



Walking God's Way

*Biblical Encouragement
for Walking with Christ*

BIBLE STUDY

Making Stress Work for You

How can we channel stress to work for God's glory and our good?



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Stress can cause a host of emotional, spiritual, and physical problems. None of us, however, can avoid stress completely. The key is not to eliminate stress, but to handle it in a way that is godly and productive. Holly G. Miller, in her article for *Today's Christian Woman*, said if stress is carefully harnessed, it can create positive results in our lives. These results include increased productivity, greater effectiveness, and renewed energy.

How can we harness stress to make us more productive? What is the difference between stress and worry? How do we deal with the stresses of life without its affecting our physical, emotional, and spiritual health in a negative way? Is it possible for stress to be good for us? How can we glorify God despite our stressful circumstances? This study will explore these issues.

Scripture:

Joshua 1:1-18; Esther 4:6-17; Matthew 14:3-23; Romans 8:28; 2 Corinthians 11:22-12:10; Philippians 4:4-9

Based on:

"Positively Stressed," by Holly G. Miller
TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, July/August 1998, Vol. 20, No. 4, Page 74

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LEADER'S GUIDE

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note: Prior to the class, provide for each person a copy of the article "Positively Stressed" from TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine (included at the end of this study).

We live in a stress-filled society. Multitasking is a way of life. We are often trying to balance our job with raising kids, attending extracurricular activities, carpooling, community service, volunteering, and working in the church. When we add to our busy schedules health issues, caring for others, and the trials of life, we can feel overwhelmed.

Stress is inevitable. It is often caused by circumstances that we cannot avoid or control. Worry, however, is a spiritual and emotional response to stress that drains energy and creates a host of problems. When we cast our cares on Jesus, he gives us the strength to persevere through difficult times. In this way God is glorified, and we can accomplish God's will in our lives, despite the circumstances. By God's grace, we can channel stress to work for us instead of against us.

Discussion starters:

- [Q] What causes stress in your life? How do you handle it? How does stress affect you spiritually, emotionally, and physically? Why does stress affect you this way?
- [Q] How is stress different from worry? Do you think it is possible to have stress without worry? Why or why not?
- [Q] Do you think it is possible for stress to be beneficial? Explain your answer. How can stress be harmful? How do we differentiate between harmful and beneficial stress? What behaviors do we exhibit when stress is harmful? When it is beneficial?

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PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Meditating on God's Word reminds us that God is always with us and that he gives us the courage and strength to accomplish his will in all circumstances.

Read Joshua 1:1–18. Joshua was faced with a monumental task. He had stepped into the role previously held by Moses for forty years. He was expected to lead the entire Israelite nation into the Promised Land. Joshua was dealing with a group of people who had a history of grumbling, disobedience, and rebellion. The Israelites had refused to enter this land under Moses' leadership and had consequently wandered in the desert for forty years. Given this potentially overwhelming task, Joshua was told to be strong and courageous. He reminded Joshua to meditate on God's law day and night, so Joshua would be diligent to obey it. God promised to be with Joshua wherever he went, and he promised to never leave nor forsake him.

God also commands us to be strong and courageous. He does not want us to be trembling, terrified people, nor does he want us to be discouraged by circumstances. He reminds us that he is always with us, and he gives us his Word to guide and comfort us along the way. He promises to never leave or forsake us. Often we stand at the river of promise God offers. We are afraid to step out and take the risk to follow him into the Promised Land; instead, we choose to wander in the desert of our doubts and disbelief. God calls us to be conquerors. When we meditate on his Word, rely on his strength, and have the will to obey, God will give us the courage to conquer whatever he calls us to do.

- [Q] What is the difference between meditating on God's Word and simply reading it? How does meditation help us apply God's Word to our lives?
- [Q] Why was it important for Joshua to be reminded to be obedient and to have courage? How might Joshua have been feeling? What contributed to that?
- [Q] How did Joshua call the Israelites to demonstrate courage and obedience? What was their response? Why was it important for Joshua to call the people to obedience and courage, as God had called him? How might their unity of purpose have helped them conquer the Promised Land?
- [Q] Joshua harnessed his stress and began his great task of conquering Canaan by breaking it down into manageable steps. How does breaking down a task and focusing on one step at a time help us reduce stress? How do we do this without losing the big picture?
- [Q] Joshua delegated responsibility to those under him. How do you think this might have helped him? How might it have helped the Israelites? How do we decide what and when to delegate?

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- [Q] God promises believers that he is with us wherever we go and that he will never leave or forsake us. What does that mean to you? How does this promise help you to have courage in times of stress?
- [Q] Have you ever had a time when fear kept you from conquering something God called you to do? Be specific. What blessings may you have missed? What could you have done differently?

Teaching point two: Acceptance of God's sovereign will, no matter what the circumstances, gives us peace and courage to face whatever comes.

Read Esther 4:6–17 and Romans 8:28. Esther was under tremendous stress. The lives of her people, the Israelites, were in her hands. To help them, she had to risk her own life. Mordecai, Esther's cousin, kept her accountable so she would not back away from her calling. Mordecai told Esther God would save his people one way or another, but if Esther did not obey God's will by carrying out her part of his plan, she and her family would perish. Esther's life was at risk no matter which choice she made. She found courage and strength through prayer. In her phrase "If I perish, I perish," we witness her trust in God's sovereignty.

God wants us to trust him completely. Getting to this point requires much prayer. Esther recognized this. She solicited the prayers of those around her who shared her faith. God wants us to be willing to risk everything, including our lives, for his kingdom. When we get to the point of complete surrender to God's will, peace floods in, and we have the courage to face whatever comes.

- [Q] What was Esther's first reaction to Mordecai's request that she go into the king's presence and beg for mercy for her people? How did Mordecai hold her accountable?
- [Q] Holly Miller suggests that when we are under stress, we should find someone who will be strong enough to hold us accountable. How can having someone to whom you are accountable help you complete a task? How can it spiritually help you in difficult times?
- [Q] How does prayer help us accept God's sovereign will in our lives? Why is it important to ask others to pray for us? How has prayer helped you during stressful times?
- [Q] How did Esther exhibit her trust in God's sovereignty? What must she have known about God? Romans 8:28 says that God promises to work all things for the good of those who love him. How does this help us trust God? How does it help us endure difficult times?
- [Q] How did Esther harness her stress to accomplish God's will in her life?



Teaching point three: Finding time to be alone with God is essential to our spiritual health and is rejuvenating to our mind in times of stress.

Read Matthew 14:3–23. John the Baptist had been beheaded. When Jesus heard the news, he “withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place” (Matt. 14:13). When his boat arrived at the shore, the crowds were already there ahead of him. With great compassion for the people, Jesus set aside his own grief and proceeded to heal the sick and feed the multitude. At the end of the day, however, Jesus sent away the crowd and the disciples so he could go up to the mountainside by himself to pray.

Time alone with God spiritually renews our strength. Solitude gives us a chance to immerse ourselves in God’s Word, pray, and find healing in his presence. We come to our Abba Father, Daddy God, and lay all of our worries at his feet. He reminds us of his great love for us and reassures us that we are his own. He renews our strength so that we can soar above the problems of the world, like an eagle soars above the earth. We worship him in spirit and in truth and are brought back to the place where our heart trusts in him completely, casting aside the cares of the world. We seek his wisdom, and he gives it as he promises. We are then equipped to meet life’s challenges and struggles.

- [Q]** Upon hearing about John the Baptist’s death, why was the immediate response of Jesus to withdraw to a solitary place? Why do you think Jesus chose to pray alone instead of with the crowd or with the disciples? Why is spending time alone with God essential? How does it help you in times of stress? How does time alone with God differ from corporate worship? In what ways are both important?
- [Q]** Once we have spent time alone with God, we need to allow ourselves diversions from the stress. Our physical bodies need time to rest, and our minds need time to recover and relax. Even God rested when he created the world; certainly we do not need less. What happens when we do not take time to rest? How do you relax during stressful times?
- [Q]** In her stress management seminars, Charlotte Sutton suggests prioritizing activities into categories of Critical, Important, and Unimportant to help with time management. How could prioritizing help us find time for solitude and rest? What would be on your critical list? What do you consider unimportant? What would you say are the priorities of Jesus? What should our priorities be?

Teaching point four: When we have an attitude of thankfulness and trust in God, we will have joy, even in the most difficult situations, and we will bring glory to God.

Read 2 Corinthians 11:22–12:10 and Philippians 4:4–9. Nothing seemed to keep Paul down. His purpose in life was to glorify God, and he did this in spite of great persecution. In Philippians, Paul told us to rejoice always, regardless of our circumstances. Paul was even

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thankful for insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties, because he knew they made him rely on God's strength instead of his own.

Having a heart of joy in stressful times can seem like an insurmountable expectation, and it would be impossible in our own strength. By God's grace and power, however, we are able to have joy regardless of our situation. When we pray instead of worry; let our minds dwell on what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy; and have a heart of thanksgiving, we will have deep joy.

Joy is not happiness. Happiness is dependent upon circumstance, but joy is not. Joy is that deep understanding of God's love for us and complete trust that he knows what he is doing, even when we do not understand. It is recognizing God's all-surpassing power to help us through any circumstance and knowing that God will never abandon us.

- [Q]** How can you explain Paul's attitude in the midst of so much persecution? Why was he thankful for difficult circumstances? What can you be thankful for in difficult circumstances?
- [Q]** Philippians 4 tells us not to worry. How is stress different from worry? How do we keep ourselves from worry? How can stress be good for us spiritually? For stress to benefit us, what must our heart attitude be?
- [Q]** When have you experienced joy in difficult circumstances? Upon what was your joy based? How is joy different from happiness?
- [Q]** According to Philippians 4, what brings us the peace of God? How can peace transcend all understanding? How do you think peace guards our hearts and minds? Share a time when you experienced God's peace in a stressful situation.



PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Though we often cannot control our circumstances, we can control our responses to them. If we harness stress through God's power, he will use stress to make us more like Christ. Stress then becomes an agent to accomplish God's will in our lives. In the process, God is glorified.

[Q] How can our response to stress glorify God? How can it be dishonoring?

[Q] How can stress benefit us practically?

[Q] How can we keep stress from affecting us in negative ways?

Optional Activities:

1. Using your calendar as a reference point, prioritize your activities. Based on the principle of tithing, does at least a tenth of your time belong to God?
2. Set goals to help you manage your time effectively. Be sure to include time for solitude with God. Find a person to hold you accountable.
3. Make a list of fifty things for which you are thankful, then pray through it.

—Study prepared by Julie Kloster, speaker and freelance writer.

Additional Resources

 *Can Stress Heal?* Kenneth H. Cooper, M.D. (Thomas Nelson/W, 1997; ISBN 0785283153)

 *Handling Stress*, D. Warrick (Nav Press, 1991; ISBN 0891095284)

 *Keep It Simple for Busy Women: Inspiring Ideas to Reduce Stress and Enjoy Life More*, Emilie Barnes (Harvest House Publishers, 2002; ISBN 0736905537)

 *Straight Talk on Stress*, Joyce Meyer (Time Warner Book Group, 2003; ISBN 0446691488)

 *Stress: Peace Amid Pressure*, David Powlison (P & R Publishing, 2004; ISBN 0875526608)

 *Women and Stress: A Practical Approach to Managing Tension*, Jean Lush (Baker, 1999; ISBN 0800756177)

 ChristianBibleStudies.com

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Positively Stressed

Stress can either serve as our enemy or our ally.

by Holly G. Miller

For years we've heard about the dangers of stress. The warning goes something like this: allow tension to sneak into your life, and don't be surprised when indigestion turns into ulcers, fatigue results in burnout, and innocent nail-biting leads to serious binge-eating. But wait a minute. Some experts now are claiming that stress has another side. They say that when carefully harnessed, it can serve as a positive, not negative, force in your life. It can boost your productivity, keep you interested in what you do, and make you more interesting to the people around you.

"Stress can create an adrenaline charge," says Charlotte Sutton, an associate professor of management at Auburn University who frequently teaches stress management seminars. "We move faster, are more effective, and have more energy. A lot of people tell me that without stress, they don't get very much done."

Here are some tips on how to tap into the upside of stress in your life.

Hire A Stress Manager

"Being overwhelmed wasn't an option," recalls Julie-Allyson Ieron about her reaction to the news that a publisher wanted her to develop a book titled *Names of Women of the Bible*. The problem was that Julie had a full-time job, and all writing assignments had to be tackled on weekends and holidays. Added to this pressure was a tight deadline: five months to finish the book. The opportunity had the potential of panicking this first-time author, so instead, "I broke down the project into manageable bites," says Julie. "I decided to write about fifty-two women, which required fifty-two outlines that would result in fifty-two chapters. I looked at the calendar and figured out how many chapters I needed to research, outline, and write each weekend to complete the job on time."

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Then she “hired” a stress manager to keep her on schedule, someone who was strong enough to hold her accountable to her goals. “I called in my mom and showed her my writing schedule,” she says. “I gave her permission to keep tabs on me. Most weekends that meant she would drop in two or three times as I was working. If she saw that I was puttering around, she would gently nudge me back to my writing.”

They agreed on two conditions: first, Julie wouldn’t complain when her mother reminded her of her work quota; second, her mother would be gentle and loving in any admonition she delivered. “She helped me stay on task and get the allotted work done each day—no more and no less,” says Julie. “When I reached my weekly goal, we would go out to dinner, watch TV, or find some other way to kick back. Once or twice I tried to push myself past my limit and found I sacrificed effectiveness. I knew that would serve no purpose other than to burn me out before the project was done. My mother helped me pace myself.”

Adjust Your Attitude

The Bible teaches us to “be strong and courageous; do not be terrified; do not be discouraged” (Joshua 1:9). Often the way we size up a demanding situation determines whether the stress we experience serves as our ally or acts as our enemy. If we think we’re unworthy to meet a challenge, that feeling of unworthiness will produce negative stress. If we remember we are God’s creation, we’ll welcome the opportunity to use our God-given talents. Our enthusiasm will produce positive stress that will push us to perform at our peak.

“Assume a positive viewpoint,” suggests Dennis E. Hensley, author of *Positive Workaholicism* and an associate professor at Taylor University. “Rather than saying ‘No one will hire me for this job because I’m too old,’ a senior applicant can adjust her attitude and say, ‘I have more experience than anyone else interviewing for this job!’ Rather than saying, ‘No one takes me seriously because I’m so young,’ a newcomer to the job market can say, ‘I’m fresh out of school with state-of-the-art skills, and I have youth and energy on my side!’ Phrase everything in positive terms and stress becomes an asset, not a liability.”

Ignite The Spark

We may never qualify for the Olympics, but we can all learn a lesson from world-class athletes who clamp headsets over their ears as they wait their turn to compete. Whether they’re listening to a favorite motivational speaker or a tape of inspirational music isn’t important. What matters is that they’ve identified their personal strategy for pumping themselves up and getting their butterflies to fly in formation. These instant pick-me-up techniques blot out distractions, help them focus, and infuse them with a spurt of positive energy.

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What works for you? Some people carry a favorite Scripture verse or a few lines of poetry to review immediately before plunging into a stressful situation. Others rely on a funny cartoon that causes them to laugh, and the laughter releases an adrenaline rush that carries them through an ordeal. Each of us needs to determine our individual way of igniting the spark that fires our positive emotions.

Give Yourself Time

“I can’t remember a time when I didn’t carry some kind of planner with me,” says Julie Ieron. “I trust my planner to carry the details, and this frees my mind to concentrate on the important things in life.” It also reduces negative tension caused by arriving late, forgetting appointments, losing phone numbers, and scheduling obligations on top of each other.

One key to harnessing positive stress is having time to prepare for demanding situations and time to rejuvenate between them. More than 40 percent of adults who participated in a recent survey admitted they felt they were on a treadmill and couldn’t get off; almost double that number said they would like more time to “stop and smell the roses.” A carefully designed calendar that shows a month-at-a-glance can ensure adequate smell-the-roses time. It also indicates days that contain too much or too little stress.

“Choose a planner you can customize,” advises Julie. “It shouldn’t be too complex or time-consuming to maintain, and it shouldn’t make you feel guilty. Instead, it should free you to do the things God created you to accomplish. Make sure it helps you unify your spiritual, church, home, and family lives rather than merely keeps track of professional obligations.”

As you study the month ahead, try to gauge the stress level of each day and each week. Equalize your obligations so that too much stress doesn’t leave you drained on Monday, and too little stress doesn’t cause you to feel stagnant by Wednesday. Just for fun, create your version of a perfect day. What activities does it contain? Try to include as many of these activities as possible in your schedule.

Exercise, Exercise, Exercise

“If you get into a negative stressful situation, sometimes you have to stop, step back, and start again,” says Dr. Ken Cooper, who touched off the fitness boom in 1968 with his book, *Aerobics*, and whose latest book is *Can Stress Heal?* “I use stress to make me productive, but when I’ve reached a point where I can’t be creative anymore, I take a walk or work out in the gym. Then I come back and am productive again.”

For Cooper, now sixty-seven, a typical workout includes ten minutes of stretching, a two-mile run, a seven-minute walk, and a series of strength exercises. It’s fortunate

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for us that what he does is less important than why he does it. Exercise breaks the routine, grabs our attention, rids us of tension, and refreshes us as we mobilize our positive stress for the next challenge. What kind of exercise is best? The country's leading fitness activity is also its simplest: walking.

Choose Your Rewards

In her stress management seminars, Charlotte Sutton asks participants to jot down their activities of the past three days and organize them according to priority. Each activity is assigned a label: Critical, Important, and Unimportant. Too often the activities that students categorize as unimportant are those that serve as rewards for a day well spent or a job well done. These unimportant activities reduce negative stress and replenish positive energy.

“We all need down time,” says Charlotte. “Whether it’s music, a warm bath, an hour of television, or a movie with a friend, we need diversions from whatever is stressful in our life.” But we should choose our rewards carefully because like stress, they come in two varieties: positive and negative. Rewarding ourselves with an outfit that we can’t afford or a dessert that we don’t need may provide a positive lift that dissipates into negative stress when the bills come in or the pounds go on.

“Often just getting a job done and off your to-do list is a major reward,” says Charlotte. If a genuine reward is in order, she suggests using the occasion to make a new friend. “Invite someone to share the relief and pleasure you feel at having completed a job. Go up to the person and say, ‘I’ve just finished an important project. Will you go out and celebrate with me?’”

It is possible to make stress your ally, not your enemy. So take advantage of that adrenaline rush, and be *positively* stressed for a change!

—“*Positively Stressed*,” by Holly G. Miller, TODAY’S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, July/August 1998, Vol. 20, No. 4, Page 74. Holly is a TCW contributing editor, adjunct professor of communication at Anderson (Indiana) University, and author of several books.

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