



HELPFUL HINTS FOR HANDLING STRESS

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Section I

Demanding, hectic, stressful. These are terms that can all be used to describe our fast-paced lives. Family, work, church, clubs, and other activities can combine to make our lives tense and hurried. What can be done to help handle these pressures? Over the next few pages, we will explore some means of dealing with stress and anxiety.

This pamphlet is not meant to be a detailed, all-inclusive discussion of this subject. It is a brief overview that will give helpful hints in stress management. For a more in-depth view, a reading list will be provided.

What is stress? Webster tells us that stress is “a physical, chemical, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension and may be a factor in disease causation.” Many times stress leads to anxiety which has been defined as, “an emotion that a person experiences in the face of a perceived threat or danger.”¹ Why do we develop anxiety? Because we are met with a stressor that needs to be addressed. If this stressor is handled properly, the anxiety will resolve, but if we fail to recognize or address this stress, we may be headed for trouble. Learning to deal with anxiety responsibly is not an easy matter. The methods discussed in the following pages can start us on the right track.

How does anxiety affect us? There are many ways. Headaches, chest pain, palpitations, shortness of breath, abdominal discomfort, tremors, muscle aches, forgetfulness, nervousness, and many more complaints can be manifestations of anxiety. Of course, no one should assume that these symptoms are due to anxiety as they may be indicative of serious medical problems. Physicians should be consulted to accurately assess these symptoms. Many of us experience one or more of these symptoms from time to time. When we recognize these as being due to anxiety, how should we react?

PRIORITIES

First, we need to decide why anxiety has occurred. What is it trying to tell us? Many times it is saying “slow down.” Why are our lives so busy? There are numerous factors, but we bring much of this on ourselves. We must learn to say no. Realistic priorities need to be set and followed. Once these priorities are established, a schedule can be arranged

which reflects these priorities. No one can “do it all.” Organization and efficient use of time are important, but if life is so packed-full of activity that anxiety occurs on a consistent basis, changes need to be made. Activities need to be eliminated. Life can be simplified. It may be difficult but it can be done if the appropriate decisions are made.

EXERCISE

Now that life is less hectic as a result of limiting obligations, what else can be done to alleviate anxiety? Exercise. As children, we encountered stress just as adults do; however, as youngsters we ran and played and forgot our troubles. As adults, we sit and worry about our problems. How does exercise help us deal with stress? First, it simply serves as an outlet for our pent-up frustrations and helps relieve troublesome thoughts. Also, exercise is well known to produce endorphins which are naturally produced morphine-like substances that can deliver a feeling of peacefulness. They are the body’s natural pain killers. The amount and type of exercise are individual decisions. I recommend at least three days a week for 20 minutes. The important consideration is that the exercise program is reasonable and something that can be done consistently. Walking is an excellent exercise that requires no expensive equipment, limited preparation, and has a low likelihood of injury. (A word of warning—Don’t let the weather be an excuse. Find a way to get it done. The malls and fitness centers are good for indoor exercise.)

LAUGHTER

Find an excuse to laugh. Seek out friends who make you laugh. Movies, TV shows, and books can all be effective. Sometimes we have to make ourselves laugh. I’m reminded of Mary Poppins when Ed Wynn, Dick Van Dyke, and the children all float to the ceiling in a fit of laughter. They probably never felt better. Why? Again, there is evidence that laughter triggers a release of endorphins.² It’s also hard to think worrisome thoughts in the midst of a good laugh. The Bible tells us “a merry heart doeth good like a medicine.” (Proverbs 17:22) Enjoy a good laugh.

BALANCED DIET

Dieting and concern about weight seem to be obsessions in this country. While I am totally in favor of weight and cholesterol control, I

also do not believe in becoming so preoccupied with what we eat that we actually increase anxiety. In general, fad dieting that “guarantees” large amounts of rapid weight loss should be avoided. A healthy diet chosen from all four food groups and low in salt and fat is very beneficial to our emotional and physical health. A modest reduction in calories in combination with a good exercise program is the best means to achieve a slow, steady, and most importantly, sustained weight loss. Avoid the “yo-yo syndrome” of widely fluctuating body weight. Be concerned about your diet but not worried.

SLEEP

There is a popular school of thought today which suggests that sleep is just a waste of time. Nothing could be further from the truth. Obviously there is individual variation in the need for sleep, but the large majority of people require 7–8 hours per night while some require even more. If we are to effectively deal with anxiety, adequate sleep is essential. If we require an alarm clock to wake us in the morning, we are probably sleep deprived.

A few helpful hints for a good night’s sleep:

- 1) Choose a comfortable environment, including a good mattress, low light, quiet atmosphere, and pleasant temperature (usually cooler temperatures help).
- 2) Avoid stimulating activity just prior to sleep, such as TV viewing, exercise, large meals, unfinished work from the office, and suspenseful, exciting books. Some sleep experts recommend that any reading in bed be avoided but others say certain material is acceptable. Discover what works for you.
- 3) Limit caffeine intake.
- 4) Try to go to bed at about the same time each night.
- 5) Avoid daytime naps.
- 6) Don’t try to force sleep. Let it happen. The average length of time for a person to fall asleep is 30 minutes.
- 7) Avoid drugs. Although these are helpful at times, they can worsen the problem of insomnia by causing tolerance to their effects. The majority of people do not require medication and those who do, usually for just short periods of time.

HOBBIES

Who has time? Hobbies do not have to be elaborate, time-consuming affairs. The important thing is to “take a break.” Get away from your work and other responsibilities, if only for a little while. Many people combine the need for a hobby with exercise. Just shooting a little basketball by myself is a favorite of mine. Find something that can be fitted into your schedule, whatever relaxes you. These mini-vacations can make the difference between an “uptight” person and a calm, restful person.

RELAXATION

We can learn to relax. As we practice relaxing, achieving a state of relaxation will become more and more natural. When anxiety starts, nip it in the bud. Take some slow deep breaths. With each breath, repeat the same phrase. Pick a phrase of your own. Something as simple as “anxiety tells me to relax.” Some people like to use a verse of scripture, such as “let the peace of God rule in your hearts.” (Matthew 11:28) As this technique is practiced, eventually the desired response (relaxation) will follow.³ Remember a setting where you have felt very relaxed and imagine yourself back in that setting. Allow relaxation to come to you. If this technique is started promptly with the beginning of anxiety, within a few moments the anxiety will pass.

WORRY TIME

If worry is a problem for you, set aside a specific time of day for it. Don't let it ruin your whole day. If worry creeps in, jot it down and determine to put it off until your appointed “worry time.” This condenses worry into a short period of time and thus promotes freedom from worry during times when it can be most distracting.

If the suggestions in the preceding paragraphs are followed, many of the symptoms of anxiety can be alleviated. While these lessons are very beneficial in helping cope with the stress of our lives, many times they treat only the symptoms and do not fully address the source of the anxiety. Often the source is readily apparent, but other times it is very obscure. Unless the source of anxiety is dealt with, we will be prone to have recurrent bouts of anxiety, or we may stay in a constant state of “dis-ease.” The more severe the anxiety, the more important it is to seek professional help to sort through the complexity of the problem of anxiety. There are counselors, pastors, psychologists, and psychiatrists

who are well trained in helping evaluate and treat anxiety related disorders. Medications do play a part but only a part. They often only cover up the symptoms of anxiety when the source needs to be addressed.

As an internist, I have some training in the management of stress-related disorders, but that training is limited. That is why the other health-care professionals are mentioned above. Frequently, patients are reluctant to see these professionals. There is somewhat of a stigma attached to them in our society. To see them would be a sign of weakness, some would say. Others might assert, "I'm not crazy." This attitude is unfortunate. Just as diabetes, hypertension and heart disease are illnesses that need to be treated by well trained physicians, generalized anxiety, panic attacks, and other stress-related disorders should be treated by those with appropriate training. Granted, most cases of anxiety do not require extensive evaluations or treatment, but it has been my observation that there are many patients who would benefit from such therapy. They frequently fail to receive it either because of their reluctance or that of their physicians. Help is available and your personal physician can help arrange this.

Section II

In this section we will look at the spiritual aspects of stress management. This pamphlet, I believe, would be incomplete without attention to this vital area. If anyone would be offended, please feel free to stop reading. If you continue, I feel that your ability to handle stress will be greatly enhanced.

Allow me a moment for a brief personal testimony. I am a Christian. I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior when I was 18 years old. Until that time in my life, I felt that as long as I did enough good to balance the bad I would make it to heaven. I was self-sufficient. I didn't really think I needed God's help. But He brought me to the point that I knew I could not handle all my problems alone. Because a broken relationship brought unresolved stress into my life, I developed anxiety. I called on the Lord, and He brought healing to my soul. Eventually I realized that I was not good enough to get into heaven on my own. Romans 3:23 says "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Sin has a penalty. Death. Romans 6:23 reads, "For the wages of sin is death." I was dead spiritually, but I am so glad that Romans 6:23

continues, “but the gift of God is eternal life.” How? “In Jesus Christ my Lord” For years I tried to work my way to heaven. Then I saw that salvation is a gift. Ephesians 2:8, 9 says, “For by grace we have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast.” Faith in what? In Jesus Christ and the payment He made. We have seen that the penalty for sin is death. There had to be a payment for that penalty, I’m thankful that “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8) Belief in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross 2000 years ago to pay my sin debt is now what I know will get me into heaven, not my “works of righteousness.” His gift is open to anyone. It is open to you. John 1:12 tells us, “But as many as receive Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God.” Just as God reached down and saved me, He will do the same for you if you believe in the sacrificial death and resurrection of His Son as payment for your sins. Also as He relieved my anxiety, He can relieve yours. Let’s see how.

FORGIVENESS

Frequently, the underlying source of stress is suppressed emotion. Hidden guilt, jealousy, hatred, anger, and envy can all cause tremendous anxiety. At times the problem can be pin-pointed easily. Other times it requires in-depth evaluation by trained professionals. Once the emotion and its source are identified, two things need to occur. First, ventilate these feelings. But who do we open up to? The Person to start with is someone who is always there, who will “never leave you or forsake you,”⁴ God. We must confess our thoughts (and actions). Allow the healing of the Great Physician to begin. 1 John 1:9 tells us, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” When we receive this cleansing, we can come into the presence of God. In His presence is peace, Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace, and part of the fruit of the Spirit is peace. We also need to cultivate good friendships, Some experts in the field of stress management “estimate that anxiety can be cut in half merely by verbalizing to a good listener”⁵ The friend needs to be someone who can keep your confidence, someone who has your best interest at heart.

As freeing as the ventilation can be, there is more that needs to be done. We must accept God’s forgiveness for our shortcomings but, also, it is necessary to forgive others we feel have wronged us.

Forgiveness is a choice. It is ceasing “to feel resentment against an offender.”⁶ Resentment is like a grain of sand in the shoe of a diabetic. As the diabetic walks, the sand becomes an irritant but it may go unnoticed. First, a blister develops, then an ulcer. If the irritation goes on long enough, it can eventually necessitate corrective surgery or even amputation of a limb. The longer resentment is allowed to fester, the more severe the treatment is to alleviate the problem. Forgive early and often to prevent the irritant from becoming a bigger problem. Matthew 6:14 tells us, “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.” Forgiveness may also require confronting the person who is the source of your resentment so that a mutual understanding can be obtained. Remember that we can not control the actions of others, but we can prevent those offending actions from becoming stumbling blocks for us by forgiving.

QUIET TIME

All of us need a time away from the hustle and bustle of life. A time to be alone. A time for reflection. When our schedules are already full, how do we find the time? Make this time a priority. It doesn't have to be long. You may want to start with just five minutes, but you may find that this time will grow. There are two aspects of this interlude that I would like to address.

A. Meditation: I am not talking about meditation as eastern religions view, it but rather a time to let God speak to us through His word. Allow God to fill your mind with His thoughts. Phillipians 4:8 tells us to meditate on things that are true, noble, just, pure, lovely, and of good report, anything praiseworthy or virtuous. Scripture is filled with just such things. We are better able to handle the daily stresses of life when we hide scripture in our hearts. Also, any other wholesome, good thoughts are healing.

B. Prayer: Phillipians 4:6,7 tells us to “Be anxious for nothing but in everything through prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” What a wonderful promise. Oh, how great it would be to have the “peace of God.” Well, through “prayer and supplication with thanksgiving,” we can have it. It is interesting that this verse promises that God's peace will guard our hearts and minds. What is the

difference? Many times we can analyze our situations and realize that we have no reason to be anxious, but we are. The problem is that our mind knows the truth but that belief has not made it to our heart. This verse tells us that we can have peace to the very center of our being. God's peace. "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you, not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled; neither let it be afraid." (John 14:27)

Prayer and meditation are closely linked. We can pour out our hearts to God in prayer. We've seen that this ventilation is good. As we ventilate, we need to allow Him to speak to us. We open ourselves to Him by meditating on His word.

Let this quiet time be a time of joy, not drudgery. If it is just added to the long list of things we do, we defeat the purpose. Allow this quiet time to be the best time of your day. Fellowship with your creator. Get to know Him, and He will bring you peace.

SETTLE YOUR OBEDIENCE

Daily we have decisions to make concerning God's will. Most of His will is spelled out for us in His word. His desire is for us to follow these commandments. He is looking out for us. He has our best interests at heart. He knows that when we are following His will, we will be the most fulfilled and the least anxious; even when problems arise. He tells us in Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, thoughts of peace and not evil, to give you a future and a hope."

When should we decide about following His will? Often we wait until a situation arises that signals a conflict between right and wrong. Too many times we are caught off guard and succumb to temptation. The best time to make the decision is before circumstances demand a decision. We should settle it in our hearts to follow God's teachings, no matter what. If we fail, and we all will, confess the failure to God and return to His fellowship, seeking to follow Him more closely. Don't allow guilt to fester as we saw in the example of the grain of sand in the shoe. The results can be devastating.

SABBATH REST

We saw earlier that we need sleep. God also knew that his human creation needed rest. He gives us an example in the very act of creation. On the seventh day He rested. Was He tired? No. He gives us an

example to follow. Our bodies and minds need time away from the every day grind. Take a day off. God blessed and sanctified it.

Also, there is a spiritual rest. "There remains therefore a rest for the people of God." (Hebrews 4:9) Jesus tells us to "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:28,29). Jesus Christ is our indwelling Sabbath rest.

In closing, I have attempted to give a brief overview of a very complex subject. At times I may have been overly simplistic, at other, too involved. It is my hope and prayer that these words will be beneficial to you in your daily lives. If anything has been written in error, I pray that it will be forgotten, but if there is truth, that it will help you face the struggle of life and come out a winner.

I would like to say that the methods discussed, I believe, are beneficial to Christians and non-Christians alike. But I do see a distinct advantage for Christians. We have the Prince of Peace living within us. We have His Word to guide us. We have His Holy Spirit to comfort us. And we have His church to encourage us. We can overcome anxiety because we "can do all things through Christ who strengthens" us. (Phillipians 4:13)

If any reader has questions or comments about this material, please feel free to contact me. For further information on the subject, a reading list and bibliography are provided,

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OTHER SUGGESTED READING

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