

## Stress — Family Crises #4

“Stress” seems to describe our current generation. Eighty per cent of Americans describe their jobs as stressful. Physicians estimate that 75% of all illness is stress related. Sociologists claim that stress in society increasingly comes out at home, and our families become the victims.

Of course, stress in itself is not a bad thing. The only way to completely avoid stress is to avoid all contact with all people and all circumstances! Besides, if we didn’t have any stress we would be dead. Stress keeps us alive!

Social scientists distinguish between good stress, eustress, and bad stress, which is called distress. Good stress comes when we get a promotion or win a prize. Bad stress is what we experience if we are fired from work or if we lose the contest. Too much of either can kill us!

Stress can take a heavy toll on our bodies and on our relationships. It wears us out. It pushes our relationships to the limits. It causes us to live on the edge and often to overreact.

Our purpose here is not to talk about stress in terms of self or job, but to specifically talk about stress as it relates to the family because stress affects the interrelationships of our homes, our marriages and our families.

Dolores Curran is a nationally known author, columnist and educator who has written extensively on the topic of family stress. She defines “family stress” as a condition that arises when family life gets out of control. According to Curran, symptoms of a constantly stressful family include:

- a constant sense of urgency and hurry; no time to release and relax.
- tension that underlies and causes sharp words, sibling fighting and misunderstandings.
- a mania to escape — to one’s room, car, garage, away.
- feeling that time is passing too quickly; children are growing up too fast.
- a nagging desire for a simpler life; constant talk about times that were or will be simpler.
- no time for memories.
- little “me” or couple time.
- a pervasive sense of guilt for not being and doing everything to and for all the people in our family, church and neighborhood.

*The key question is what do we do with the circumstances and the stress? Do we perceive them as enemies that bring disaster or opportunities that bring growth?*

Curran contends that unhealthy stress is rooted in three causes:

- 1.) Cultural Conditioning. The primary function of the family has been economic — providing for survival. Our present culture is strongly emphasizing the emotional — caring relationships. Couples are overloaded with expectations to do both. Man is to be a superior provider and woman is to be supermom. Our culture is calling us to meet superhuman expectations.
- 2.) Suburban Living. Move from city life to suburban life brought a large increase in activities (sports, ballet, music lessons, clubs, school/church/neighborhood activities). Parents have kept pushing their kids into more and more activities. They have become spectators of their children rather than participants with their children. Calendars have become full and out of control.
- 3.) Perfectionism. Many of us feel we have to be perfect at everything. Perfect spouse. Perfect parents. Perfect kids. We are unwilling to allow or admit to failure. We want to do everything well. It is impossible. Some things aren’t particularly worth doing well.

Curran’s book, TRAITS OF A HEALTHY FAMILY, lists 4 traits:

- 1.) The healthy family values table time and conversation.
- 2.) The healthy family has a sense of play and humor.
- 3.) The healthy family shares leisure time.
- 4.) The healthy family has a balance of interaction among members.

If you’re like I am, you read a list like that and find yourself rating your family against it. And when you do that your stress level goes up because it’s stressful to hear those kinds of descriptions. There are feelings of guilt if we don’t measure up.

All families have stress! We’d be dead if we didn’t. But, let’s consider briefly five suggestions of what we can do about the issue of stress, particularly when it impacts our families.

Suggestion Number One is to trust God. It sounds

piously super-spiritual to begin a stress-management list with “trust God”. Some may think that’s a religious point to put up with until we can get down to the really practical psychological stuff. But actually, this is the most important suggestion of all. When we really have faith in God for our family life and don’t take everything upon ourselves, we are well on our way to managing stress.

Jesus related to a family he dearly loved in John 11. There was severe sickness (which can be a major cause of stress in any family). Here is what happened:

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister, Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”

When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.

Jesus clearly didn’t get uptight about it. It wasn’t that he didn’t care. It wasn’t that he was irresponsible. It’s just that he really trusted God the Father to be ultimately responsible. Jesus did not have to do everything right away. He had no sense of hurry.

We have to come to a genuine spiritual commitment of our families and marriages to God. Admit that God can do what we can’t. Believe that God cares more and loves much more than we do. Then trust him for the ultimate outcome instead of taking it all on ourselves. This does not make us irresponsible parents and children and spouses. It does not engender laziness. Becoming stewards who are accountable to God rather than frantic manipulators of our fellow family members is biblical Christianity!

It is hard to do—giving our marriage to God; entrusting our parents to God; letting go of our children to God; trusting him for our families as we trust him for our salvation. But he can do it. He is trustworthy!

I know this is hard to do. I’m a father. I’m a husband. I’m a son. I desperately want the best for my family. And I need regular reminders that God cares more for my wife and for my children and for my parents than I could ever possibly care for them. As Peter wrote in I Peter 5:7, “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”

A second suggestion is to choose to grow. Crises and stress are inevitable. Every

family has issues of communication, money, school, friends, sex, church, jealousies and all of the other stress producers. **The key question is what do we do with the circumstances and the stress? Do we perceive them as enemies that bring disaster or opportunities that bring growth?**

Let me list two examples of great stress producers in many households. A husband loses his job. That can cause enormous stress and strain on any family. If it is viewed as an opportunity to bring the family together, to trust God and to fight the common enemy instead of each other, the stress can actually become an opportunity to grow. For the rest of marriage the couple will look back to the worst of times becoming the best of times.

Another example of stress in a family is during teenage rebellion. Families can be pushed to their limit by problems faced by teenagers. Poor grades. Angry words. Wrong friends. Illegal drugs. Illicit sex. Spiritual apathy. All of these can be heartbreakers for Christian dads and moms. Yet this can also be a family’s greatest opportunity to demonstrate the power and person of Jesus Christ to that son or daughter. So much so that years later a then-grown adult child will say, “Dad, Mom, I love you and I’m sorry for all of the things that happened back then. I wish I could take back those words. But I want you to know that the way you responded to me back then taught me more about Jesus Christ than all the sermons I’ve ever heard and all the Sunday School classes I’ve ever attended.”

The question is will these stresses become opportunities for disaster or opportunities for growth? One couple describes it this way: “Marriages are not made in heaven, nor in bed, but in the way people respond to crises.”

Let me tell you a true story of family stress. It’s recorded in Luke 2:41-50:

Every year (Jesus’) parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was

twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who

heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you."

"Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

Family stress! Lost youth. Anxious parents. A strange explanation. Sounds to me like a whole lot of trouble! But they all grew from the experience. Listen to what happened in the epilogue to the story in verses 51-52:

Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

Stress is raised by high and unattainable expectations. We think that we have to try harder and harder in order to lower stress—keep the house absolutely perfect; hire a tutor for Junior; take a night class in order to learn more skills; become more involved in church; join a support group; read more books; listen to tapes. And on and on and on it goes.

A far better approach is to lower expectations rather than seeking to raise efficiency. Decide what we're not going to do. Conclude that it really doesn't matter if we attend every meeting, get perfect grades, have an immaculate home or take every promotion and job transfer.

That's a very, very difficult thing to do. It's hard to say "no". It's hard to not try to be perfect. It's hard to not try for the best of everything. But it is often better. Many families should make a commitment that they won't add anything unless they subtract something else.

Make a list of everything your family is doing. Decide what can be chopped off. Busyness is not a virtue. Overcommitment is far more of a sin than a grace!

Ananias and Sapphira were classic New Testament examples of wrong expectations. Their story is found in Acts 5:1-6:

***Exercise and rest are primary therapies for stress. Go to bed earlier. Sleep longer. Start a simple exercise program. Take a regular day off. Stay home more nights. Eat a balanced diet.***

Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to

the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to me but to God."

When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

Ananias and Sapphira wanted everything. They wanted the money and they wanted everyone at church to think they were sacrificial givers. They needed to lower their expectations. They couldn't do both. Because they didn't alter their expectations, they ended up dead. Stress can do the same to us and to our families.

Think right now of three areas where you could lower your expectations—areas that would make a marked difference in your family and personal stress. Decide to do at least one of the three.

Stress is a physical concern. While burnout takes an emotional toll, stress takes a physical toll. Elijah was one stressed-out prophet. His story is found in I Kings 18 and 19. There it tells that he took on all the priests of Baal. He called down fire from heaven and witnessed one of the greatest demonstrations of divine power in the Old Testament. He slaughtered 450 pagan priests. He was God's prophet to stop the rain and to start it again. He took on the kingdom and army of King Ahab and won. He performed wonderful miracles.

But it produced enormous stress. He was spiritually, emotionally and physically spent. Elijah was very vulnerable. At the beginning of I Kings 19, Queen Jezebel threatened him and he fell apart. She was able to intimidate him in a way the king, the priests and all

of heathenism could not do.

Elijah was depressed and suicidal. Here's what is tells us about Elijah in I Kings 19:4-8:

(Elijah) went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.

All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.

What Elijah needed wasn't a miracle. Elijah needed a good night's rest and a decent meal! Exercise and rest are primary therapies for stress. Go to bed earlier. Sleep longer. Start a simple exercise program. Take a regular day off. Stay home more nights. Eat a balanced diet.

Those who say, "I don't have time" are making a foolish mistake. Hurrying is no virtue. God created us to be whole persons and that includes meeting our physical needs. There are many ways to do it: take Sunday afternoon naps; stay home every Saturday night; have a weekly Sabbath. The Hebrew word "Sabbath" means stop. That was God's idea!

God commanded the people of Israel to leave their ground fallow for one year in every seven. Agriculturists today say there was an obvious reason for that. They would wear out the soil if they kept on farming it. The soil needed rest and a time for renewal. But the people of Israel never obeyed. They kept working the soil. They didn't trust God to feed them through the Sabbath years. They depleted the soil. God forced them into 70 years of national captivity when the ground was not farmed. If they wouldn't take it when they were supposed to they would have it forced on them all at once.

There's a tremendous parallel there to our lives and our stresses. The individual or the family that will not take a Sabbath day, that will not exercise and rest, will often be hit with sickness and other breakdowns to give the body a chance to renew. It is not the best way. The best way is to care for the physical every day and every week as an ongoing responsibility of handling our stress.

Add to your list a fifth and a final suggestion, to prioritize commitments.

Jesus was experiencing a very stressful day. It began with the news that his cousin John the Baptist had been beheaded as a party favor for Herod's wife. Jesus must have been deeply grieved. Then he spent the ma-

mor part of the day preaching, which is an exhausting and a draining exercise, as well as healing and feeding over 5,000 people. The crowds pressed around him. They wanted to learn about God. And they wanted more healing. Look at what Jesus did in Matthew 14:22-23:

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.

Jesus ordered his priorities. He walked away from the stresses when he needed to be alone. He knew his limits.

That's what we all need to do. We must take inventory of ourselves. We need to know our limits. What is most important? What could be eliminated? It may mean walking away from someone who needs to be taught, healed or helped, but it's what we need to do. It's what our families need to do.

I'm not talking here about the extraordinary times. I'm talking about everyday life. We are often operating our families and ourselves at constant peak. We are forcing children to grow up and hurry up. There are no priorities. Everything is at the top of the list. No one can keep living that way. We'll become sick. Our homes will become places of hostility rather than havens of help.

Practically, we should begin by keeping a list. Take a time inventory of all the activities, all the calls, all the commitments, all the problems. Sit down and decide what can wait. Quit worrying about what you can't control. Give that to God. Take responsibility for what is reasonable and most important. Prioritize.

Christian stress management is not something that is done quickly or finally. It's not something that we do and then get on with the rest of life. It's a way of life. So let's all work on trusting God, choosing to grow, altering expectations, caring for the physical and prioritizing commitments. May God bless you and un-stress you!

*Faith Matters*® is the Broadcast Ministry of  
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church  
6630 Shady Oak Road  
Eden Prairie MN 55344  
952-944-6300  
[www.wooddale.org](http://www.wooddale.org)  
©Leith Anderson