

How to Make Stress Healthy and Helpful

Prayer

O Blessed Mother I beg you to shower us with your graces and to send your spouse, the HS, to work through us. Hail Mary... St. John Vianney... St. Philomena...

Talk

Themes:

- God's wonderful design of the human body
- *Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it* - Thomas Aquinas
- *Not with that attitude you won't* - Fr. McCullough

Who here believes stress is bad? Unhealthy? Debilitating?

When you think of stress do you see burdens, being overwhelmed, despair and depression?

Stress does not have to be this.

Stress is a sign of a purposeful life. Many studies have been done and show that the most fulfilling lives are also the most stressful. Think about it. You are stressed because you care about something. Because you have a duty towards this something. A duty with purpose and a duty that's rewarding when accomplished.

Think back to a big test, defending your thesis or ordination to the priesthood. All of these most likely brought a certain amount of stress. Why? Because it's important, it serves a purpose. Once the event is completed, there's a feeling of accomplishment, happiness. This is the natural cycle: a stressful event, resolution and then satisfaction and happiness. Now you are stressed over your parishes because you care about them and the parishioners. You want what's best for their souls. You want to lead them to Heaven. When you see this happening it's a wonderful feeling. Succeeding through difficulties leads to a purposeful and happy life.

Does stress need to be burdensome, overwhelming, debilitating? Or is there another way?

Think about someone at the bottom of Mt. Everest. One person looks up and sees a challenge and gets excited to meet the challenge. Their energy level goes up. Another looks up and thinks about everything that could go wrong. I could freeze to death, get lost and die alone, run out of oxygen. If I'm lucky I'll die a quick death and fall off the face of the cliff. This person is overwhelmed and falls into despair. The same situation- two different reactions. One healthy and the other unhealthy. One inspiring, energy boosting, the other debilitating.

Let's take a closer look at the two reactions. The first person is focused on success. He's already creating a plan, growing in determination to conquer the mountain. He trusts in his abilities to succeed, to overcome obstacles and setbacks. The second reaction is dominated by fear. So much so, that success doesn't even seem like a possibility.

When confronted with difficult situations we need to respond like the first. We need to see the situation as a challenge and trust that God will help us be victorious.

Psychologists call this Cognitive Behavior Therapy, and it has proven to be very successful. The mere acceptance that stress is not bad, not unhealthy has proven in many studies and experiments to be life altering. There are many examples in this book: from students entering college (grades and drop out rates), taking exams, fear of flying and so on.

But I like the way a Catholic psychologist from Harvard described Cognitive Behavior Therapy. He calls it the intellect and the will. When we encounter stressful situations we have a choice. We can focus on the opportunity. Dream of success. Trust in God to work through us for the salvation of souls. Nothing is impossible with God. Or we can let Satan creep in using fear to paralyze us. We become overwhelmed at the task at hand. See no way out, no chance of success. Fall into despair and depression. Men, we need to fight against this. The devil is attacking with his greatest weapon FEAR. Fear of failure, fear of humiliation, fear of not doing everything for our parishes. But God is greater than all of this. We must use our intellect to inspire the will to have faith in God. He is in control. Even in our failures he can bring about good. A humble trust in the power of God will defeat Satan and his desire to paralyze us in fear. All we need do is allow the Holy Spirit to work through us, and leave the results to God.

Thomas Aquinas says, "Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it."

So let's take a look at the nature of stress. What we will see is that God has designed us to handle stress. The way we look at situations can change our reactions to stress. The way we react to stress is what determines whether stress is healthy and helpful or debilitating.

We have God-given biological reactions during stressful situations. These reactions cause chemicals to be released and if worked with will help you in these situations.

I'm sure you've heard of fight-or-flight. People lifting cars off of people or other super-human strengths in stressful situations. What happens in these situations is the brain causes the body to release adrenaline and cortisol which enables the body to use energy more efficiently. One can quickly see how this is a good thing.

But how does this help with everyday life? We can't go around lifting cars or fleeing situations in our daily lives. Isn't this just a response that gets in the way of coping with daily life? That would be true if fight-or-flight was the only stress response, but it's not. There are two other stress responses.

One is the challenge response. The challenge response happens when the situation is less threatening. The easiest way to think of this is an athlete in a big game. Similar chemicals, but in different amounts, are released which increase energy, confidence and concentration leading to peak performance when the game is on the line. There's a reason why the best players, say Michael Jordan and Tom Brady, always seem to come up big. Unknowingly, they've mastered

the challenge response to stress, and thus are at their best during the most stressful moments of the game.

God designed the body so that when the stress is turned up your body releases the chemicals it needs to excel. Just as we talked about before, trusting in God. Having confidence in Him. The challenge response helps us to do this. It releases the chemicals which on a biological level leads to increased energy and confidence. This helps the intellect inspire the will. It also helps us focus, this could be in prayer or in developing a plan. As we see God has designed the human body so that grace can perfect nature. Simply amazing!

We have talked about the devil's greatest tool - fear. Now let's talk about his greatest desire - division. He wants us separated from God and our brother's in Christ. He wants to isolate us. Once again we will see the magnificence of God through the design of the human body. The third stress response is designed to combat this. It's called 'tend-and-befriend'. In this response the body releases a chemical called Oxytocin. This chemical repairs micro-damage in the heart. Did you hear that, it repairs the heart? Stress does not have to be unhealthy. Studies find that those with the most purposeful lives and stress are the most healthy. This chemical also raises our desire to be social, to reach out to loved ones or to defend your family. I encourage you, I beg you. If you are feeling stressed, overwhelmed, depressed- reach out to someone. Family, a brother priest, call me if you want. Do not allow yourself to be isolated. Again the intellect needs to inspire the will by nature and grace to know that you are not alone. You have God, family and friends. Don't let the devil isolate you.

If this isn't enough, science has proven the quickest way to change our mood when feeling stressed or depressed is to do something for someone. An act of love, of charity changes our mood faster than anything else. Even something as small as making a donation to a charity has an effect. Caring for people flips the brain from fear to hope. From self-focused to love. Jesus commanded, "Love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another." Soon after this Jesus began his passion. Even in our suffering we are called to love, and when we do He will reward us in nature and in grace.

The last biological reaction happens after a stressful event. A chemical called DHEA is released which helps you recover and learn from stress. This causes you to reflect and pray about what happened or discuss it with others. You might be able to remember a stressful event in your life, where afterwards you couldn't stop thinking or talking about it. This is your body's way of recovering and learning from the event.

Lastly, I will read a couple pages from Dr. Kelly McGonigal's book, *The Upside of Stress*, on the Anxiety-Avoidance Cycle. It does a very good job of explaining how avoidance only reinforces our fears and increases our worrying about anxiety. It also ends with a beautiful nugget of truth not expected from psychologists.

The Costs of Avoiding Stress

When we reflect on our daily lives, we might look back at a day that was very stressful and think, "Well, that wasn't my favorite day this week." When you're in the middle of one of those days, you might long for a day with less stress in it. But if you put a wider lens on your life and subtract *every* day that you have experienced as stressful, you won't find yourself with an ideal life. Instead, you'll find yourself also subtracting the experiences that have helped you grow, the challenges you are most proud of, and the relationships that define you. You may have spared yourself some discomfort, but you will also have robbed yourself of some meaning.

And yet, it's not at all uncommon to wish for a life without stress. While this is a natural desire, pursuing it comes at a heavy cost. In fact, many of the negative outcomes we associate with stress may actually be the consequence of trying to avoid it. Psychologists have found that trying to avoid stress leads to a significantly reduced sense of well-being, life satisfaction, and happiness. Avoiding stress can also be isolating. In a study of students at Doshisha University in Japan, the goal to avoid stress predicted a drop, over time, in their sense of connection and belonging. Having such a goal can even exhaust you. For example, researchers at the University of Zurich asked students about their goals, then tracked them for one month. Across two typically stressful periods—end-of-semester exams and the winter holidays—those with the strongest desire to avoid stress were the most likely to report declines in concentration, physical energy, and self-control.

One particularly impressive study conducted through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, in Palo Alto, California, followed more than one thousand adults for ten years. At the beginning of the study, researchers asked the participants about how they dealt with stress. Those who reported trying to avoid stress were more likely to become depressed over the following decade. They also experienced increasing conflict at work and at home, and more negative outcomes, such as being fired or getting divorced. Importantly, avoiding stress predicted the increase in depression, conflict, and negative events above and beyond any symptoms or difficulties reported at the beginning of the study. Wherever a participant started in life, the tendency to avoid stress made things worse over the next decade.

Psychologists call this vicious cycle *stress generation*. It's the ironic consequence of trying to avoid stress: You end up creating more sources of stress while depleting the resources that should be supporting you. As the stress piles up, you become increasingly overwhelmed and isolated, and therefore even more likely to rely on avoidant coping strategies, like trying to steer clear of stressful situations or to escape your feelings with self-destructive distractions. The more firmly committed you are to avoiding stress, the more likely you are to find yourself in this downward spiral. As psychologists Richard Ryan, Veronika Huta, and Edward Deci write in *The Exploration of Happiness*, "The more directly one aims to maximize pleasure and avoid pain, the more likely one is to produce instead a life bereft of depth, meaning, and community."

Conclusion

We must not lose faith or hope. We must look to the cross. The greatest moment of despair was actually our greatest victory. Proven three days later in the resurrection. There may be times that the sins of your parish may feel too heavy to bear. I want you, a soldier of Christ, to look to the ultimate soldier as he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane. The sins of all mankind upon Him. Deserted and betrayed by friends. Turned over to be crucified by the supposed leaders of the Jewish faith. Through it all Christ conquered sin and death by uniting His will to that of His Father's. When the weight of the sins of your parish are on you- at that moment you are most like Christ. Standing with Him in the garden. Now unite your will to His and to the Father. Know that through suffering, you are a true soldier of Christ and that victory is near.

In the following pages are handouts for the talk.

Shifting Your Mindset

1. Handling stress
 - a. Acknowledge the stress when experienced and how it affects your body.
 - b. Welcome the stress, knowing it's a response to something you care about. Think about what is at stake, and why it matters to you.
 - c. Make use of the energy stress gives you.
2. View the situation as a challenge rather than a threat. (p. 113)
3. Tell yourself that you're excited when you feel nerves (p. 104)
4. Exhausted at the end of the day means you gave it your all. Try to be grateful for all that was done and not resentful. See the good in the day with the struggle.
5. At the beginning of your day instead of worrying about your day or feeling overwhelmed, wonder how God is going to use you to save souls.
6. Have too much to do and not enough time to do it? Be generous with your time. This has proven to shift one's chemical make up and leave one feeling less overwhelmed. (p. 142)
7. Stories of hope can inspire you - read about the saints. Dream about being one.
8. Bigger than self goals. Parish goals vs personal goals - helps build social relationships and a team working together. (p. 145)
9. Challenge yourself to a meaningful and difficult project. (p. 222)

Misc

Your conscience can cause stress. It's not your conscience's fault, but you not abiding by it. When you aren't doing things that you believe you should be doing, that will cause stress.

Stress from tragedies - Show empathy not pity. Allow yourself to be touched by their suffering. (p. 213)

* page numbers above are from *The Upside of Stress* by Kelly McGonigal

Stop Feeling Overwhelmed

In times when we feel as if we have too much to do we can know that God doesn't give more than we can handle. He must not want all of this done right now. He is a patient God.

Lighten the load - Typically we feel overwhelmed because we have too much on our plate.

Three ways to take things off of your plate and off your mind are

1. Focus on the task and complete it. Focusing on a task and working on it can take it off of your mind.
2. Delegate to another - This only works if you completely delegate the responsibility and trust them to handle it. Giving tasks, but keeping the responsibility may lessen work, but not stress.
3. Schedule - Schedule the task for a future date relieving your mind of thinking about it until then.

If you find something always coming to mind or causing you worry take some time to think it through and use one of the options above to take it off your plate.

Write things down so that your mind doesn't need to keep a mental list.

Sometimes the above methods take a little time to work. That's because it takes time to train our minds. Below are other ways to train our minds so that we aren't always thinking about everything on our plate.

Create a schedule - Teach your mind when to think about the office, pray and leisure by having a daily schedule. Our bodies and minds will conform to a schedule once one is in place. If you take leisure time from 3-5:00 everyday over time your mind will get used to this. Similarly with praying in the morning or doing office work from 9-12:00. There's a reason you had a schedule in the seminary and why monasteries do as well.

You will most likely need to fight the urge to think about things when you shouldn't, but this will lessen with time. Remember, it takes time for your mind and body to adjust to the schedule.

Don't forget to schedule eating, sleep and exercise

- Eating - Plan healthy meals at designated times to socialize or relax. They are perfect break points to a busy day.
- Sleep - 7-8 hrs a day. Get immediately out of bed. Laying in bed after you wake up can make the day feel heavy and burdensome. Get up, get the blood moving and the day started.
- Exercise - It makes our brains work faster, and kills stress for 48 hours. You should exercise in one of the below ways every other day.
 - For 10 minutes with 3 sets of 30 second sprints
 - For 25 minutes fast enough that it's difficult to talk
 - For 45 minutes

Escaping Despair and Depression

Stress is harmful when

- You feel inadequate to it
- It isolates you
- It seems meaningless and against your will

Ways to avoid falling into despair and depression

1. Say a prayer - Ask the Blessed Mother and St. Michael to protect you.
2. Get up and do something.
3. Call a friend - Isolation is the devil's path to despair.
4. Communicate regularly with others in similar situations. Knowing that others are in similar situations as you builds camaraderie and hope.
5. Pray - Acknowledge God's omnipotence. He's in control. We are only his instruments.
6. Embrace your cross. Avoidance just increases stress.
7. Generosity - Do something for some else - acts of charity change your biological make up and your outlook. Schedule regular acts of charity.
8. Start a project you can get excited about.
9. Love life - If you are not loving life it's time to take a step back and determine what is missing. While you are called to pick up your cross, the priesthood should still be a vocation of love and joy.

Mastering Anxiety

Anxiety is a reaction of adrenaline, think of it as a superpower. Like stress you can hate it or embrace it. How you react to it will determine future anxiety.

The amygdala detects threats, sounds the alarm and looks for your response. If you approach the stress then it learns for next time that it is not a threat. If you avoid it then the threat label is increased. You can only gain mastery over anxiety while you're in anxiety. This is the time to train the amygdala that these are not true threats.