



Foundation Stone #3: Stress Management September 2005

Stress Management 101: Know the Difference between *Stress* and *Distress*

There isn't a place on earth you can go where you won't find elements of stress. Regardless of your occupation, age, economic status or geographic location, it's a central part of the human experience. Most consider stress a bad thing. This is due to an unfortunate misunderstanding about the very nature of stress itself. Stress isn't the real problem; rather, it's the *mismanagement* of stress that creates havoc for so many American ministers.

During times of crisis, God created the body to respond with a thing called stress – a *biological* response to environmental pressures. Your body responds with changes such as increased heart-rate, dilated pupils and increased blood pressure, all designed to assist you with increased productivity and greater accomplishment. Your body also steps up its production of adrenaline, the hormone responsible for your ability to react quickly and efficiently to the pressures of your environment. In extreme cases, adrenaline even enables people to survive – often called the “fight or flight” mechanism.

God knew we would need such a mechanism to handle life after the Fall. From a young boy running to catch the school bus to a firefighter rescuing a woman from the Twin Towers, stress is the trigger that propels us toward the attainment of goals. The fact that your body reacts with stress is actually a blessing. You would aspire very little in life without it. When it is harnessed and managed properly, it's the very energy that allows you to focus on accomplishing great things consistent with your Calling (Foundation Stone #2).

But too *little* stress is just as big a problem as too *much* stress. Some amount of stress is necessary to motivate you toward productivity. Too little stress and you'll lack motivation to accomplish your Calling; too much stress and you'll experience a sense of chaos and feel overwhelmed, leading to decreased effectiveness – unless you develop good stress management skills. **Therefore, the problem isn't the presence of stress; rather, it's the lack of skills to manage stress that ultimately causes fatigue and burnout.** It's as much about *self* management as it is *stress* management.

Many things in modern life contribute to increased stress for ministers: meetings with disgruntled congregants, emotional hospital visits and counseling sessions, weddings, funerals, trying to meet budget, managing ministry staff (and even more difficult, managing *volunteer* staff!), casting vision and maintaining a consistent walk with God. All of these (and dozens more) are quite stressful for today's minister. When your actual stress exceeds your perceived skill to manage that stress, you will experience *distress* (or “dis-stress”) – feeling unable to bear your load. While stress is a good thing, distress isn't.

Remember, stress is merely the biological response your body has to changes in its environment, particularly to stressful circumstances. Distress is the *emotional response* to the burden of experiencing more stress than you can handle effectively. Not only do you need skills to handle stress, you also must *perceive* having the ability to handle it. **Lack of confidence in handling stress is just as distressing as not having the actual skills to manage it.**

Thoughts to Ponder:

- Will you *choose* to learn stress management skills rather than stay immobilized by your stressful life circumstances?
- *Who* or *what* resources can you think of that might help you attain new stress (and self) management skills?

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