

Stress – Questions to Ask

Drs. Larry and Lois Dodds



Something that I have developed for myself when I was really feeling stressed is a list of questions that I answer. So I'd like to suggest this for you. You could try this. When you are feeling really stressed, ask: "What are or what were my expectations? What did I really think was going to happen?" Sometimes we haven't really thought through the implications of things. Sometimes we are unwilling to recognize our physical shortcomings or physical limitations, expectations of other people. But what are or what were my expectations?—because often our expectations create stresses for us.

The second thing I ask is, "What are my limits?" Those could be physical, emotional, resources, could be money or people, training or lack of training. What are my limits? What are the things keeping me from accomplishing what I hope to accomplish?

Another area is, "Do I need to be more assertive?" I use assertive in the context of letting others know my needs. If I have needs that others don't know, they won't be able to do anything about it. Letting other people know that I have needs in a particular area allows them to join with me in helping work this thing out. Assertiveness, what we call appropriate assertiveness, is letting other people know your needs so they can join with you. You can't be demanding. That won't work.

Another question is, "Do I have clear goals?" If I don't have clear goals, I can't set limits and I just kind of flow all over the place. But if I have clear goals, that automatically limits what I will not do. So it's really crucial to have clear goals because that will help me be focused.

We often don't think of this so much, certainly in the kind of work we do, but, "What and who are my sources of approval or validation? Who is telling me that I'm doing a good job?" Sometimes you might need to look at checking in with the supervisor or a field leader. All of us need validation and approval. Not having it or not hearing it sometimes makes us feel very bad about ourselves and we say, I must not be doing well enough because I haven't heard anything. But the truth is, more often than not, if there is not a problem, others won't say anything to you. So, you need to find some people who can validate you.

Another question that is really crucial is, "What am I doing for my own personal growth, my internal life?" We often focus on a lot of professional development, courses and books, and we become real specialists in things. "But what am I doing for my spirit? What am I doing for my emotional life and developing that, so that I'm a richer deeper person?" That just doesn't come from doing the job, it comes from taking care of our spirits.

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Last, but not least, “Am I loving myself as much as I’m loving others?” We’re prone to meet other people’s needs without meeting our own. Really what I’m saying is, “Am I taking care myself as well as I’m taking care of others?” And I think these seven questions can really help a lot in sorting out the issue—it will help uncover the issues that are really making me stressed. I have really unrealistic expectations or I haven’t really thought about this. But all of these seven points can help a great deal in sorting out what’s really going on and then you know what to do.

I also have a personal stress plan when I figured this all out. I sit down with a piece of paper and say, “What are sources of stress for me? What is really bothering me?” It’s not my spouse or my partner or colleagues. What is bothering me? My symptoms of stress are—then I list them, you know like: headaches, backaches, sleeplessness, or waking up at 4:30 in the morning worrying about this, trying to solve problems. So those are my symptoms. Then, how am I coping? Am I coping very well? What am I using to cope? Many people I know escape into escape literature, reading all kinds of books. If they have them, they read all the ‘Reader’s Digest’ books for a year, just because they want out. Or they will spend too much time on the internet. They may do other things or just go to bed and pull a blanket over their heads. That’s one way of coping. But in other ways they are indeed taking charge and doing things well.

Other of my resources to use in stress are — these are things that really work for me. I’ve done in the past and know they really work—sometimes it’s quiet, sometimes it’s music—just listening to music for a period of time. It could be reading, could be writing, meditation on the attributes of God or verses of scripture. Often-times strenuous activity is a really good stress buster. Going out and doing something very physical can really help a lot. Playing with animals if you have pets can really help.

“What am I already doing to help with stress? In other words, am I using things that have worked in the past, but are not quite enough?” There may be some things that I already use, but I’m not using them all, so I need to add them. “And then, is there anything new that I can do that is different?” You might take some creative time thinking about this, so you can come up with some new strategies. But along with every strategy, is when do I start doing it? We can have a plan, but if we don’t implement it, it doesn’t matter anyway.

This is what I found works for me, but you know yourself best. This is just a suggested outline that I would recommend that you write it all down, so that when you are overstressed at another time, you can follow all these steps. If you have been successful in the past at managing it, you can be successful again.