

Handling Stress

Drs. Larry and Lois Dodds



So you are feeling stressed. What do you do about it? That is a real concern. How do I manage this when I feel like things are piling up and I'm not doing very well? One thing that I have found very helpful is just to identify what the stresses are. Sit down with a piece of paper and just start making a list of everything that is stressful. The dog threw up in the middle of the kitchen. The kids dropped something down the toilet and the toilet stopped up. Whatever all these things are, make a list of everything that is stressing you right now. And it could be some long-term stress like having insufficient funds, chronic illness, or something going on or concern about parents back home. But, identifying really what the stresses are by making a list is extremely helpful.

I have personally found, sometimes I just feel I'm just overstressed. Life is hard and too much is going on. But by making a list, all of a sudden it starts making sense. And I thought okay, I can see things and put them in their proper perspective. So this is really a crucial thing to identify these stresses. Also, is it coming from inside of me or outside of me? If it is from inside of me, maybe I have unrealistic expectations and I'm trying to meet everybody needs. So I'm trying to get by on five hours of sleep at night and then I'm fatigued. Which of course, fatigue doesn't make it much easier to get along with stress. So identifying these is really crucial.

My wife Lois has mentioned at another time that there's sort of an ideal load. We need to recognize what our symptoms are and what kind of thing is a flag that goes up that says I'm under too much stress.

Now I have a notion of looking at stress as a speedometer. There's kind of a cruise level where you get maximum speed and energy with a minimum amount of fuel. You feel like you are just really humming. This is good and you can keep it up for a long period of time. Lots of times though, again using the analogy of the speedometer, you are in passing mode and then never slow down. Of course, that means we are burning fuel and more wear and tear on ourselves.

Another thing that is helpful is just to talk out your feelings with somebody else that is safe. Sometimes husbands and wives can do this or a trusted friend or partner. But talking out your feelings can be an enormous help. Now sometimes you may have to give some instruction to the person you are talking with. I just need to talk, I don't want any fixes. Just listen. And if you start giving me fixes, I'll tell you to shut up and listen. But I think the instructions are really worthwhile because you are telling them what you want and sometimes they can reflect back to you.

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One thing related to this is personality type, again because under a high stress people do more of what they usually do. So if you are usually a person who is going to talk everything out, when you are under stress, you are going to do that much more. Now if you happen to be married to a person who is the opposite or your partner or your roommate is the quiet kind of person, when they are really under stress they are going to go underground. So you've got a little gopher underground and then you've got this eagle up above soaring around and so your stress can make each other worse if you don't understand that dynamic. So, the one that needs to talk it all out, or who will automatically do that, may need to find another friend instead of the spouse or the roommate because that person can get overloaded. And then the one that is naturally very quiet will need to be invited out of themselves because they may get really silent when they are under a lot of stress.

So people who tend to be introverted, they will become more introverted with overstress. Then paradoxically, when they are overstressed, they will suddenly blow up and you have a volcano and you wonder, "Where did this come from?" because they really crossed that point with themselves. So it does have a lot to do with temperament.

Sometimes you have to change your expectations. You have unrealistic expectations and I'd like to mention in this, a verse that we have all learned: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Now sometimes we interpret that as I can do everything that everybody asks me to do. And I think through our own personal experience, if I was going to restate that verse, "I can do everything that Christ asks me to do with the strength that He gives me. If I do anything else, I'm on my own." I think clarifying that expectation is a crucial aspect of this. So sometimes we need to look at what my expectations are of this. Part of that is: I don't need as much sleep as other people. I don't need as much food as other people. I don't need personal time as much as other people. So somehow you are different than everybody else. Everything that applies to everybody else doesn't apply to you.

Sometimes you need to look at motivation: Why am I doing this? For example, we all know that it is easy to spend an awful lot of time on the computer making the page look perfect, but you are using an awful lot of time and energy for something that doesn't really matter.

There is another thing called "Junk stress". This is where someone tells you about a very difficult situation over which you have absolutely no control, no influence, but you assume it as your own. For example, I'm very concerned about famine in several countries in Africa. That concerns me a great deal, but other than sending contributions to aid agencies, it doesn't help me to stay awake and worry about all those people. That is Junk Stress.

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One thing you can do if you are feeling all of these things is seek change. If you are on overload and there is too much going on in your life, you're going to have to make a change. This is why going back and identifying the kinds of stresses or talking it out with somebody, you come up with solutions. But when you are on overload, something has to change. You just can't keep it up. So then you have to work out, or perhaps talk to your spouse, or your partner or colleagues about what you need to do. At another time we will talk about what you need to do personally or internally to help you manage stress. But the big thing is that you need to make some changes.

One thing I learned in Peru, I was at one time appointed our hostess for our center which had about a hundred homes. This was a 24-hour job, keeping all those homes going, supervising employees who actually did painting and repairs. Larry was, meanwhile, on-call 24-hours a day as a doctor. I began to see that much of my stress was self-imposed. Because I wanted every one of those homes to be at the same standard my home is. If you were coming back from your home leave, I wanted you to walk in the house with fresh flowers and food in the fridge in the way I would treat my personal guests in my home. I began to see that my high standard was in fact unrealistic and I had to let go of that.

What Larry and I have learned personally is that when we are in overload, we actually have to stop. We have learned that contemplative prayer is one of our best assets. That is sitting before God and listening to Him. It is not the typical devotions where we are studying the Bible and writing everything down. It is actually as the scriptures say, as the young maiden waits for the hand of her mistress to show her what to do. We learn to wait. We learn what we need to let go of. What to give up.

I was once in a country where a young couple asked me to help them because they said, "We're just not doing well." What I discovered in them is very typical of young, new people, who are very idealistic, very eager to serve, very devoted. Their lives illustrated what a problem this creates. I said, "Tell me what happened in your life." This couple was about aged 25. They had a newborn, which the wife was breastfeeding, a toddler two years old. They were house parents for 23 children who range from kindergarten to high school. In her spare time, the wife was following the airplanes on the radio when the pilots were flying to the interior. In his spare time, the husband was the purchaser for the people of the interior. In addition, they had about 6 national employees to supervise, to do the cooking, arrange the shopping, do the laundry. They said to me with tears, "What is wrong with us?"

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What I wanted to have said, once you have passed at least age 30, you are going to say, “There is nothing wrong with you, what’s wrong with this picture?” Because they believed that since they’ve been asked to do all of that, it must be possible. And because they are idealistic and want to serve, then actually they were really set up for what we would call burnout. They were just using themselves up getting totally exhausted and yet thinking they could somehow do that. What we find when we get to that point of saying, “What is wrong with this picture?” is that we have to get back to God and just listen to Him. And let Him help us to know what His agenda is because so many people have an agenda for us. You know, we have our own and our family has an agenda, and our team has an agenda. Maybe the organization has an agenda and maybe even the people back home. We have to keep going back to God to say what is your agenda for me today?