

STUDY THREE: STRESS AND BURNOUT

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A. DEFINITIONS

A.1 Definitions of 'stress' –

'probably the most common of all problems facing western society' – Dr J Clarke *Advanced Professional Counselling*

'demand upon physical or mental energy' – *Concise Oxford Dictionary*

'The term "stress" refers to any reaction to a physical, mental, social, or emotional stimulus that requires a response or alteration to the way we perform, think, or feel.' *Prescription for Nutritional Healing* P and J Balch.

Not all stress is bad stress. Some people have coined the term 'eu-stress', meaning 'good' stress. This good stress is the stress that stimulates us to action, to achievement, to decision. Without any stress at all we would not be motivated to grasp hold of life and live it to the full.

But even good stress, if there is too much of it, can take us beyond our tolerance point, beyond our ability to cope, and become bad stress. And this is where what we learned about balance becomes important. It is also where our trust in God and our knowledge of his grace must govern us.

It is in the context of good stress that people involved in the work of the kingdom of God have to be most careful. If a Christian worker is pushing themselves to their limit in their ministry, and they are coping quite okay with that, it only needs one of the 'bad' stressors listed in B below, to push them beyond their limit.

A.2 Definitions of 'burnout'

'Burnout, the super-achiever sickness'

'... people, as well as buildings, sometimes burn out. Under the strain of living in our complex world, their inner resources are consumed as if by fire, leaving a great emptiness inside ... Their lives seem to have lost meaning; ... they are disillusioned ... they are tired, filled with frustration ...'

[*Burn-out* Dr Herbert J Freudenberger]

B. SOURCES OF [BAD] STRESS [= 'STRESSORS']

Death of a spouse or other close family member	Serious trouble or increased responsibility at work
Divorce or separation	Changing job
Death of a close friend	Child/children leaving home
Job loss or financial problems	Sexual difficulties
Serious accident/injury	Changing residence
Serious ill health/major surgery	Changing social group
Retirement	Allergies [food or environmental]
New marriage	[Sources: Clarke and Balch]

From the above list we can identify *significant life changes* as a significant cause of stress. Other significant stressors are *physical* – injury, serious illness, major surgery and allergies. In the case of the life changes the degree of stress we experience has a lot to do with our personal attitudes to the change; in the case of physical stressors there is objective physical weakness or incapacity that has its own inbuilt stress, irrespective of our subjective attitudes to the physical problem. [Note that *allergies* can affect our attitudes and emotions as well as our bodies.]

A further area contributing to stress is the area of *roles and relationships*. If we are unsure of our roles or insecure in our relationships, or if there is tension or conflict in our roles and relationships, we can become subject to stress. [Note: In future lessons we will be looking at understanding ourselves and relationship principles. These lessons will contribute to our

understanding of how to minimize stress from role and relationship areas.]

C. SYMPTOMS OF CHRONIC STRESS

[The lists in the table below are adapted from Clarke, page 166]

Physical symptoms	Emotional symptoms	Psychological symptoms
Change in appetite	Undue anxiety	Confused thinking
Poor digestion	Undue fear	Poor decisions
Nausea	Undue concerns	Poor attention
Dizziness	Low self-esteem	Disorientation
Sweating	Mood swings	Slowed thinking
Chills	Sudden anger	Reduced scrutiny
Changed sleep patterns	Feeling alone	Memory lapses
Excessive dreams	Feeling lost	Forgetfulness
Rapid breathing	Feeling guilty	Abnormal 'after the event' thoughts
Racing heart	Wanting to hide	Undue daydreaming
Headaches	Easily startled	
Aching muscles	Easily upset	

Clarke also points out [p167] that there are **significant health risks** associated with stress:

- High blood pressure
- Angina
- Atherosclerosis
- Thrombosis
- Coronary heart disease
- Migraine
- Back problems
- Ulcer
- Asthma
- Allergies

D. MANAGING STRESS

D.1 Manage external stressors

There are some external factors over which we have no control. We cannot change them, but we can choose how we respond to them. As a Christian we should respond to these unpleasant realities in a way that honours God and that expresses Biblical confidence and trust in God and in his Word that assures us that in all things he is at work for the good of those who love him. This does not mean that we won't grieve when a loved one dies, or that there will be no difficult adjustments to make if we lose our job; but it does mean that we will not face the stressor alone in our own strength. We will call on the Lord, who is our Strength, our Rock, and we will seek comfort and encouragement from both his Word and his people.

Complete Section #1 Study Three Worksheet now.

There are other external stressors over which we do have some control, and that we can choose to change or to eliminate. At this point all that we have studied in this *Setting Biblical Foundations* and *Managing Yourself* comes into play. We need to proactively assess whether the stressor is necessary in our lives when lined up with our principles, priorities, mission and goals, or whether the time we give to the stressor is out of balance [– which quadrant is it in?], and eliminate it or reduce the time spent on it. For instance, if our credit card is causing stress, then we can choose to get rid of our credit card. If we are stressed by too many in-coming calls, set boundaries about when you receive work-related calls at home.

D.2 Manage yourself

How are we personally responding to the stressors in our life? What emotions are we allowing to dominate our response? What attitudes are we embracing? Are we allowing the stressors to dictate our emotions and attitudes, or are we subjecting our

emotions and attitudes to the Word of God? [The following study on Managing Depression, and the study series *Knowing Yourself* are relevant here. Also the study on Expectations and Perceptions in *Managing Your Relationships*.]

- Are we responding with hate when the Word commands us to respond with love?
- Do we bear grudges when the Word commands us to respond with forgiveness?
- Do we respond with anger when the Word commands us to respond with kindness?
- Are we hard-hearted when the Word commands us to be tender-hearted?
- Are we anxious when the Word commands us to be trusting?
- Are we self-justifying when the Word commands us to be humble?
- Do we seek escape by lying when the Word commands honesty?

Complete Section #2 Self-management instructions in the Study Three Worksheet now.

D.3 Manage life-style

Here again what we have learned in previous studies is important, particularly the study on balance. The *Knowing Yourself* studies are important here also. For example, if you are a person who needs time out from people but work in a highly-peopled job, you need to factor 'time alone' into your regular schedule. Conversely, if you are a person who needs people, but work in a solitary kind of job, you need to factor 'people time' into your schedule.

But managing your life style is broader than that. It includes managing your spending, managing your family time, factoring in enough sleep, relaxation, exercise and nutrition for you to keep performing at the required level. It also means giving due attention to your relationships.

D.4 Manage relationships

Relationships can be stressors. They can also be a means of de-stressing. Ideally, if we were all obeying God's Word 100% there would be no stress in relationships. To manage your relationships take on board what you learn in other lessons in this subject.

Recognize that some relationships are more important than others.

Complete Section #3 Manage your Relationships in the Study Three Worksheet now.

E. FACTORS LEADING TO OVERLOAD/BURNOUT AND HOW TO AVOID BURNOUT BY FACTORING SOME MARGIN INTO YOUR LIFE

[This section has been adapted from a paper by Gary Williams, of Christian Management Australia, drawing on the writings of Dr. Richard Swenson.]

Overload and burnout happen when there is no 'margin' in a person's life. *Margin = power minus load*. If your total load [personal expectations, emotional disabilities, work, relational problems, responsibilities, financial obligations, community involvement] is greater than your power [skills, time, emotional strength, physical strength, spiritual vitality, finances, social support, education] you will suffer overload or burnout. Margin is basically 'space' – not just time space, but emotional space and strength space. It is leaving multi-dimensional space in your life to enable you to deal with the unexpected.

E.1 Accessibility overload

This overload is about always being available, if not in person then via technology. It is about a life with no private time. It is about never being sure that you are not going to be interrupted. This overload is not just about always having people knocking on your door, but about all the different ways that people can track you down – your home phone, your mobile, your email, your voice mail, your answering machine, your fax, your call waiting, your pager.

We need to recognize here that some people need more time alone than others. If you are one of those you should factor that recognized need into your schedule, and realize that if you are feeling stropky or overwhelmed by everything, it could simply be that you have not had enough time to yourself lately.

Complete Section #4A in the Study Three Worksheet now.

E. 2 Information and education overload

There is always more to read and to learn. Workers are encouraged to keep upgrading their skills and to keep their qualifications current. Businessmen simply cannot keep up with all the information that is available to them and essential for their economic survival. Professional people need to keep investigating and researching or face career failure.

In the field of the study of the scripture we have at least the fact that God's truth is absolute and unchanging. We don't need to read multiple books on biblical topics, so long as the books we read are written by authors whose theological integrity has been proven over the years. But even in this field writers come up with fresh insights into the scripture, or write books relating the Bible to current issues and mindsets. There is still need to read and to learn.

The internet has put information at our fingertips, yet this blessing is also a curse. There is simply too much there to read and to assimilate. Even for one verse of the Bible an internet search can call up as many as 2 million references. In addition, in the Christian context there seems to be a never ending number of journals, newsletters, mission magazines, requests for funds, and so on, on top of the unsolicited junk mail that clogs our letter boxes.

Complete Section #4B in the Study Three Worksheet now.

E. 3 Media overload

This has some relation to information overload, but is different in that this is not information we need to have for our work or our education, but media presentations [TV, radio, CDs, DVDs, videos, music, books] that we choose for entertainment, etc.

Images we see and hear remain imprinted in our brains, impacting and shaping our values, our perceptions of life, and our expectations about life. Unfortunately, because most of the media input that comes our way is created by godless people, the values it expresses are also ungodly, and work contrary to our biblical values and perceptions of life.

The impact of the media on our lives can be that:

- We become accustomed to seeing violence and killing
- We become accustomed to hearing profanity
- We become accustomed to deviant sexual behaviour [that is, sexual relations prohibited by the Bible].
- We feel lost without music or TV – we don't like silence
- We use media as an escape

Complete Section #4C in the Study Three Worksheet now.

E. 4 Activity and commitment overload

This relates to the studies on time management, balance and expectations.

If we are suffering activity and/or commitment overload –

- We will not have time for happy anticipation of activities beforehand
- We will not have time for happy or constructive reflection on activities afterwards
- We will not have time to spend with our family, our friends, or by ourselves

For Christians this overload of activity and commitment often is focused in church ministries, and is often the result of living on the basis of the expectations of others, or of our perceptions of the expectations of others.

To restore margin in this area of your life, here are some suggestions:

- Ask the Lord for wisdom in planning your involvement
- Be free to say 'no' when people ask you to get involved or to help them
- Cross out items in your list of activities that you can reasonably cancel
- Plan empty spaces in your diary or calendar
- If you have too many nights out on committees, boards, etc, decide which ones you can reasonably resign from.
- Plan to spend X nights each week at home with your family as a general rule
- Plan to eat meals with your family
- Schedule a rest day every week
- Schedule a weekend or day away every so often
- Schedule your annual holidays

Complete Section #4D in the Study Three Worksheet now.

E.5 Hurry overload

We live in a generation accustomed to 'instant' everything. We seem to have lost the ability to embrace patience and anything slow-paced. Meals are consumed at a rush. We chafe at standing in queues. Stop signs, traffic lights and speed limits frustrate us. Road rage threatens to overtake us. We simply cannot wait for anything.

Complete Section #4E in the Study Three Worksheet now.

E.6 Emotions

Emotional strength and reserves are easily depleted by overload in the previous five areas. If your emotional reserves are depleted you will probably feel that you cannot possibly implement any of the changes needed in those other areas.

Frequently emotional depletion is caused by the attitudes of others. Think about Job: he was already overloaded by the stresses of the disasters that came upon him. He was suffering financially and physically; he had lost servants and family. He was also suffering spiritually because he did not know what God was doing or why God was doing it; his whole theological perspective had been shattered. Then his wife came; rather than offering comfort and encouragement she suggested he should curse God and die. After that his three friends came and just sat and stared at him for a week; then they broke out with harsh accusations, blaming Job for harbouring some great hidden sin which must surely be the reason for his suffering. They totally reversed their prior opinion of him and pummeled him with criticism and accusations.

Some people help us and build us up. Far more actually drain our emotional reserves, either in the manner of Job's wife and friends, or because they are so incomplete in themselves that they are constantly demanding our help and our encouragement. An overload of such people can leave you feeling totally washed out emotionally. You get to the point where it would take only one more thing, one more demand on you, for you to either crumble or explode.

In this context some people talk about our 'emotional bank account'. The various circumstances and people in our lives, and we ourselves, are either building our emotional strength or depleting our emotional reserves. At the bottom line our emotional bank account should draw its strength from God and his Word.

Complete Section #4F in the Study Three Worksheet now.

CONCLUSION:

Avoiding stress and burnout rests largely in the choices you make. While others might make demands of you, or expect a certain level of performance or commitment from you, how you respond to those demands and expectations is *your* choice. Your confidence in your position in Christ should give you the freedom to make the decisions you know you must to keep yourself in the best possible state physically, spiritually and emotionally, so that you can serve the Lord most effectively and continually.

Take your example from Jesus. Jesus, knowing all he knew about people and their eternal destiny, and loving people as he did, gives no evidence of his life being a mad, over-committed rush. He spent his first thirty years incognito and as far as we know, uninvolved in ministry. His ministry period was only three years. Yet his life in those three years shows evidence of both balance and margin – he had time and energy for the unexpected, yet he took time out when he needed it. He had time for his close friends, and he had time for the multitudes. He worked steadily and with commitment towards the final goal, and would not let anything, or anyone's expectations, turn him aside from that goal.

Discuss the issue of stress, burnout and margin with your Mentor.

If necessary plan some personal strategies for reducing the stress in your life.