

STRESS

KEYS TO MANAGING IT

“I felt like a mouse running on a treadmill and getting nowhere. I often worked 16-hour days with rarely a weekend off. I felt angry because I only ever saw my little girl asleep. Stress was making me sick.”—Kari, Finland.

KARI'S experience is not unusual. According to a mental-health charity in the United Kingdom, 1 in 5 British workers said that stress had made them physically ill during their career, and unmanageable pressure had caused 1 in 4 to cry while at work. Prescriptions for antidepressants saw an unprecedented rise during one recent year of economic recession.

What has caused you stress?

- Insecurity—financial or otherwise
- A demanding routine
- Interpersonal conflicts
- A traumatic experience

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How has stress affected you?

- Health disorders
- Emotional exhaustion
- Sleep problems
- Depression
- Deteriorating relationships



“The Best Start” to Relieving Stress

“Making certain lifestyle changes is the best start” to relieving stress, says the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in the United States. “Start with eating a well-balanced, healthy diet as well as getting enough sleep and exercise. Also, limit caffeine and alcohol intake and don’t use nicotine, cocaine, or other street drugs.” The NIH also suggests taking breaks from work, spending time with family or friends, learning to make things with your hands, or learning to play a musical instrument.



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Stress activates an amazing system in your body—your emergency response system. Hormones are released to increase your breathing, heart rate, and blood pressure. In addition, reserves of blood cells and glucose flood into your bloodstream. This cascade of reactions prepares you to deal with the stressor, the stimulus causing the stress. After the stressor has passed, your body may return to normal. But when a stressor remains, it can leave you chronically anxious or tense, like a motor that stays revved up. So learning how to deal with stress is important to both your physical and your mental well-being.

Managing Stress

Stress in itself is not necessarily harmful. The American Psychological Association has noted: “Stress is to the human condition what tension is to the violin string: too little and the music is dull and raspy; too much and the music is shrill or

the string snaps. Stress can be the kiss of death or the spice of life. The issue, really, is how to manage it.”

Adding another dimension, people vary in temperament and general health. So what stresses one person may not stress another. That said, you are likely over-stressed if your regular routine makes you so tense that you cannot relax or deal with the occasional emergency.

To help them “cope” with chronic stress, some people turn to alcohol, drugs, or tobacco. Others begin abnormal eating patterns or sit passively in front of a TV or computer—habits that do not address the underlying problem but may, in fact, exacerbate it. How, then, can we learn to manage stress effectively?

Many people have been able to manage life’s stresses by applying the practical advice found in the Bible. Could its tried-and-tested wisdom help you? Consider that question in the light of four common causes of stress.



1 INSECURITY

Not one of us has total security. As the Bible states, “time and unexpected events overtake [us] all.” (Ecclesiastes 9:11) How can you cope with feelings of insecurity? Try these suggestions.

- Confide in a trusted family member or friend. Studies show that the support of loved ones *consistently* confers protection against stress-related disorders. Yes, “a true friend shows love at all times, and is a brother who is born for times of distress.”—Proverbs 17:17.
- Do not continually focus on worst-case scenarios. Such thinking does little more than drain emotional reserves. And what you fear may not happen! For good reason, the Bible says: “Never be anxious about the next day, for the next day will have its own anxieties.”—Matthew 6:34.
- Tap into the power of prayer. “Throw all your anxiety on [God], because he cares for you,” says 1 Peter 5:7. God shows his care by giving us inner peace and by assuring us that he “will never abandon” those who sincerely turn to him for comfort and support in times of need.—Hebrews 13:5; Philippians 4:6, 7.

2 DEMANDING ROUTINE

A relentless routine of commuting, working, studying, or caring for children or elderly parents can keep stress levels high. Moreover, stopping some of these activities may be out of the question. (1 Timothy 5:8) What, then, can you do to cope?

- Try to give yourself some downtime, and get adequate rest. The Bible says: “Better is a handful of rest than two handfuls of hard work and chasing after the wind.”—Ecclesiastes 4:6.
- Set sound priorities, and adopt a modest lifestyle. (Philippians 1:10) Consider simplifying your life, perhaps by reducing expenses or time spent at work.—Luke 21:34, 35.

Kari, mentioned earlier, took a fresh look at his life. “I realized that I was pursuing a selfish lifestyle,” he wrote. He sold his business and took on work that gave him more time at home. “Our standard of living has dropped a little,” he admits, “but my wife and I are now free of constant stress, and we have more time to spend with family and friends. I would not trade the inner peace I now have for any business opportunity.”





3 INTERPERSONAL CONFLICTS

Conflicts with others, especially in the workplace, can be very stressful. If you experience such difficulties, you have a number of options that might help.

- When someone upsets you, try to stay calm. Do not add fuel to the fire. “A mild answer turns away rage, but a harsh word stirs up anger,” says Proverbs 15:1.
- Try to settle differences privately and respectfully, thus dignifying the other person.—Matthew 5:23-25.
- Try to gain insight into his or her feelings and viewpoint. Such insight “slows down [our] anger” because it puts us in the other person’s shoes. (Proverbs 19:11) It can also help us to see ourselves through the other person’s eyes.
- Try to forgive. Forgiveness is not only beautiful. It is also good medicine. As reported in a 2001 study, “unforgiving thoughts” resulted in “significantly higher” blood pressure and heart rate, whereas a forgiving attitude reduced stress.—Colossians 3:13.

“Better is a handful of rest than two handfuls of hard work”



4 TRAUMATIC EVENTS

Nieng, who lives in Cambodia, suffered a string of tragedies. In 1974, she was injured when a bomb exploded at an airport. The following year, her two children, her mother, and her husband all died. In the year 2000, her home and other belongings were destroyed by fire, and three years later, her second husband died. At that point, she wanted to end her life.

Yet, Nieng found a way to cope. Like Kari, she examined the Bible and benefited so much from what she learned that she, in turn, devoted time to helping others enjoy the same benefits. Her story calls to mind a 2008 study by British researchers. One way to develop “resilience in the face of stress,” they found, was to “give in some way . . . to others”—advice that has long been espoused in the Bible.—Acts 20:35.

Additionally, Nieng gained a sure hope for a better future, one in which all the problems that plague mankind will be gone. Instead, “peace will abound” earth wide.—Psalm 72:7, 8.

A genuine hope and the wisdom to cope with life’s many stresses are both priceless, and both can be found in the pages of the Bible. Millions have already benefited from this remarkable and unique book. You can too. ■