Here are some of the things that follow: our breathing, metabolism and heartbeat accelerate to raise our blood pressure and release sugars and fats into our bodies. Some systems (for example, the digestive system) slow down so that the increased blood and fuel will flow to needed areas for optimum performance. Nerve response quickens, crucial organs operate at peak efficiency and our blood clotting mechanism increases to protect us against laceration. We are in a state of stress alert and ready for fight or flight. The amount of stress we experience depends upon how great we perceive the demand being placed upon us to adapt and protect our well-being.

Conquering Stress

1. When your body is in a state of stress alert, what physical symptoms are you aware of?

Not All Stress Is Bad

Stressors are circumstances which require us to adapt or change. There are good stressors and bad stressors. The good stressors are the circumstances which challenge us to do our best. Our bodies are able to meet the challenge and we are left feeling exhilarated. Good stressors can also become bad stressors if the demand to adapt continues over a long period of time. For example, how many of us have become ill during or after a strenuous vacation?

Bad stressors are usually those circumstances which we perceive as threats to our security and happiness and our bodies are unable to adequately cope. For example, we may lose someone who means a great deal to us -- either through divorce, death or a broken relationship. The demand upon us to adapt or change in order to protect our security and happiness may be so great, or it may continue so long, that we will find ourselves facing an illness.

Sometimes stressors are harmful when they needn't be. We may be looking at our circumstances incorrectly. When we think something is a threat to our security or happiness and, in reality it is not, the stress response within our bodies will be excessive to the actual need. For example, we can be sitting in a room alone and feel loneliness, self-pity or fear. We feel threatened but the threat is of our own making. Our bodies go into a stress response; we are ready to defend ourselves, but we cannot fight or flee because the stressor is ourselves.

Stress - Friend or Foe? Lesson 1

Our bodies cannot use up the chemicals and increased blood pressure they have produced. What we experience is an excessive stress response. The mechanism given to protect and benefit us is now potentially harmful. Our anxiety about something that is not true or never happens requires our organs to operate unnecessarily at peak capacity. And, because it is due to an incorrect way of viewing life, it will occur frequently.

When we recognize a *legitimate* threat to our security or happiness, and the requirement to adapt or change does not continue too long, the response of our bodies to meet the challenge is appropriate to overcome the threat. We do not suffer from excessive stress. For example, when we see a car speeding toward us on a roadway, the accelerated functioning of our bodies can save our lives. When we are given a challenging assignment that puts our job on the line, our increased capacity can raise us to heights of performance we never thought possible. In cases such as these, stress helps us to survive and achieve. It is our friend.

If we could limit our stress responses to legitimate threats only, most of us would do well in life. The problem is that there are many events in our lives that we see incorrectly as threatening. When this happens, the stress response is usually excessive.

2. From your own experience, give examples of

a) positive stress _____

b) negative stress _____

How we see our circumstances depends upon our upbringing, our environment and our education. Some people have had the privilege of a stable family background. They have not suffered severe rejection or the loss of a loved one. They have had healthy experiences of love. They may also have had a good education and learned what offers true and lasting value.

People who have not had a good experience of love as children, or who have not learned healthy values, suffer from poor self-esteem and they do not know how to bring true meaning to their lives. These people are more easily threatened by life and are not as well equipped to see their circumstances correctly.

Stress is harmful to us when we do not perceive the threat correctly or do not know how to handle it. It is usually our *incorrect perceptions* or our *inability to cope* and not the stressor itself which causes us problems.

We are able to survive a single episode of stress with minimal effect. But if the episodes continue and become chronic, stress exhaustion sets in. Organs that have been operating at peak capacity for long periods of time become weak and vulnerable. Our immune systems begin to fail and we become vulnerable to disease. The delicate mechanism intended to be our friend has become our foe.

Question for private reflection:

What situations in your life recur so often they have become chronic stressors (such as troublesome relationships, financial difficulties or time deadlines)?

Stress Balance

Medical science teaches that our bodies try to maintain a proper chemical balance. They need a proper stress balance as well. We can suffer from inadequate stress as well as excessive stress.

Inadequate Stress

Some people do not have enough interest or variety in their lives. Either through choice or circumstance, they are not being adequately challenged and they feel their lives are not meaningful. They become just as vulnerable to the breakdown of their immune systems as those who are experiencing excessive stress. The signs of inadequate stress are boredom, lethargy or depression. It is difficult for these people to put one foot in front of the other just to get through the day. Because of their growing immobility, they allow negative things to happen: an important relationship deteriorates, a bad habit grows, they fail to express their needs, or they do not defend themselves when they should.

Excessive Stress

The amount of stress we can handle depends upon the strength and stability of our bodies. If we have inherited a strong body and are healthy emotionally and spiritually, we can handle an amazing amount of stress. But at any time, we can become vulnerable. The expectations we have of ourselves may cause us to work too hard. Or circumstances beyond our control may worry us and we neglect our relationships and our health.

Question for private reflection:

Do you think the amount of stress you are experiencing is inadequate, excessive or reasonable?

Signs Of Excessive Stress

A feeling of tension is the first signal that our body is entering a state of stress alert. The dictionary describes tension as "the act of stretching or the condition of being stretched". We need a certain amount of "stretching" in order to be stimulated or challenged to our highest and best. We see our desire for this "stretching" in our enjoyment of sports, adventure and drama. Tension can also warn us that things are not right -- that something is threatening us. It may also be a signal that we are perceiving something as a threat when, in reality, it is not.

After our bodies have signaled their stress alert (tension), we will experience one or more of the following: sweaty palms, dry mouth, flushing, 'butterflies', muscular tightness, irregular heartbeat, low energy, confusion, anxiety, forgetfulness, irritability or difficulty in breathing, eating or sleeping. Our bodies, minds and consciences are all trying to tell us there is something wrong.

We are able to respond to most challenges with a reasonable stress response. However, when we see them as threatening, we will feel a lack of control and experience one of the above symptoms in an alarming or excessive way. It is likely we will try to regain control by reacting in whatever way we have learned. Most of us are either:

aggressive: hostile, condemning, pushy, competitive, dictatorial, argumentative

- or -

passive: worried, hurt, martyred, teary, petulant, silent, resentful

Most of us excuse ourselves for handling threatening situations in these incorrect ways. When we are aggressive, we tell ourselves we are simply standing up for ourselves and we have to be tough to survive. But our toughness may keep us from being open to reason and to love. If we are passive, we may think that keeping silent and swallowing our hurt is the honorable thing to do. We don't realize our 'honorable' approach might be simply another form of anger and may later surface as resentment. Keeping silent is not always fair to ourselves or others.

Question for private reflection:

When you feel threatened, what incorrect methods do you usually use in an attempt to regain control?

Stressors Common To Most Of Us

We are in a rapidly changing technological and nuclear age. We often find ourselves having to make decisions without any experience or counsel from the older generation. In addition, the emphasis of our society upon materialism, success and self-reliance has placed increased pressures upon us. What may be a threat or a challenge to one person, however, may not be to another. The following are some stressors that are common to most of us:

Circumstantial - finances, job responsibilities, unemployment, new assignments, relocation, decision making, job boredom, time deadlines, retirement, illness, the fear of becoming a victim of crime, terrorism, war, chemical toxins or radiation.

Relational - marriage, rejection, separation, divorce, death of a loved one, single parenting, betrayal, loneliness, unforgiveness, bitterness, difficulties with children or fellow workers, trying to maintain healthy relationships, our changing roles as men and women.

Environmental - excessive noise, overcrowding, air pollution, weather conditions, exposure to sudden heat or cold.

Physiological - dramatic weight gain or loss, the process of aging, allergies to certain foods, too much or too little exercise, poor nutritional choices, exposure to harmful chemicals.

Spiritual - meaninglessness, clarifying our true beliefs, temptation, disobedience, rebelling against God, guilt, fear of God's punishment, difficulties in perceiving God's will and maintaining Godly priorities.

Questions for private reflection:

What things in your life are your greatest stressors? Which ones can you change? Which ones can you not change? What is your attitude toward the things you cannot change?

The Bible And Stress

Even in biblical times, there was an awareness that people do not always approach the stressors of life realistically.

3. What advice do we receive from the following psalm concerning stressful circumstances?

Psalm 37:7-8 _____

Personal Application _____

Question for private reflection:

*Is it hard for you to "be still before the Lord
and wait patiently for Him"? (Psalm 37:7)
If so, why?*

4. The response of the psalmists to their circumstances was not always good. How did they respond in the following passages?

Psalm 55:2-8 _____

Psalm 42:5 _____

Question for private reflection:

There were times when David wanted to escape his problems (Psalm 55:6). When you look for escape, what do you think is the reason? Why do you think this is not a good answer to your problem?

Question for private reflection:

When your circumstances depress you, what do you think is usually the cause? What was the psalmist's answer? (Psalm 42:5)

5. What observations regarding life are contained in the following proverbs? What promises does God make in these passages?

Proverbs 3:1-2 _____

Proverbs 3:5-8 _____

Proverbs 3:25-26 _____

Proverbs 29:25 _____

How does fear trap us? _____

6. What advice did Jesus give about the things that trouble us?

Matthew 6:25-34 _____

Avoiding Problems Leads To Further Stress

If we try to avoid our problems, or we do not pay attention to the first signs of excessive stress, our feelings of being out of control deepen. Some of us try to repress our anxiety by substituting another activity. We begin to do one or more of the following in an excessive way: eat, drink, sleep, play, spend or work. We may also find ourselves lying, gossiping, smoking, gambling, using drugs or abusing our loved ones.

All of these are attempts to regain the feeling of being in control. But if we continue, the substitute we have chosen will become as painful as the problem we tried to avoid. We may think our compulsive behavior is helping us gain control, but it is only a poor attempt to escape from reality. Our behavior may surprise and disappoint us, but we find we cannot change. Our lives are more out of control than ever. We are saying, "I don't have a problem. I can control my life." If it is not checked, compulsive behavior can lead to addiction and/or disease.

Question for private reflection:

Are you trying to avoid any problems by doing something excessively? Why do you think you are trying to escape in this way?

Excessive Stress And Disease

Scientific evidence is mounting to show that excessive stress is the underlying cause of much, if not most, disease. The American Cancer Research Institute estimates 50% of disease is caused by unhealthy lifestyle or behavior.^{1[1]} Other experts say harmful stress causes 70% or more of physical illness.

The following are some of the minor illnesses which could be identified as stress related: recurring digestive problems, frequent mood swings, headaches, hemorrhoids, psoriasis or other chronic skin rashes, recurring soar throats or cough, muscle and joint pains, susceptibility to bacterial or viral infections, chronic stomach pain, allergies, elevated blood pressure, pain or tightness in the chest.

Minor ailments are signals that something has been going on in us for a long time. Our immune systems are weakening and we are headed for further trouble.

Question for private reflection:

*Are you experiencing any of these illnesses
and is there a possible connection with a
particular stres-sor in your life?*

^{1[1]} Center for Disease Control

Managing Excessive Stress

Harmful stress affects us physically, emotionally and spiritually. We are a trilogy of body (our physical structure), soul (our person or personality - thinking, feeling and willing) and spirit (that part of us which is capable of fellowship with God). We cannot be affected physically without also being affected emotionally and spiritually and vice versa.

We can deal with the symptoms of excessive stress in these practical ways:

- **Time management** Re-arranging priorities and schedules help us to regain control and bring order to our lives.
- **Exercise** Regular time out for exercise can relieve frustration, boredom and hostility. It also reduces cholesterol levels by as much as 22% and diminishes the number of hours that stress hormones remain in our bodies from 40 hours down to 8 hours.
- **Diet** Eliminating foods to which we are sensitive or allergic, maintaining optimum weight, and eating a balanced diet, all help to strengthen us.
- **Assertiveness training** Learning to improve our communication skills is essential for successful conflict resolution and for building healthy relationships.
- **Relaxation and Christian meditation** Learning to relax and reflecting on our faith help our bodies reduce or avoid excessive stress.

7. What disciplines are currently helping you cope with symptoms of excessive stress?

: Questions for private reflection:

What disciplines do you feel you need to begin to work on? What will you do about it?

The disciplines outlined in this section, when earnestly incorporated into our lifestyles, can help us physically and emotionally to deal with the *symptoms* of stress and, to some degree, help us to avoid stress. The purpose of this study is to consider the biblical answers to the problem of excessive stress and learn to conquer it. We will begin by dealing with the *causes* of stress in the following lesson.

Personal Reflections

The first time I remember experiencing excessive stress, I was in my early twenties. I was working hard to receive my license in the investment banking business and I was going through a divorce after only four years of marriage. I didn't know it at the time, but I had my priorities all upside down. It was more important for me to get ahead in business than to work on my failing marriage. With symptoms of an ulcer, my body tried to signal me that something was wrong.

I had been taught as a child that it was important for me to succeed. I also learned that if you were married you would be secure. I was anxious about my career and facing the failure of my marriage. I was afraid of losing my financial and emotional security. When my divorce became final, I continued my career without taking a look at my fears.

A certain amount of external pressure is good for me. It makes me stronger. It helps me to perform at my best and it encourages me to grow and mature. However, there is a point where the pressures in life become too much for me. This excessive stress takes me to a breaking point where I become vulnerable to emotional or physical breakdown.

It is like measuring the capacity of metals to withstand pressure or stress. A yield point and a failure point are determined. The yield point is the point where the external pressures make the metal stronger. The failure point is where the external pressure is too great and the metal fails or collapses.

The next time I recall suffering from excessive stress was many years later when my husband (I had married again) was killed in an auto accident due to his alcoholism. I had financial problems because the lawsuit against me connected with the accident had not been resolved. I had been working too hard trying to meet writing deadlines. My daughter was ill with mononucleosis and bronchitis and my step-father was suffering from terminal cancer. While he was undergoing treatment, my mother came to live with us. I, too, became ill with mononucleosis and bronchitis and was in bed for nearly three months. I had a lot of time to think and pray. I asked God to tell me what it was I needed to learn. Why was I susceptible to disease? I believe that still, small voice inside of me said, "Marilyn, you are living with too much stress."

There were things in my life I could not change, but there were some things I *could* change. I sought God's wisdom because my human understanding had not helped me much in the past. I began to feel that He wanted me to look at what I was counting on for security and happiness. I was counting too much on work and financial security and it was causing me unnecessary stress. I was also worried about my children and my parents. I thought I was depending upon God in these areas, but I felt He was asking me to take a second look.

I went to a clinic for preventive medicine because I realized God also wanted me to learn how to respect my body and help it deal with stress. I learned I was allergic to several things and I was over-stimulating my body with sugar, caffeine and chocolate. I wasn't exercising enough or managing my time properly and my immune system was wearing down.

I began to eat properly and to exercise. The clinic taught me to be a detective about myself, to be alert to symptoms that show me my immune system is weakening. When I identify these symptoms, I ask myself, "What did I just eat?" or "What have I been doing?" "Was it simply an allergic response to a food or an air pollutant? Or was I reacting to something that was threatening my security or happiness?" It may not have been a threat at all, but I may have perceived it as a threat.

The way I view life affects me every day. For example, if I am generally anxious or negative in my thinking, my body will be called upon continuously to help me cope with all of the things I think are threatening me. Tests show that hormones produced by stress stay in the body for 40 to 48 hours. If I am habitually anxious, these hormones will constantly be trying to help my body operate at peak capacity. My internal protective mechanism will finally weaken and fail.

We have the responsibility to do everything we can to help ourselves physically, emotionally and spiritually. But it takes disciplined effort and it is difficult to maintain all the things we are to do. Where are we going to get the motivation to do these things?

A spiritual awakening is what we need more than anything else. By ourselves, we are not able to radically change our fears and the focus of our lives. But as our faith in God grows, He gives us understanding into ourselves and helps us to change. He gives us the love and wisdom we need to meet the stressors of life and emerge victorious.

Some good questions to ask ourselves occasionally are these, "Am I happy with the amount of stress in my life? What is it that upsets me most frequently? Is my immune system as strong as it could be? Am I happy with my lifestyle? Am I experiencing symptoms from illness or from a compulsive habit?" An illness or a bad habit can be a kind friend if we will listen to its message.

God is faithful and, if we ask for His wisdom, He will begin to give us insight into ourselves and the causes of harmful stress.