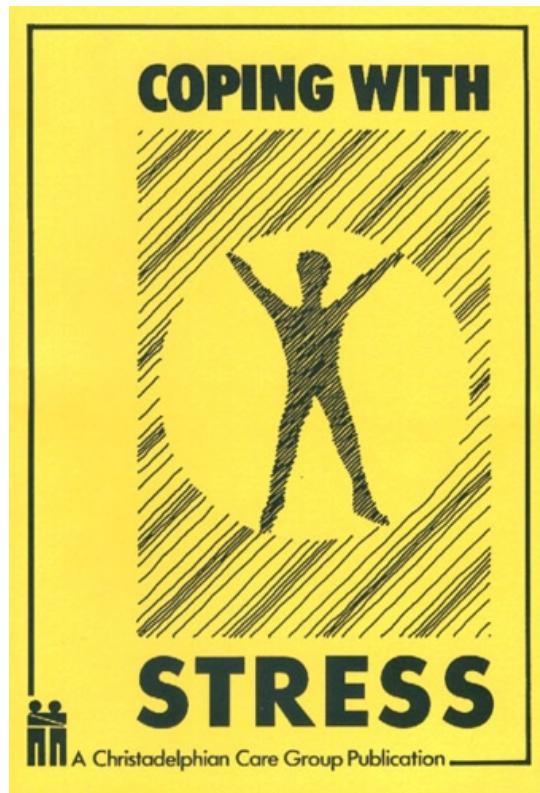


# **COPING WITH STRESS**



**CHRISTADELPHIAN CARE GROUP**

A Christadelphian Care Group Publication

## **FOREWORD**

Stress, it is said, is a positive force which aids survival. It generates the impetus to convert thought into action, to scale unclimbed mountains, to break world records or just to be in a certain place at a certain time.

Stress is also a negative force which threatens survival. Anxiety, strain, overwork, family and ecclesial commitments, the pace, complexity and responsibilities of life can reduce the effectiveness of the body's immune system and may actually cause physical illness and pain. 'Stress-related illness' is a fairly recent addition to the medical vocabulary and the condition it describes can be alarming.

The Christadelphian Care Group, in co-operation with the Bournemouth Winton Ecclesia, presented a Seminar on 'Coping with Stress'. Some of the writers of the articles in this booklet spoke at that Seminar. It became clear that their personal experience and professional skills and wisdom should be made more widely available. Hence this booklet. If it brings encouragement to carers and motivates those not so burdened to offer help; if it leads the readers to value more highly the privilege of our relationship with God and to appreciate the need for prayer and the blessings of friendship, then it will have achieved its objectives.

Norman Fitchett

(Secretary to the Christadelphian Care Group)

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NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

# **UNDERSTANDING STRESS**

Peter Parsons

## **DEFINITION**

Stress can be defined as a stimulus or change in our surroundings or within ourselves of such a strength or duration as to tax our ability to cope. Stress may be physical, such as an injury, infection or allergy; it can be social, such as adverse living conditions or unemployment; or it can be psychological such as grief or conflict with other people. Social and psychological stresses differ from physical stress in that they are influenced by our own reactions and expectations. What is stressful to one person is not necessarily so to another. For instance one person may be very distressed by a disagreement while the other may relish the argument.

The essential conflict which leads to stress and distress for the followers of Christ is the conflict between that which is natural and that which is spiritual, between our self-will and our desire to be Christ-like. The only real, long-term answer to this stress is a change of nature and this is, of course, what we are promised. At various stages of our lives we are subjected to many other conflicts which we must resolve as best we can, but, for us, self, much loved by the natural man, is the enemy and not the stresses that afflict us. For the Christian, these stresses may be God's way of fashioning us or adapting us to serve His purpose.

## **THE EFFECTS OF STRESS**

We all need a moderate level of stress in order to motivate us to achieve goals and meet deadlines. There is evidence that a certain amount of stress when we are young helps us to withstand greater stresses when we are more mature. But excessive stress to the young and immature is damaging and counterproductive. The same can be said about chastising and discipline which to the young are forms of stress.

Stress leads to distress which is an unpleasant emotional experience like anxiety, anger, jealousy or depression. These emotions lead to changes in hormone levels such as adrenalin, and also to an upset in the chemical balance in our brains. These changes then modify the function of our other body systems; one example is the increases in heart rate and blood pressure caused by anger. The wide range of physical changes caused by distress gives us an inkling of how stress can sometimes lead to disease.

Disease is surprisingly quite difficult to define, but can be described as a disordered state of emotional or bodily function which imposes difficulties in coping with everyday work and responsibilities. Disease interferes with our sense of well-being and produces more distress. Most of us can accept that the more stress we are under the more likely we are to become distressed and ill - or break down. However, different people can cope with different amounts of stress, but it is generally agreed

that given enough stress each of us would become mentally or emotionally ill. Not being able to cope is not necessarily a marker of inadequacy but an indication that stress has reached a level beyond the individual's adaptive capacity. In view of the consequences of stress it is not surprising that physical illness is more common in those under greatest stress.

Psychological factors are known to play an important causal part in many diseases such as hypertension, asthma, migraine, premenstrual tension and ulcerative colitis. Major life stresses such as being bereaved of one's spouse result in an increased risk of becoming ill.

It is God's prerogative to put us under stress to test and shape us.(1) What we need to beware of is giving ourselves unrealistic or unattainable targets and thereby putting ourselves under needless stress. Our ambition can lead us to risk our own emotional and physical well-being. Putting ourselves under stress for the sake of others is often a good Christian response, but ultimately we are called to put our trust in the power of Christ's sacrifice and not our own.

## **MANAGING STRESS**

We should aim to reduce our levels of stress wherever possible without neglecting our responsibilities. We might do this by reviewing our work load, delegating some tasks to others and considering carefully the demands made upon us by other people (2). We do well to avoid certain conflicts and stresses altogether.

Stress leads to tension and so relaxation techniques such as Yoga can reduce some of the consequences of stress. We cannot be at ease or at peace with ourselves and tense at the same time.

In some cases a doctor's help may be needed. Medication can be prescribed and can be helpful in acute cases for a short time.

Just talking about the stresses we have can be helpful especially to someone who is sympathetic and non-judgmental and who may have experienced the same problem. Such listeners need not be professionals but can be found in the home, the classroom, the office, in coffee morning chats and in the less formal ecclesial get-togethers.

## **THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

Some stress in life is unavoidable and indeed beneficial. As Christians we are invited to enter the 'small gate' and walk the 'narrow way' which leads to life.(3) Following God's way rather than our own is invariably stressful to the natural man in us. The conflict is unavoidable.

Jesus faced the same dilemma. He knew all about stress, conflict and the denial of self. He said, 'I have come not to do my own will but to do the will of Him who sent

me.’(4) When setting himself to go to Jerusalem for the last time, he said, ‘I have a baptism to undergo and how distressed I am until it is completed’.(5)

As we read of Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane, getting no support from his sleeping disciples, we are aware of the stress he is under and his great desire for relief. Here is stress at its greatest and here we see victory over self when he said, ‘Abba, Father, everything is possible for You. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what You will’.(6) Without resentment or anger Jesus accepted the destruction of self so that His Father’s will could be done.

May we be given strength to quell the rebellion within us and so be granted the peace of God that comes from accepting His will.(7)

Jesus so identified himself with sinful man that he who knew no sin, was made sin for our sakes. He actually experienced a moment of alienation from his Father when on the cross he cried, ‘My God, my God, why have You forsaken me’.(8) Surely this must have been the ultimate stress for Jesus, and it is this stress that we are spared through our faith, God’s grace and Christ’s sacrifice.

Here is the only ultimate cure. Natural man exalts self. Natural man sees the protection of self as all-important. He sees stress as the enemy threatening that all-important self. The Christian is relieved of this burden, for Jesus says, ‘Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For having overcome self and subjected his own will in the ultimate situation to that of his Father, he was able to declare assuredly to his followers, My yoke is easy and my burden is light’.(9)

## **INDEX TO BIBLICAL REFERENCES**

1. Deuteronomy 8 vs 2 - 5 and Hebrews 12 vs 3 - 11
2. Exodus 18 vs 13 - 23
3. Matthew 7 v 14
4. John 6 v 38
5. Luke 12 v 50
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7. John 14 v 27
8. Matthew 27 v 46
9. Matthew 11 vs 28 – 30

# **THE STRESS OF PARENTHOOD**

Carol Lees

## **PARENTS AND CHILDREN**

When we read our Bibles, we are left in no doubt that children are seen as a blessing from God. When we think of the prayers of people like Hannah, Elizabeth or Abraham and Sarah, who desperately wanted children of their own, we recognise that it can be one of life's great privileges to raise children to the glory of God.

How is it, then, that as parents we sometimes feel at the end of our tether, unable to cope, full of untold sadness and despair? Surely the fault must be with us? Not necessarily, and the purpose of this chapter is to explore why parenthood can involve so much stress and how we can deal with such stress in a positive way.

Our culture, centred as it is on the small nuclear family, has a lot to answer for. The myth of 'the happy family' is presented wherever we look - in advertisements, magazines, television programmes and through our social contacts, including brethren and sisters. It is very hard to admit how stressed we feel while everyone around us appears to be coping. Our feeling of failure can be overwhelming.

God tests us all in different ways but perhaps the problems we experience because of our children - whether these problems are affecting our marriage, our spiritual well-being, our mental health or whatever - are arguably testing us where it hurts most, at the very core of our closest relationships. We should perhaps take heart from the fact that parental stress is no new phenomenon. David, in the Psalms, talks often of the pain caused by those nearest to him, particularly his son Absalom, while Abraham had problems with Ishmael, Job's children were a source of great anxiety to him and, in particular, we have the case of Isaac and Rebekah.

While she was pregnant, God said to Rebekah 'Two nations are in your womb and two people from within you will be separated'.<sup>(1)</sup> Paul adds to this by saying '... Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad - in order that God's purposes in election might stand, not by works but by Him who calls - she was told "The older will serve the younger". Just as it is written "Jacob I loved but Esau I hated".'<sup>(2)</sup>

It is difficult but important to accept that so much of life is in God's hands and, in families where there are tensions and difficulties, these need not be due to poorer parenting any more than harmonious family relationships are attributable to better parenting. Hence, having done what we can, we should not feel ashamed if things go wrong, especially in our society where, compared with Isaac and Rebekah's times, there are so few directly on hand to share the parenting task.

## **HOW DO WE GET IT RIGHT AS PARENTS?**

Babies arrive without any special instructions for our particular model and without any form of guarantee that the child will develop in the way we would choose.

In our society there is currently a heavy emphasis on the psychological aspects of child-rearing. Freud, Spock and countless others stress the importance of those early years and, when things don't go according to plan, they urge us as parents to examine whether there was enough security, enough physical touch, enough attention when it was needed and so on.

The Bible, on the other hand, is rather short on direct advice regarding child-rearing. We know we should instruct our children in the ways of God (3) but the rest is implied rather than clearly spelled out. In fact, there were parents who desperately wanted to get it right and who asked God for specific guidance on how they should bring up their child.

About 3000 years ago, an angel appeared to a woman and told her she would conceive and bear a son who would be a Nazarite, set apart to God from birth. (4) When the woman told her husband, he recognised that this baby would be special, so he prayed that the angel might come again 'to teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born'. (5) Then, when the angel returned, Manoah asked 'What is to be the rule for the boy's life and work?' But, apart from repeating the conditions pertaining to his wife during pregnancy, God, as far as we know, gave Samson's anxious parents no direct advice. There was no specific formula.

## **WHAT DOES GOD EXPECT?**

In the Bible, parenthood is not given top priority. God comes first. We are not called to be super' parents, focussing our entire attention on our offspring. Children form only a part of the overall pattern of life. In fact, the Bible does not make the task of procreation as burdensome as some of our contemporary thinkers would have us believe.

There is no need for unnecessary guilt or self-doubt. None of the parents in the Bible were accused or blamed for the wrongdoing of their children, with perhaps the exception of Eli who allowed his sons to desecrate the temple. God makes it very clear to Ezekiel when He says 'What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel "The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge?" .... The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son shall not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son.' (6). Although our children are given us by God, they are not extensions of ourselves. They are loaned to us for a season and we must try to bring them up 'in the training and instruction of the Lord' (7). Indeed, our children are known to God at least from the womb (8). Some will be easy, compliant children. Others will challenge, resist and blatantly defy us from an early age. However, having sown the seed and nurtured the young plants, the harvest,



be it good or poor, is God's alone. Moreover, it is not always the naturally compliant children who ultimately yield the greatest crop.

It is possible to love our children too much and we have to aim for the right balance. Jesus tells us 'Anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me'.(9) He also says 'Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace on earth .... For I have come to turn "a man against his father, a daughter against her mother .... a man's enemies will be the members of his own household"'.(10) This process can start very early on!

Of course, this is not always the way things are. Parents and children can offer each other great joy, love and happiness. But we must be prepared to accept that this will not always be the case and that some of the stress experienced may be attributable to trying to stand firm in our beliefs.

### **WHAT DO WE EXPECT OF OURSELVES?**

Frequently we expect too much of ourselves and our children. Current thinking about child-rearing is linked closely to the theory of determinism which implies that all behaviour is caused and that babies come into the world like 'blank slates'. This is contrary to what God says. We have already mentioned what He said to Rebekah about Esau and Jacob. To Hagar when she was pregnant with Ishmael, God said 'He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him...'(11) Without doubt, Ishmael would not have been an easy child to bring up and would have caused both his mother and Abraham heartache before he went away.

All human beings are wonderfully complex and each is unique. Nevertheless, as parents, we constantly compare our child with other children. We desperately want our child to be the same as or better than others. This often means we become competitive. It is not unusual to hear parents scolding their child because they do not meet the general expectation. Even Sunday School prizes are still awarded to the academically bright whilst attributes such as gentleness or truthfulness go unrewarded.

No child is born a Christadelphian nor can a child be programmed to become one. However, we still feel saddened when our children fail to meet our expectations and hopes. Many parents, for example, insist their youngsters attend the meeting. For some this works well. For others, who are more active, sitting still is an agony and neither parents nor children gain from the situation.

Other people are not always very understanding. Possibly they have had very different children from ours for whom such and such worked and their suggestions and attitudes can add to our stress. It is important that we try to do what is right in God's eyes - but what is right will vary from child to child.

We have to find a balance. We should not focus all our attention on the children, nor

must we fail to give them the attention they need. Likewise, we should not provoke them deliberately nor discipline them so harshly we break them, whilst recognising the need to be firm.

The task of parenting is hard. When we are at our lowest, when we feel unable to cope with the stresses our children bring, when we are short on confidence and overwhelmed by our responsibilities, then it is important to review our expectations and, if necessary, adjust them. We can also take strength from the problems faced by parents down the ages - perhaps thinking of Mary who must often have felt her expectations of her firstborn were not met. Remember the twelve year old who stayed behind in Jerusalem?

### **TEN POSSIBLE POINTERS TO DEALING CONFIDENTLY WITH THE STRESS OF BEING A PARENT**

1. **Accept the child God sends you.** Do not waste energy or effort on trying to make your child what it is not nor ever can be. This will only cause you more stress. See the positives in the child you have and concentrate on building on them. Your child is not in a race or competition, nor is the child a reflection or extension of yourself. Refuse to judge or be judged in this way.
2. **You are the boss.** Children will often test your power as a parent to the limit but they need to know who is boss. Don't dwell too heavily on incidents of childish thoughtlessness but beware of direct challenges to parental authority - and try to discern between the two. Most children will benefit from a structured life but not when it's so structured there is no space for growth. Try to combine discipline with lots of love and never vent your own feelings on the children. Remember too that when you forbid, you allow no room for possible alternatives.
3. **Beware of over-dependency.** Your child can become too dependent on you. Be prepared from the start to begin to let go. The aim is to push the fledgling safely out of the nest and we should never keep young people with us to meet our own needs. From early childhood, encourage your child to make choices within reason, ready for the day he or she will become independent. Be very careful not to continue parenting well after the task should have been completed - you have your own life to worry about too!
4. **Keep a sense of humour.** If you can see the delightful side of having children, you are more likely to cope with the more difficult. Laughter during the good times helps you maintain your perspective. The terrible two year old will not always be as he is nor will the adolescent girl always play her pop music at full blast when you are entertaining the visiting speaker!
5. **Get God's values across.** Make sure your children know what parents in Christ feel in good times and bad. Try to ensure your child does not receive double messages from you. Set out God's values and acknowledge where everyday

living has fallen short of them. Even if your child rejects your faith, a remnant will live on if you lay firm foundations. Remember the prodigal son. Try to talk about life in its totality and don't overprotect your child. Place emphasis on individual responsibility and accountability from an early age.

6. **Have faith.** It is particularly important not to overact with older children who are being rebellious. Often your child will come through this sticky patch safely. Save your energy to do battle over really important issues - not such things as a savage haircut, too much makeup, the odd cigarette. Such incidents are not usually of lasting or moral significance. Stay with your child through difficult times because, despite appearances, he or she needs you. The caring child will almost certainly in time become a caring adult.
7. **Never write off your child.** Be cautious about labelling your child as difficult, too demanding, stupid, unchristian, etc. You will always be older and hopefully wiser than your child, so be prepared to make the peace or say you are sorry, even if he or she won't. When you are going through a difficult time and feel very stressed, try not to over-commit yourself in other directions, keep life fairly simple, get plenty of rest and pray.
8. **When the worst has happened, stand firm.** Forgiveness and understanding should always be tried but they don't always work in the most difficult situations, such as when children become so rebellious that they break the law, can be the breaking point, but you need to stand firm. This might mean saying 'Live by our rules or leave'. Let your child take responsibility for his or her own actions. Find the courage to stop giving money, stop your pleas for change and stop feeling guilty. When children realize they are no longer so powerful, they might become more hostile in the short-term but we need to love them enough to stop protecting them against their self-defeating behaviour. There is a time to hold on and a time to let go and always a time to pray. It is also important that parents consider getting help for themselves when facing the most difficult times.
9. **Try sharing your problems.** Many of those near to us who appear to cope so well may not be as impervious to stress as they seem. God is testing them as well, but not perhaps through the parental relationship at this time. Try sharing your difficulties with your brethren and sisters. Don't reject offers of help but allow people to get close. They will not be perfect in the ways they try to help but accept this from the start. Don't overburden one particular person but try different people and different ways of finding strength. Share all your problems with God through prayer.
10. **Pray without ceasing.** When things are at their worst, it is sometimes very difficult to pray. Don't aim for the ideal prayer. A few words offered here and there through our mediator will suffice and then a longer prayer when you can. Pray for strength for yourself and your children. Pray that God might place key individuals in our children's paths to nudge them in the right direction. Pray in confidence and hope for yourself and your child, and not in regret. Neither

parents nor children are perfect. We can't undo mistakes but we can forgive ourselves and them.

Remember, God loves our children more than we ever can.

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2. Romans 9 v 10 - 143 and Deuteronomy 6 vs 6 - 7
3. Judges 13 v 5
4. Judges 13 vs 8 and 12
5. Ezekiel 18 vs 2 and 20
6. Ephesians 6 v 4
7. cf Jeremiah 1 v 5
8. Matthew 10 v 37
9. Matthew 10 vs 34 and 36
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Useful further reading:

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## **COPING WITH STRESS AND CRISES IN THE FAMILY**

Hope Drage

There was stress in the very first family in the Garden of Eden between Adam and Eve and later, as the story unfolded, between Cain and Abel. We can all go through in our minds the stresses in the families of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and later of David who was beset with stress, initially with his brothers, later with his wives, his father-in-law and, possibly most distressing of all, with his sons. Some of these were brought upon him by his own actions. No doubt today we would have difficulty accommodating such a vital personality in our ecclesias, and yet God loved him, and his experiences found expression in the Psalms which have given Christians down the centuries comfort and hope. Even the family of Jesus did not escape. Those of us who are parents may well have shared the anguish of Mary when Jesus delayed his return from Jerusalem, 'Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you'.<sup>(1)</sup>

And the stress continues in families today. Given this long history, there is no way that these issues can be resolved in this chapter. We are simply going to look at one or two ways of coping and perhaps using them to make positive changes in our lives.

So how do we in our Christadelphian community cope? We have no inbuilt immunity against stress; we suffer the same blows and misfortunes as those without a faith, as the requests on the Care Group Prayer Line show. In addition we can find ourselves torn by the conflicting demands our faith makes upon us: on the one hand we have the support and fellowship of our brothers and sisters and the comfort and inspiration of prayer and communion with our heavenly Father; on the other hand the dilemmas, the guilt and additional stress of the high moral and spiritual values demanded of us. How do we reconcile, for example, the broken marriage of a young couple with the values of our community? Does our love and concern for a sister suffering from a depressive illness outweigh the additional guilt she feels from her own sense of personal failure?

Sometimes we are not even aware of the causes of our stress until someone tells us of theirs and it strikes a chord. I recall a sister telling me that she and a number of other sisters had found their most constant time of stress to be on a Sunday morning. The children had to be taken to Sunday School, the lunch prepared, the home tidied for visitors and all before the 10.30 departure for the Meeting. It had been such a regular part of the weekly routine that it was only when she mentioned it that I could say, 'Yes, me too!' Perhaps your labours are equally distributed on Sunday morning, perhaps not, but, given a little forethought, there is no reason why each member of the family should not help with some task in order to share the load.

Firstly then we are talking about identifying the everyday stresses and to do this we need to nurture within the family a spirit of openness and trust. We can as parents lay down our Christian values for family guidance, but we also need to listen to our children, to our parents and to our partner without judging, and encourage a free

expression of feelings so that fears and anxieties can be aired, explored and possibly allayed. 'Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.'(2) If we can create this atmosphere within the family - no easy task - we can then start to tackle the stresses.

I would like to suggest that there is an opportunity for doing this while sitting down to Sunday lunch as a family. Let each member identify what he or she sees as their biggest stress. There are likely to be some surprises because what one finds stressful others may not; teenagers may feel frustrated that they cannot play their records/tapes at full blast 'to get the real impact', while parents feel that half the volume is still too loud. Parents may bicker with each other, not realising the distress this causes the children. Another cause of stress is the mother and/or father being so late home from work or from commitments at the Meeting that they have too little time to listen to the children or to each other. Tensions can arise in the three generation family when Gran or Grandad have to move in to stay. In every case the family members need to communicate about the problems and then work together to achieve a compromise to which all can agree.

Clearly this only applies to the day-to-day stresses that afflict all families. There are the major crises such as bereavement, the break-up of a marriage, the emergence of a chronic progressive illness, the loss of a job, children in trouble with the law, all with devastating effects on the family and affecting the relatives and the Meeting. How can we as committed brothers and sisters survive these experiences, some of which we are all likely to face at some level?

Again the first step is to start communicating and sharing the problem. Individual circumstances will ; dictate whether the problem is shared with a member of the family, a sympathetic brother or sister within the ecclesia, a member of the Care Group or an outside professional counsellor.

If you were to ask any professional carer when people are most likely to change and adapt, the answer would mostly be, 'following a crisis'. A crisis forces us to stop, take stock of our position and change direction to suit the new circumstances. It is a very painful process, not without much heart-searching, and often requiring a lot of support from our brothers and sisters and immediate family. Such an experience can provide an opportunity for families to unite and grow; without help it can often destroy them.

To illustrate what I am trying to say, I am going to look at a real case of family stress. This case is from outside our community to avoid the obvious danger of identifying individuals within the brotherhood.

Tim, a 16-year old African boy, was caught shoplifting, fiercely resisted arrest and was charged. When the Probation Officer was asked to investigate his home circumstances and report to the Court, she found that he was one of four children abandoned first by the father and more recently by the mother. The responsibility for the family's care rested with the eldest brother (21 years old; who was at work all day

providing for the family's material needs). Tim had left school, fallen through the education net and had lost the will to do anything with his life, hence his crime. In practice the crime brought him to the attention of the welfare agencies who were able to offer him the support he needed to make something of his life, to apply for jobs and to give him back his self-confidence. Tim responded and in time became a more independent, resourceful member of society. The elder brother, once he got over the shame of his brother's crime, saw that it had provided the opportunity for changing his ways. What appeared to be a step down the slippery slope of delinquency created the opportunity for a change of direction and a fresh start.

There are times when we have to let our children move in directions we would not wish. Although we can make clear our feelings and beliefs, sooner or later we must let them go. Jesus recognised this in the parable of the prodigal son. The younger son had to reach his own crisis before he 'came to his senses'(3) and this proved to be the turning point. The Father's constant love and eagerness to welcome him back should be reflected in our attitudes towards our wayward children.

There is, of course, opportunity for personal growth at any age. I was moved by the elderly man, recently widowed, who 'could not boil an egg' before his wife died, but spoke with such pride of his growing skills in cookery. He had also resolved the problem of returning to an empty house by getting a small dog whose warm welcome at the door made life a little more bearable. Then he found that when he took the dog for walks he met and talked to other people and so his life took a new turn. His life will never be the same but he is beginning to adjust in a positive way.

There was also the woman who cared for many years for her severely demented husband until this task overwhelmed her and, after much heart-searching, she finally agreed to his admission to hospital. In practice, once the stress of his admission was over, she found that their relationship improved, the tension of his physical and mental demands was now shared and they could enjoy each other's company on a limited level. Other residents in the hospital whose families were not able to visit regularly became included and looked forward to her visits. For her a new chapter had begun.

In many crisis situations the factor which turns a potential disaster into a way forward is a friend who can listen and so share the burden of the sufferer. Talking through the problem can help the distressed to discover inner resources and recognise the way forward. What more sympathetic friend have we than our Lord, who is described as 'Comforter', 'Counsellor', 'Advocate' and 'a High Priest who is able to sympathise with our weaknesses' (4). And we are exhorted to 'carry each other's burdens',(5) to support with kindness, without judging, and so encourage one another to persevere.

Perhaps the greatest crisis in history is seen in the cross, not only for Jesus who had to face the personal agony of his crucifixion but also for his disciples who saw their hopes apparently shattered. 'We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel'.(6) Yet the scene moved from despair to resurrection and has in turn

given us the hope of salvation. However, Jesus did not promise to free us from stress. He exhorts us

to share his cross and for the early church this was to include persecution. What Jesus did promise was that we would never suffer alone but that he would provide the comfort and peace we need if we allow him into our lives. 'The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (7)

The words of Hymn 87 express this theme in a prayer with which we can all identify:

Drop thy still dews of quietness  
Till all our strivings cease;  
Take from our souls the strain and stress  
And let our ordered lives confess  
The beauty of thy peace.  
Breathe through the heat of our desire  
Thy coolness and thy balm;  
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;  
Speak through the earthquake, wind and fire,  
O still small voice of calm.

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2. James 1 vs 19 - 20
3. Luke 15 v 17
4. Hebrews 4 v 15
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6. Luke 24 v 21
7. Philippians 4 vs 5 – 7



## **TEENAGERS AND STRESS**

Sylvia Ospina and Norman Fitchett

The following questions were put to a group of teenagers in a Christadelphian youth group:

- (a) What is stress?
- (b) How does it affect you?
- (c) How does it arise?
- (d) How do you cope?
- (e) How does your Christianity help - or doesn't it?

They were asked to write down their answers. Many of them were still writing copiously after the ten -fifteen minutes allowed. It certainly seemed as though a raw nerve had been touched. Once they had completed their answers, there was an opportunity to express their thoughts and to expand on some of the ideas.

Listed below is a digest of some of the ideas which came out of the session.

### **(a) What is stress?**

- 'Things you find hard to deal with'
- 'Pressure building up on you (work, relationships, family)'
- 'Pressure built up inside you'
- 'Pressure on you which is hard to get rid of'
- 'Problems that make you feel depressed or unable to cope'
- 'Being pulled several ways'

### **(b) How does it affect you?**

- 'I get worked up'
- 'Get upset - think of doing stupid things - feel alone'
- 'Get very tired and easily annoyed - argue with anyone -feel like crying'
- 'Badly! I get ratty and sarky (sarcastic)'
- 'Makes you tense and brings on more stress'
- 'Feel lonely and depressed. Feel unwanted and depressed.'
- 'It gives me a headache'

‘Feel aggressive’

**(c) How does it arise?**

‘Problems which I’m not very good at dealing with’

‘Someone aggravates you at work, school, home, etc.’

‘Pressure at school, too much work, not enough time, doing things in a rush’

‘Relationships - breaking up - or feeling jealous’

‘Parents, friends, work’

‘Time of the month’

‘People expecting too much of you’

‘Problems and pressures mounting up, often when I’m already down’

‘Taking too much on’

**(d) How do you cope?**

‘Take a long ride on my bike’

‘Talk about it - think about the good things’

‘Relax, watch TV, go to bed, listen to music, stop and think’

‘Go into my bedroom and listen to soothing music’

‘Being on your own for a while’

‘Relaxation - time to think - or a punchbag’

‘Not very well - I become moody and weepy, but I pray about it a lot’

‘By crying’

‘Work out with weights’

**(e) How does your Christianity help - or doesn’t it?**

‘Stops me getting angry with people’

‘I read the Psalms and they cheer me up because they say what I mean’

‘People in church help me through stress’

‘My Christianity doesn’t help - I pray for strength but nothing happens’

‘Helps in some ways but in others it adds to your stress’

‘I pray when I’m alone - it helps’

‘Bible has comfort and advice to many problems’

‘Can talk to God and ask for help’

‘Unresolved issues can increase stress’

‘Have the example of Jesus’

These comments make one thing very clear... stress is not monopolized by the business executive, the harassed housewife, the doctor, teacher or overloaded social worker, but it can also be experienced by young people -in this case, young people with an interest in Christianity.

The world, society and church all make demands of one kind or another. Sometimes those demands are in conflict. Those who have come to understand the value of and the need for a high moral standard and whose conscience tries to direct them into a better way of life will experience tensions which their peers will not appreciate. Because of this, a commitment to Christian beliefs presents still another pressure point.

We may feel that because we are in close touch with young people we are fully aware of their needs. If so the answers given above may surprise us. If these comments provoke us to listen more carefully to what young people have to say, we may become more sensitive to their needs and sympathetic to their problems, and so be more effective in encouraging their developing faith.

## **STRESS IN CARING FOR A DISABLED, ELDERLY OR INFIRM PERSON**

Margaret Howarth

For most of us work occupies a designated part of our time, balanced by welcome periods of rest and worship according to the divine principle. For carers of chronically sick or disabled relatives or elderly, frail dependants, life isn't like that. Their job is for 365 days a year with additional night duty. All their time and every activity and the needs of others and self have to be planned around the needs of the one being cared for. Love for their relative is clouded with sadness and anxiety and a sharing of the hurt. For some the situation develops inevitably with the birth of a handicapped baby or because of disabling illness or accident or because a partner becomes ill or feeble. For others a decision has to be made whether and to what extent to take on the caring of an ageing parent or other relative. This article does not attempt to deal with the psychological effects of caring but addresses some practical ways of alleviating the stress.

In all cases, despite the feelings of panic, disbelief, anger and inadequacy, it is important to weigh the matter carefully, seek the Lord's guidance, consult medical and social personnel involved and consider as far as possible the choices of everyone concerned. Discuss the possible options. Do not assume that full time caring in your own home is the only or even the best course. Do not take on whole time caring because of outside pressure or feelings of guilt or other people's expectations. Do what is best for your relative, your family and yourself. Independence is a valued state and not to be surrendered without careful thought and prayer. For anyone wanting and able, with help, to retain independent living, consider the alternatives:

- (a) remaining in own home with support from doctor, nurse, home help, meals and regular attention from family and friends, safety devices, bedside telephone and opportunities to stay with family as often as needed.
- (b) moving to a warden-controlled flat, Christadelphian or local, with all necessary facilities plus support as in (1).
- (c) residential care in a home, Christadelphian or local. Possible homes must be visited and details of routines, standards and levels of care investigated. Where 24 hour care is required or where mental as well as physical problems exist or where a family are quite unable to undertake full time care, residential care may be the best choice; family and friends could visit regularly and keep their loved one involved in their lives.
- (d) providing a separate flat or bed-sitting room within or attached to the carer's home, allowing for independence but with full security and necessary care.

If, however, none of these is possible nor considered appropriate and the relative in

need of care is to come into the carer's home (or when the relative is already in the carer's home) then further careful consideration is important. Ask yourself and discuss with others involved, including as far as possible the one being cared for:

- (1) what are the prime needs, real and perceived, of your relative?
- (2) how can these needs - physical, financial, medical, emotional, social and spiritual - best be met, in order to provide good quality of life?
- (3) how can the maximum realistic degree of independence, choice, social contacts, ecclesial involvement and individuality be maintained?
- (4) what resources are available to help?
- (5) what are my (the carer's) personal resources and limitations, strengths and weaknesses?
- (6) what other people must be considered?

Face the whole situation realistically, taking into account the advice of doctors, therapists and family members, as well as the feelings of your relative. Carers are deeply emotionally involved, and love and conscientious attention to duty can drive them to take on too much to the detriment of themselves, other family members and ultimately to the one they are caring for. As in any change of circumstances and new responsibilities you will need to pray and seek guidance, wisdom and strength. 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight'.(1) Whatever decisions are taken, review the situation from time to time. Circumstances change, as do needs and resources. But rejoice that the Lord never changes.(2) He is our ever present shepherd (3) and His compassion is renewed every morning.(4)

It is easy for those who don't know the reality to picture a sweet, frail, elderly, appreciative lady and a devoted, patient, loving daughter or husband sharing life together at a gentle pace, smiling, content and godly. For a happy few that may be so. More often than not, it isn't like that. There can be multiple disabilities, heavy lifting, feeding problems, the need for constant attention, incontinence, mountains of washing, worrying expense, communication difficulties, personality changes, behavioural problems, confusion, irritation, aggression and disturbed nights. Carers, many of whom have to do a paid job as well, can become weary, anxious, angry, resentful, frustrated and ill. Some carers are themselves elderly and unwell. Tensions can build up and feelings of inadequacy, conflict and guilt can permeate every long day.

Here is an excerpt from a letter written by a sister who cares for a loved disabled relative and has to be the breadwinner also: "Preparation for bed seems to go on for ever - this usually when I've had more than enough and am longing to go to bed and can hardly keep my eyes open. Tiredness brings problems for both of us - short temper, frustration, irritation, constantly picking up dropped things, encouraging,

persuading - but it's no use trying to rush; this only seems to exacerbate the problem and it takes twice as long. There are drinks to make, bed to prepare, maybe bottles/flasks to fill, tablets to get out, help with undressing/washing and perhaps applying cream to painful joints. Two hours later I can crawl into bed for another short night".

Yes, caring is wearing. Demands on the carer can become excessive and it is all too easy to be overwhelmed by the problems and to think negatively about every aspect of the situation. But there are positives and some practical steps which can be taken to relieve the stresses of the task.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE may be available in the form of benefits or grants. DO ASK the Welfare Rights Officer or Social Worker at your local Social Services Area Office, or the Ward Social Worker if your relative is being discharged from hospital. If, despite all the help you are entitled to and the help of family members, financial problems persist, do talk to your Recording Brother in confidence. Help is available from funds lovingly provided for the support of any brother or sister in difficulty.

MEDICAL CARE and information should be sought from the General Practitioner and his team including the nurse and health visitor, or from the hospital clinic while under the care of a Consultant. Therapists are usually glad to talk to carers and explain treatments, teach lifting techniques, advise on problems such as feeding, dressing, positioning, exercising and communication difficulties and answer any queries. DO ASK.

AIDS can be supplied on loan and ADAPTATIONS made to the house to make some tasks easier - such as ramps, grab rails, bath seats, special cutlery and crockery, showers, stair lifts, special chairs and beds, wheelchairs, commodes, incontinence supplies, hoists, etc. Contact either the Social Services or the Health Authority Occupational Therapy Department. Boots Chemist and specialist aids suppliers sell a range of equipment for people with special needs. If you have a particular difficulty, find out if there is something that can ease it. DO ASK.

Your relative may be able to attend a DAY CENTRE (National Health Service or Social Services or private), or a self-help group concerned with particular needs (Stroke Group, Arthritis Care, Take Heart, Parkinson's Society, Mencap, etc.) or a luncheon club. DO ASK about what is available. Your local library is a good source of information. Or maybe the ecclesia could organise a support group for elderly, disabled or lonely members. Resist your relative's over-dependence upon you for every need. A day centre or support group can provide friendly contacts, a change of scene, mental stimulation and occupation for your relative and allow you time to relax or shop or concentrate on a task or meet friends, etc. and so you will both be refreshed. If, however, your relative would be miserable in a group situation or refuses even to try it, you could consider the alternative of applying for a visiting care assistant from Social Services or from an organisation such as Crossroads or asking a brother or sister to visit in order to give you a break from time to time.

When tensions develop between you:

- (1) **Talk about it.** Bring your feelings out into the open and deal with them. If it is not possible to talk with your relative, then involve a third party - a nurse or brother or sister - to help you to resolve the difficulties. Another person can sometimes see a solution that you missed because you could not 'see the wood for the trees'.
- (2) **Pray about it - alone, and where possible together.** God gives new strength each day commensurate with need. The conviction that we are not tried more than we are able to bear is only deeply learned when we have felt pushed to the limit and found God's grace sufficient as He has promised. (5) PRAY, PRAY AND PRAY AGAIN. However, prayer can be difficult for those who are feeling stressed. For some, it does not feel right to approach God with 'bad' feelings. But the records of the lives of faithful men and women in Scripture can reassure us on this matter. Job, Moses, Hannah and David, for example, poured out to God their distress of mind and they were heard and found favour with God. Your heavenly Father knows your needs, your weaknesses and your dark thoughts (6) and He will be glad to hear your call for help. (7) He does not want you to shut Him out and struggle on alone. 'You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them and you listen to their cry'.(8)
- (3) **Try to be flexible and adaptable.** It is the tree that bends in a storm that is less likely to break. Try to recognise humour and even a sense of the ridiculous. Shared laughter can diffuse many a fraught situation.

THE CARERS' ASSOCIATION may have a local group which you can attend to find mutual support and encouragement by talking with others in similar circumstances, particularly important if you are coping alone. It is important to be able to TALK over the problems and stresses that arise and express the bad feelings of resentment, anger, frustration, guilt, etc. which are common amongst people under stress, with someone who really understands, someone who is prepared to listen without judging or jumping in with ill-considered advice. Not all women (or men - and some men find themselves in the caring role) are natural nurses or carers. It is healthy to accept your own limitations and not expect yourself to be faultless. Failure to match up to the perfect example of Jesus or to one's own Christian aspirations is part of the human experience. Be gentle with YOURSELF. Allow friends and brethren and sisters to help. If they do not offer, you may need to tell them what your needs are and ASK for their support. Good friends will be glad you did.

The stress of caring for a parent or a child can put a strain on the relationship of a married couple. It is vital to TALK not only about the problems but about your feelings and your relationship and ways of coping together with the demands on your time and energy, to take time out to relax together and to seek help early if

communication begins to break down. Believing partners need to encourage each other's faith and to pray together. As well as seeking to recognise and provide for the needs of your relative, you also need to recognise and address your own and your partner's needs.

RESPIRE CARE should be discussed and planned from the outset. No one can work all day every day without rest periods, as the Scriptures clearly teach. It is unwise to take on full time caring and put off thinking about breaks until exhaustion results in desperation and depression. By that time it can be difficult to introduce the idea of a break to your relative without inducing anxiety, insecurity, feelings of rejection and even stubborn refusal. Plans for periodic breaks should be discussed and their necessity anticipated and established from the start. (The doctor or Social Services may be able to make arrangements, and some Christadelphian Homes take short-term residents.)

Otherwise there is a danger of isolation, exhaustion, family tension and nervous strain, leading to break down.

It is not selfish for carers to balance caring with their own needs. It is wise to follow the example of Jesus who withdrew from the demands of the crowds for solitary meditation and prayer, and who was refreshed by the company of loving friends.(9) It is important to make provision for your own devotions, health care, interests, friends and involvement in the ecclesia, in order to replenish your inner resources for the task.

There can be great FULFILMENT for the servant of Christ in caring for a dependent loved one. There can be recognised a close following of the example of Jesus in such a situation.(10) There is dignity and privilege in service.....'I was sick and you looked after me....

whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me'.(11) There is the exercise of love in considering the feelings and needs of your relative and trying to appreciate the frustrations and pain and anxiety which are perhaps being expressed in impatience or sharp words or silence. There can be fellowship with brethren and sisters in similar circumstances. If this is not available locally and you feel a need for it, you could contact the Care Group for loving support. (12) Over all is the assurance of your loving Father's compassion and control. He has promised that He is with you and will sustain you.(13)

The KEY WORDS are:

TALK - through your feelings and problems

LISTEN - to your relative's needs and feelings

ASK - for the help and support you need

REST - plan breaks for your relative and yourself

PRAY - God sees, God cares -lean on Him



It was been said that IT IS NOT OUR TRIALS THAT BREAK US DOWN BUT LACK OF ENCOURAGEMENT. And that is where the rest of us come in. PEOPLE NEED PEOPLE. The relative needs the care of the carer, the carer needs the care of supportive friends who in turn need supportive friends who also have needs of their own. The carer who feels alone, unsupported and not understood is in a sorry state indeed and in serious danger of break down. That should not be the case for anyone in our brotherhood, in our ecclesia. Our Father has provided a fellowship in which we all have a responsibility to care for one another.(14) Let us remember to care for the carers by practical support and by our prayers for and with them and so encourage and enable them to say with conviction, 'I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.'(15)

### **INDEX TO BIBLICAL REFERENCES AND ALLUSIONS**

- (1) Proverbs 3 v 5 and 6
- (2) Malachi 3 v 6
- (3) Psalm 23
- (4) Lamentations 3 vs 22 - 26
- (5) II Corinthians 12 v 9
- (6) Psalm 139 vs 1 - 4
- (7) Psalm 91 vs 14 - 16
- (8) Psalm 10 v 17
- (9) Mark 6 v 31
- (10) John 13 vs 12 - 17
- (11) Matthew 25 vs 36 and 40
- (12) 2 Corinthians 1 v 4
- (13) Psalm 55 v 22
- (14) I John 3 vs 16 and 17
- (15) Philippians 4 v 13

## MEETING STRESS AT WORK

Ken Drage

It is not unusual to find employers in the UK reporting an average annual absenteeism for sickness of ten days or more a year for each employee. Some are grossly in excess of this amount. A large number of these absences are due to stress related illnesses. Many people, due to stress in their lives, cannot face going to work and stay away under the pretext of illness.

The symptoms of stress at work are no different from those in other areas of life and not all absences are due to conditions and pressures at work. Stress at home is frequently the cause or it can be a combination of the two. While the symptoms may be easy to see, the real cause may be more difficult to trace especially as people under stress are prone to hide their real feelings and concerns.

Sufficient to say that absence from work of this magnitude is seen nationally as a major problem. It is not surprising therefore that good employers spend a lot of time and money trying to anticipate and alleviate the causes whether at home or at work. Ideally they employ welfare officers, provide good working conditions, health care schemes and play schemes for employees infants and encourage participative management styles that allow employees to be open with management.

Stress occurs when we feel threatened by something beyond our ability to cope. Good employers recognise that the threat is lessened when we feel we have someone to talk to who is sympathetic and supportive, someone with whom we can share our concerns. (The 'in' word is empathetic - 'the pain you feel, I bear'.) Such support relieves the burden and gives us the space to put into effect coping strategies. These are the key elements of any strategy to cope with stress.

Stress is not, however, always a negative force; it can and does generate creative breakthroughs if we are strong enough to build on it. How frequently when we have time to spare do we waste it, but when there is a tight schedule we come up with good solutions. All of us when faced with clearing our 'in-trays' before going on holiday suddenly find the energy to arrive at relevant answers to cases that have stuck there for months.

Christadelphians have the same concerns at home and at work as anyone else. While as followers of our Lord we have the privilege of fellowship with God and His Son which is rejected by most, we are no less vulnerable to the strains of working life. If we thought we should escape, it is sobering to read Peter's words to a suffering 1st Century Christian community, 'To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps'.<sup>(1)</sup> It is this example of Jesus that can be terrifying for the Christian because so high a standard can present us with stresses which others do not experience. Will we be involved in war work? Do our employer's trading practices stand condemned by the moral standards of the ancient prophets because he uses 'dishonest scales' and 'sells even the sweepings with the wheat'?<sup>(2)</sup> Will we be required to join a union? Will we have to go to law? Will

our job take us away from the meeting and leave us little time for our brethren and sisters? Will our Christian values bring us into ridicule with our colleagues? The list is endless but the cause of tension is the same: it is our Christian conscience.

In a short article it is not possible to give definitive answers to these and other questions. However, we can start to address the problem. The solutions do not lie in a list of do's and don'ts but rather in the confidence we have in our fellowship in Christ. Paul calls it 'freedom in Christ'. When he was a Jew he felt law bound. It caused him great tension for he was never sure whether he was acting correctly, as the rule book was never ending. He wrote to the Romans and told them about this period in his life; he was wretched, negative and a persecutor of Christians. When he believed Christ he found he now lived his life by faith and grace. He could live with his weaknesses for, as long as he tried to imitate his Lord, he was forgiven. Christ therefore gave him the way to a strong conscience that took many of the tensions out of his life. 'There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.' (3) Paul now lived a positive and constructive life and so achieved much. He knew where he was going. A strong will is one of the keys to overcoming stress but if we are unsure of our position in Christ then we will be at the mercy of the storms of life. While we, like Paul, are required to share in the sufferings of this life, we can have a confidence and purpose which is denied to others and we can say, with Paul, 'I can do everything through him who gives me strength' .(4)

Earlier I said that one of the keys to overcoming stress was feeling that someone is concerned for us and having someone with whom we can share our problems. Is not this one of the roles Jesus plays in our lives? We have 'a high priest who is ... able to sympathise with our weaknesses . . . Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need'. (5) We can speak to him in prayer. This is the strength we bring to the work place so we must use it to the full.

We also have the fellowship of our brethren and sisters with whom we should be able to share our concerns and expect a compassionate hearing. The role of a helping friend is mainly listening and reflecting our concerns back to us to enable us to discover the solutions to our own problems. Advice is not necessarily helpful, for a solution acceptable to one may not be acceptable to the conscience of another. There is no universal answer when dealing with stress. Strategies for coping have to be tailor made and worked out with the individual so that he feels confident enough to own and implement them. Anyone who feels the need can contact the Care Group and be put in touch with a brother or sister experienced in counselling and personnel work, who will be willing to listen.

While a strong fellowship in Christ helps us to cope with the pressures that come upon us unawares, we can take steps to avoid some stresses. For example we do have some say in the type of working life we choose. Most of us have to work but we should not see our work as being in conflict with our Christian calling. Work, like marriage, is an honourable estate; the struggles of a working life are the divinely

appointed consequences of the fall.(6)

It is also part of our Christian calling to work for our living. (7) Many of us like to seek a job in which the objectives reflect the Christian ideal, 'let us do good to all men', (8) such as nursing, teaching, medicine, welfare and social work and, to a lesser extent, personnel work. However these professions can demand our all and take us away from our brethren and sisters. If we choose such a demanding career we must have a clear idea of the way we want to serve God, for on occasions our brethren and sisters may not see it in the same light and may encourage us to take up a less onerous job. Such good intentions can themselves be a source of stress. These and similar careers are very stressful and if we are by nature anxious and find it difficult to cope with pressure then it would be foolish to choose such a career.

We should beware also of choosing a job that is really beyond our capabilities. Over-ambition is a major cause of stress. If we did over-extend ourselves we would not only have to live with the strain of handling problems too big for us but also be subjected to a poor performance procedure. This would involve us with management interviews and written warnings which threaten and may eventually lead to dismissal.

Many of us find the annual performance review, which most companies operate these days, a stressful occasion. None of us likes to have our faults and weaknesses exposed, though as Christians we should be better than most at being honest about ourselves since we admit our weaknesses to God through prayer. James goes so far as to exhort that we should 'confess your sins to each other'. (9) While modern employment law aims to be fair to the employee who is finding it difficult to perform at work, in practice procedures can be slow, tortuous and hurtful even to the most humble believer. The good company may perhaps try to find a way out by offering a less demanding job, but it will certainly be one with less pay. Paul hits it on the head when he writes to Timothy, 'godliness with contentment is great gain'. (10) If we follow this advice we should find ourselves working within our abilities.

Before finally accepting the offer of a job, we have an opportunity, if we ask, to find out about any hidden responsibilities - and these are to be found in all jobs. When we accept our wages we enter into a contract with our employer and accept the conditions he lays down. The contract is binding on both parties and neither should act unilaterally. But the contract of employment is rarely a document which nestles nicely in our hands. It need not be written; it can be made up of a series of company notices available for inspection in the Personnel Department or on a factory notice board.

Usually we have bound ourselves to work overtime when asked, even at weekends. Middle managers and sometimes more junior staff are not guaranteed employment at one location but can be required to move to another part of the country. For many the small print is never applied but the relocation of businesses is becoming a common occurrence and it can come as a shock to know you can be required to move. Also for a member of a community that stresses 'Let your "Yes" be yes and your "No" no, or you will be condemned', (11) to confront an employer who has a weekend emergency with "I'm sorry, I cannot work overtime as I have to attend the meeting" does not say

much for the word of a Christadelphian. It is by our behaviour as good employees that the non-believer may be moved to give glory to God.

These and other issues such as 'war work should be cleared with our future employer before binding ourselves to a contract. A reasonable employer will meet most of our conditions if they are sensible but we are not in a position to demand. If our conscience will not allow us to bind ourselves to the conditions of employment then we have to accept the consequences, remembering that 'God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear'.(12) Industrial Tribunals which deal with employees' grievances spend much of their time listening to employees trying to evade the conditions of their contracts. Time spent sorting these issues out beforehand can be well spent. Your future employer may not have met such convictions before and a relaxed chat in the early days does much to smooth the path for the future.

Sexual and racial harassment at work are current issues. For us there may be the additional problem of religious intolerance. It is by becoming 'mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ....no longer ....infants, tossed back and forth ....., '(13) that we will be able to face this hurdle. We must remember that we are paid wages to work and not to preach. We proclaim Christ by the way we tackle the tasks set before us, the way we show love and compassion to our colleagues and the way we deal with our managers. Expression of Christian virtues should command respect not ridicule. If we are being ridiculed we should look carefully at our behaviour at work.(14)

We could go on listing cause after cause of stress at work. Much of the stress arises from our limited ability to deal with change. The business world these days is subject to so much change that special courses are now laid on by employers to prepare their staff for the experience and to develop their skills to cope. Managers are taught to listen and to communicate and staff are encouraged to avail themselves of participative processes. Time is spent building up team relations. The employer wants to change his staff from whingeing children to mature adults. (Those of you who are conversant with Transactional Analysis will recognise the origin of these terms. Those who wish to know more about this particular analysis of human behaviour should read 'You're OK I'm OK! by Thomas Harris. The Christian will experience no surprises when he attends such a course for he will find the core material is the content and practice of his own faith.) The object is to create mature and resilient people, if need be, with the help of counselling and the support of colleagues.

This objective must be ours too. To face the stresses at work we must develop the maturity and living skills to be found in Christ. As we grow we must learn not to be afraid to seek the help of a sympathetic friend in Christ. When our help is sought by others we should spend time listening, avoid being judgmental and help to create in those in need the strength to meet the threats facing them.

The final words must be Paul's for he of all men learned to cope with change and stress<sup>5</sup> 'I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for

me ..... I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances .....I can do everything through him who gives me strength'.(15)

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3. Romans 7v25-8v1
4. Philippians 4 v 13
5. Hebrews 4 vs 15 - 16
6. Genesis 2 v 15 and 3 v 17
7. 2 Thessalonians 3 vs 6 - 10
8. Galatians 6 v 10
9. James 5 v 16
10. 1 Timothy 6 v 6
11. James 5 v 12
12. 1 Corinthians 10 v 13
13. Ephesians 4 vs 13 - 15
14. 1 Timothy 3 v 7
15. Philippians 4 vs 10 – 13

## TOWARDS HARMONY IN THE ECCLESIA

Don Graham

*From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth,  
From the laziness which is content with half-truth,  
From the arrogance which thinks it knows all truth,  
O God of Truth, deliver me.*

### THE PRINCIPLE OF LOVE

It is surely true to say that we have enough difficulty coping with the day-to-day stresses that life serves up for us, without being assailed by problems from within the brotherhood. From all directions voices bid us to conform to the pattern of this world which, for the most part, completely denies God. In joining the Christadelphian community we have given common assent to certain doctrinal beliefs which separate us from the mainstream churches and which, in turn, should bind us together in fellowship and in a way of life in Christ based on the principle of love.

Individually we have responded to the grace and mercy of God toward us in Jesus and have been bound together in unity of faith, hope and purpose in him. But, naturally speaking, we are all kinds of people. We are different shapes and sizes with different temperaments and intellects; we come from different backgrounds; we have different jobs and standards of living and we possess different talents; some are extroverts and others introverts; some are full of confidence whilst others feel inadequate; some have dominant personalities whilst others are self-effacing. There are differences in both strengths and weaknesses but we have in common our human nature with all its imperfections and its inherent proneness to sin.

In writing to the church at Corinth,<sup>(1)</sup> Paul compares the believers to the many parts of a body, and explains that, for the body of Christ to work effectively, there should be harmony and a realisation of the need for each other. Just as in the physical body we suffer aches and pains from time to time, so also in the ecclesia we are confronted by stressful situations and cause for sadness. Pain indicates to us that something is wrong and that action needs to be taken to find a remedy. God shapes, grafts and prunes His children. 'The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the heart'<sup>(2)</sup> speaks of a refining process in order to remove the unwanted dross.

Recently I was involved in a situation in which a sister suffered a long and painful illness. Her faith was so tremendous that it enriched the whole ecclesia. In its efforts to give loving support to the family, both practically and spiritually, the ecclesia itself was strengthened and blessed, as it became bound together in unity of purpose in the bonds of the love of Christ. It was a time of stress for all, but it was of a positive kind.

## **THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST**

It is regrettable that the majority of stress in the ecclesia is not so positive and is often self-induced. I believe that there are three main areas in which difficulties arise:

- (a) practical issues - order of meetings, administration and use of funds;
- (b) interpretation and application of the Scriptures;
- (c) conduct and questions of fellowship.

When differences arise among us in these areas they can create for some, if not for all, feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. Sometimes distancing and coldness begin to creep into our relationships, born of mistrust. Then emotions become fuelled and personalities involved. Sides are taken and, sadly, anger and gossip are generated. More often than not, I believe that in these circumstances, peripheral or secondary issues assume such importance that the 'more important<sup>1</sup> matters of brotherly love, 'justice, mercy and faithfulness'(3) are set aside.

In order to cope with situations of stress in the ecclesia I believe that we need to reflect on the idea of offering spiritual sacrifices. This is costly. We may have to relinquish what hitherto has been a treasured position and humble ourselves, not in the sense of being weak but rather in love being strong through him who strengthens us. If we, in turn, are recipients of such gracious help we should accept it, not in a sense of triumph but humbled by the spirit in which it is given. 'An offended brother is more unyielding than a fortified city, and disputes are like the barred gates of a citadel'.(4)

The presence of Jesus is real. He is not a 'sleeping partner'(5) but one who is there to come to our aid. Because of our human nature and self-sufficiency we are not always ready or willing to accept his help.

With God in the forefront of our minds we can do no other than wonder at His wisdom and greatness which enable us to bridge the gulf that exists between the bitterness generated by division and strife, and the warmth and the rewards of fellowship, unity and love through our Lord and Saviour.

## **THE POWER OF PRAYER**

Situations arise which involve talking about very sensitive and personal matters; events may occur which cause distress and perplexity, even bitterness and anger. When we are called upon to help or mediate in such cases, we may feel totally inadequate and uncertain. Experience has taught me that the most essential requirement is to pray and to keep on praying not only that God will give me the wisdom to say the right things and to act in a loving and caring way, but also that everyone involved will be led to find solutions to the problems. We need to be



prepared by prayer but we also need to ensure that the whole counselling session is both governed by and carried out in an atmosphere of prayer.

If there are times when we are at loggerheads with someone we need to get down to praying together not just as a prologue to our discussion but to keep on praying. It leaves less time for 'fighting' and certainly makes it more difficult. To pray together requires that we are together and that we need to be open and honest with each other and ready to confess our fears and our feelings. Maybe we would do that passionately, but above all it would be done in a spirit of brotherly love.

## **THE PROBLEM OF CRITICISM**

The disciples, seemingly, were justified in their indignant criticism of the woman at Bethany who had, in their estimation, wasted the contents of a jar of very expensive perfume, by pouring it over the head of Jesus. After all, the proceeds from its sale could undoubtedly have been put to good use in alleviating the sufferings of the poor.<sup>(6)</sup> This didn't bring a 'Get thee behind me Satan' retort from Jesus but, 'Why are you bothering her?'<sup>1</sup>. The insight of Jesus enabled him to perceive this as an act of love towards him. We can learn much from this incident. We should not be deterred by criticism. We can do something from the very best of motives and still be told that we ought not to have done it or to have done it differently or better. On such occasions may we hear the Lord's words, 'She did what she could'. There are occasions, perhaps because of our own fallibility, when two opposing views can apparently be justified, but the command of Jesus that we love one another'<sup>(8)</sup> should be more than sufficient to lead us to embrace different viewpoints without dissension. I think that we do well to reflect on the possibility that we may misjudge situations, thereby causing an innocent party unnecessary stress. The woman who anointed Jesus did 'what she could' and the testimony of Jesus was, 'She has done a beautiful thing to me'.

Our attitudes and how we see things from a personal point of view are obviously governed by our own particular personality. Thankfully we are in the course of being transformed into the likeness of our Master, a process which will not be completed until he comes again. Accordingly we know that, despite our strivings, total purity of doctrine and conduct will never be achieved this side of the Kingdom of God.

We have to beware, therefore, that we do not cast aside a brother or sister, nor pass them by, when we should really be sharing their problem and journeying with them. The Law through Moses was legalistic and prescribed a specific course of action in a given situation. The woman caught in the act of adultery should have been stoned according to the Law. <sup>(8)</sup> Thankfully the New Covenant through Jesus is one of unmerited grace. It is not a rigid catalogue of do's and don'ts but an ideal which demands from us a far greater and deeper level of commitment because Jesus, in his law, looks for actions that spring from inward spiritual renewal.

I have read that as a musical note is to a symphony, or a ball to a game of cricket, so

is a neighbour to a Christian. Why is it then so often the case that, when an apparent weakness is displayed by a brother or sister, the ecclesia, instead of being the place where difficulties may be shared, where forgiveness, love, comfort and peace may be found, where there is a measure of understanding and encouragement, sometimes becomes the place where burdens are increased and inadequacies pilloried and exposed? Weaknesses can become accentuated rather than diminished. We need to bear in mind the words of Jesus to those critical Pharisees, 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.'

These words should temper the eye of judgement when we consider the weaknesses of others.

We picture the wounded man who lay on the Jerusalem to Jericho road.(9) Whilst those who professed God passed by for fear of becoming unclean, it was the Samaritan who ministered to him. When any brother or sister or a 'neighbour\*' is hurt and wounded, we have to be ready to play the role of the Samaritan, be prepared to set aside our pre-occupations and prejudices and go to their aid.

## **THE WAY FORWARD**

In many cases of ecclesial stress we know the steps that should be taken and the attitudes that need to be changed but we still do not find it easy to proceed, especially if we are likely to meet opposition.

The Parable of the Loving Father (10) illustrates the problem. The younger son, the prodigal, returns in a spirit of sadness and repentance wanting to enjoy once more the love, warmth and security of the family. He is ready to please and to do all that he can to make amends for his behaviour. He is anxious to be reconciled to his father and his family. We can cope with people who are like that. The older brother, however, is belligerent, aggrieved and resentful. He is convinced that his view of the situation is right and he is very reluctant to modify that view even in the light of his father's forgiveness. He forgets that both he and his wayward but now restored brother are members of the same family on which the father's love is generously bestowed. The prodigal had learned his lesson and was a transformed person. The older brother still had much to learn about himself and his place in the family. It was not going to be easy for him to 'climb down' and accept the situation, but if he did not then the whole family would be under stress.

Stress can sometimes be self-generated and only a programme of self-analysis can remedy it. So .....

- We need to learn to love one another more, notwithstanding the differences that exist between us.
- We need to recognise the value of differences and that these need not always lead to negative confrontation.

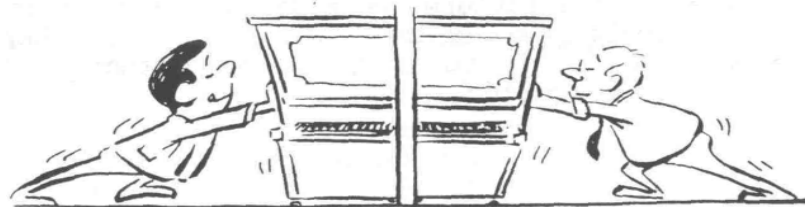
- We need to be able to pray together in order to break down any barriers.
- We need to sit together at the feet of Jesus and learn from him.
- We need to overcome the tendency to be over preoccupied with trivialities and give greater place in our lives to the 'more important matters'.(3)
- We need to consider whether we give offence needlessly and cause stress to ourselves and to others by being awkward and provocative. If so, there is need for an 'about turn' and a move towards reconciliation.
- We need to be aware of the feelings of others and to learn to be gentle and patient.
- We need to be less critical in our judgement of others and remember the teaching of Jesus concerning a 'splinter' and a 'plank'.(11)
- We need, in the interests of unity, to try to suppress our own feelings and be prepared and willing to yield a treasured position. This does not mean a compromise.
- We need to humble ourselves and offer costly spiritual sacrifices to one another and to receive humbly the gifts of others.
- We need to be honest, merciful and compassionate, loving with open-eyed wonder, communicating, sharing, praying, supporting, understanding, caring, forgiving and accepting forgiveness.
- We need to look to our Heavenly Father who is the source of all wisdom and strength.

It is possible to search the Scriptures, to analyse critically, to dot coldly every 'i' and cross every 't' and yet somehow fail to let the all-important principles enter our very being. So we must always turn to our lovely Lord and Saviour who is 'the way, the truth and the life'(12) for all who would come to the Father. 'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.'(13) 'Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'(14)

What a beautiful picture these words convey to us. As we sense their balm and know the healing that they have for us, may we, in turn, share one another's burdens with Jesus at our side.

## INDEX TO BIBLICAL REFERENCES

1. 1 Corinthians 12 v 12
2. Proverbs 17 v 3
3. Matthew 23 v 23
4. Proverbs 18 v 19
5. Matthew 8 vs 24 - 25
6. Mark 14 v 6
7. John 13 vs 34 - 35
8. John 8 vs 2 - 11
9. Luke 10 vs 30-35
10. Luke 15 vs 11 - 32
11. Matthew 7 vs 3 - 5
12. John 14 v 6
13. John 14 v 27
14. Matthew 11 vs 26 - 30



**Working Together**

## **STRESS - SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR COPING**

Derrick and Margaret Monk

Stress is something we all think we have, to a lesser or greater degree, and may be seen by some as a product of the second half of the 20th Century with its speed of change and rapidity of communication.

Stress for some can be the trigger to release energy and motivate actions, but for most of us stress is usually associated with more negative results. Stressful situations are like a treadmill - inescapable, unbearable and demoralising. We feel we can't cope a moment longer, our self-control falters, or gives way, and then we feel guilty at our own 'failure'.

Yet some people seem able to cope with today's hectic pace better than others. How do they do it? What strategies do they employ, consciously or unconsciously, in order to cope. Can we learn from such people and apply similar techniques ourselves? How do we learn to cope with 'negative' stress, while remembering that a strategy that helps one may not help another?

However, before jumping to solutions, we need to try and identify the problem. If we can determine some of the causes, maybe some solutions will become apparent.

For example, the problems of stress have two obvious main causes - ourselves and other people. We create stress for ourselves, for instance, by trying to achieve too much in too little time, or by accepting some activity which we think we would like to have a go at but which may be beyond our ability to undertake. (Hang-gliding is not for everyone!)

On the other hand, other people make demands on us which force us into situations which we have difficulty controlling. Often these demands create pressure upon us because of our response to the needs of another person. There is, for instance, the close family tie of a daughter or son caring for an elderly parent, the many demands of a young family, the demands of a heavy work schedule from our employer, peer group pressure, pressures within a marriage, etc. until we feel we must blow our top.

O.K. TELL GOD. He will listen, and so will a good friend.

It is, of course, not possible (sometimes not desirable) to remove all sources of stress from our lives, but one way of dealing with difficult stress may be to try and take time out and to sit down with a piece of paper and 'back-track' through the situation. It isn't easy to be objective when you are right in the middle of a stressful situation, but it is not impossible if you are determined to reduce your stress level. Remember that often the causes of problems may have their roots in unlikely places and only by careful analysis shall we unearth the real issue.

Write down all the factors which you recognise as causing you stress, however trivial they may seem when put into words - little things can often cause the aggravation.

Write down your negative feelings about the things you have written.

### **NOW TALK TO GOD ABOUT THEM.**

Look again at what you wrote, perhaps at a different time. Look at each stress factor. What started it? What kept it going? Could you have modified your feelings? Can you eliminate any of these causes?

Not every stress factor can be eliminated, but reducing some of them gives us more energy to cope. Do write down your ideas - they may help next time. Do try to be objective - was it really him or her, or was it really me? How could I have 'hosed down' the situation? Try not to be self-condemnatory - Christ is there to help.

Now look hard at the intractable, really difficult causes of stress that you can see no way through.

### **TALK TO GOD AGAIN ABOUT THESE.**

Give yourself time to listen and to reflect.

At this point you might want to discuss how far you have got with a close friend you can trust. Your friend may not have any answers either, but it is often therapeutic to 'get it off your chest', and two heads are often better than one. Together you may be able to develop acceptable strategies for tackling the problems.

### **PRAY TOGETHER**

Remember that just as the alcoholic has to want to be cured and has to work hard at the problem all the time, so the chronically stressed have to work at their condition and want to be cured of the debilitating stress habit. ('I love my stress' is not conducive to a cure.) It must be emphasised that you must make time for yourself. You must find a place of retreat and a time of retreat for you. This is not selfish. You need to recharge your batteries! It's also a good idea to make time to do something you like doing, and don't feel guilty.

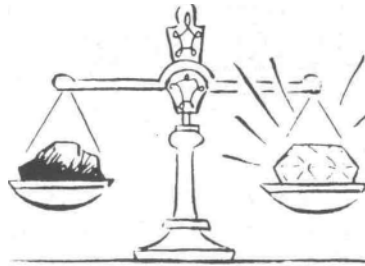
Use other people to help and don't feel guilty about that either - delegate jobs to others, accept offers of help, ask for help - this makes others feel useful too. Above all things, enjoy your time to yourself. You then return to the situation refreshed and thinking more positively. So organise your time carefully, and stick to it.

Too often stress can be caused by trying too hard to practice self-denial, self-sacrifice and even self-effacement. These can be negative qualities.

As Christians, we can turn to our Lord and Master and see how he coped. Stress was part of his every day existence too. The crowds thronged him, the sick needed him (remember how he felt ‘goodness go out of him’?), the leaders argued with him, the disciples misunderstood him and even deserted him in his hour of greatest stress. Think of the Garden of Gethsemane and the Crucifixion. None of us has had to face that sort of stress.

What did Jesus do? He resorted to prayer, mostly on his own, withdrawing from his disciples and finding some quiet place away from the stressful situation. There he talked to God about it, then returned refreshed and ready for the next day’s work, the next day’s preaching, the next miracle, etc.

Let us take courage from his example and accept his recommendation - ‘Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest!’ (Mark 6 v 31)



Pressure’s Product

A diamond is a piece of coal that made good under pressure.