



Introduction

I was asked to speak at a Youth Ministry meeting concerning stress and worry. This is an important topic for teens, since they have a lot on their minds as they mature into adulthood. I did not think it would be the right approach to simply throw out Bible verses that tell us God loves us so we should not worry. God made us both spirit and flesh, and we need to minister to both. I wanted to give the teens something concrete they can relate to, so focused mainly on the human aspects of stress. I am not a psychologist, but have a lot of experience with stress in my own life. I also shared this with my son, who has a Masters Degree in Psychology, and he agreed. Here is what I shared.

Defining Stress

Let's start by understanding what stress really is. The dictionary defines stress as "*Physical, mental or emotional strain or tension*". For this talk, I would like to expand that definition as follows:

Stress is our body's physical and mental reaction to situations in life that threaten our physical or emotional well-being. Stress is the body's way of bringing awareness to situations we need to act upon. Our level of stress increases as the possible threat to our well-being increases.

Examples of Stress

Mild stress can be caused by public speaking, job interviews or asking someone out on a date. The possibility of embarrassment or rejection makes us nervous. Stress might lead us to practice what we want to say over and over again, in hopes of getting a good outcome.

Higher levels of stress might be caused by driving in heavy traffic or walking alone down a dark alley. The possibility of physical harm causes a "fight or flight" reaction. Stress would lead us to have a heightened awareness of our surroundings and movements of others. We focus harder on our environment to give us a better chance of avoiding harm.

The highest levels of stress are often caused by situations that alter our life in a significant way or maybe seem to have no end in sight. Losing a loved one, losing a job or living with overbearing parents are very stressful situations. The problem with these situations is that stress is renewed every day. It does not seem to go away and can build up until the stress may be hard to handle.

Understanding Stress

Stress is normal. Life in general is filled with situations that are beyond our control. No matter how careful we are, we will get a cut or bruise. No matter how we treat others, somebody will emotionally hurt us. There will always be situations in life that trigger a stress response. It is hard or impossible to avoid stress.

Stress is ok. Each of us has a certain level of comfort, or discomfort, in different situations. Things that cause one person stress may not cause others stress, and vice versa. Someone with a natural ability in math will have less stress over a math test. Someone who is very sociable is less likely to be stressed speaking publicly. It is ok to be stressed in situations where others are not. Stress will not go away just because someone tells us the situation is nothing to get stressed over.



Stress is nothing to be guilty about. We often believe we should be able to handle situations better. We do not like getting nervous or upset. We wonder why we cannot stop the feelings. We may wonder why, after so long a time, we cannot “get over” the grief caused by the loss of a loved one. But, if we deeply love someone, shouldn't we always want to remember them and never get to the point where we act like they never existed? It's ok to cry.

Stress is good if it leads to action. When we realize that we are feeling stress, we begin to evaluate the situation and the potential physical, mental or emotional impact. When we correctly respond to stress, we increase the likelihood of a better outcome. The stress of an exam might lead us to study more. Stress in social situations may lead us to be cautious of our words and call on fortitude to get through it. Stress can protect us from harm. When driving situations cause stress, we automatically become more aware of our surroundings. We see every car on the road as a potential accident, so we drive with extra caution.

Stress needs to be managed, not relieved. We have to be careful about how we approach stress. There are hundreds of videos on YouTube with titles like: “Reducing stress”, “Relieving Stress”, “Dealing with stress” and there is a lot of stress relaxing music available. Sometimes, we do need to step back and clear our mind to manage a situation. It is not often a good thing to react without thinking. To use meditation or relaxing music to calm down in order to think is a good thing. To continually watch the stress relief videos to try to avoid stress in our life is not good. If the situation causing the stress is not managed, the stress will not go away.

God loves you and has not abandoned you. God created each of us for the purpose of sharing in His own blessed life in Heaven. God is always drawing close to us and calling us to Himself. (These are the first two sentences of the Catholic Catechism.) We should reject any temptation to believe God has abandoned us or does not love us. Each of us is so important to God that Jesus gave His own life on the cross for each one of us. He would not die for us only to then abandon us. Why God allows bad things to happen to good people is an entire topic of itself. But just believe, always believe, God is not punishing you or abandoning you.

Understanding Worry

Worry is not the same thing as stress. Stress and worry are often mentioned together as though they are the same thing, but they are not. Let's take a look at worry.

The dictionary defines worry as “*to torment oneself with or suffer from disturbing thoughts.*” Honestly, I cannot describe worry any better than that. Worry torments us with disturbing thoughts of the worst possible outcome. Worry keeps our focus on the problem and can prevent us from concentrating on a solution. Worry may hinder meaningful prayer.

For comparison, let's look at the dictionary definition of concern, “*interested, affected, troubled or anxious.*” Stress, at first causes, concern. We become interested in the possible effect of a situation. We may even become nervous or troubled. The anxiety we first experience by stress is not the same as the constant anxiety felt when one has an anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders do require medical attention.

One final definition, despair is defined as “*to lose or give up hope.*” When a bad situation continues for a long time, worry can become despair. We see no end in sight and have no hope for a better outcome. Despair is characterized by lack of focus, lack of energy or desire to do anything and losing a sense of self-worth. If despair is recognized it is very important to seek professional help quickly. Despair does not always lead to suicide, but suicide is often caused by a feeling of complete hopelessness in a bad situation.



So, to summarize...stress causes concern...if stress is not managed properly, concern becomes worry...if worry is allowed to persist, we can lose hope and feel despair.

I heard a priest one time describe evil not as the opposite of love but as the total absence of God's love. In that sense, I like to think of worry not as the opposite of hope but rather the absence of hope and trust in God. If love drives out evil, then hope and trust in God drive out worry.

A final point about worry. When we begin to worry, we should quickly ask ourselves if the situation is life threatening. If we often worry about non-life-threatening situations, for example how many friends we have online or how many people like our post, we should consider professional help. This may be a sign of mental disorder.

Avoid harmful ways of dealing with stress

Let's return to the point that stress must be managed and not relieved. There are ways of reducing "the feeling" of stress that do more harm than good. These stress reducers have a high tendency to cause addiction. They include:

- Alcohol
- Drugs
- Compulsive spending
- Emotional eating
- Pornography
- Sexual relationships

It is true, all of these reduce the feeling of stress. They create a sense of happiness that relaxes nerves and makes us forget about the stressful situation. But the problem is that none of them resolve the situation that causes stress. Since the stress does not go away and the stress is not managed, we must continually engage in the harmful act to keep the feeling of stress away. Thus, causing addiction.

Some Ideas for Managing Stress

Once again, I do not have a psychology degree and am not qualified to give detailed advice on managing stress. But I can offer ideas as one who has had his share of stress in life. Here are some of my thoughts. I hope they help.

- Be aware of stress and do not ignore stress of any level
- We cannot manage what we do not know, and we will not manage what we ignore
- Accept stress as a call to action
- Acknowledge that it is ok for you to feel stress, because stress is a normal part of life
- Acknowledge your stress is ok even in situations where others do not feel stress
- Do not feel guilty about stress and do not put expectations on when you need to get over it
- Make good decisions
- Decide that, no matter what, you will avoid harmful methods of relieving stress
- Decide that, even if the stressful situation is not your fault, it is up to you to manage it
- Decide that, even if you have no control over the situation, you will manage it somehow
- Decide that God still loves you and will lead you through it
- Put the situation into perspective by asking questions
- Am I expecting too much out of life? Am I unwilling to accept situations I do not like?

- Am I positive the situation will still have a negative impact years from now?
- Is there a solution and I know what I need to do, but I just don't want to do it? [like study]
- Have I faced this type of stress before? [social situations or embarrassment]
- Is this something normal and natural that will just take time to heal? [grief]
- Is there any way something positive can come out of this? [a better job, better life]
- If the other person absolutely will not change, can I accept it and adjust my expectations?
- Determine if the stress is self-caused and is it better to change something?
- Am I putting too much on myself or doing too much at once
- Are my expectations too high
- Is the reason I am doing this to myself worth the stress, should I change something?
- Do I have the right priorities in my life? Can I reset priorities to reduce stress?
- Avoid worry where possible
- There should definitely be no worry in non-life-threatening situations
- Hope and trust in God will cast out fear and worry

Consider medical assistance

We do not hesitate to call a physician if we have the flu or have severely cut ourself. The physician assesses the situation and prescribes medicine or stitches. These simply assist the body to get into a position where it can finish healing itself. So, why not seek professional help if we just cannot handle the stress.

You are not a failure if you need professional assistance.

Seek the Lord for help and trust Him

If you are not praying for strength, then pray...every day, not just once.

If you are not praying for guidance, then pray...every day, not just once.

Be willing to accept God's will, even if it is not your will...His will is better.

Even Jesus felt stress. Meditate on Luke 22:39-46 about Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Conclusion

"No trial has come to you but what is human. God is faithful and will not let you be tried beyond your strength; but with the trial he will also provide a way out, so that you may be able to bear it." (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Stress comes to all humans. With God we can bear all things. We may have to be open to God's way out and not just our desired way out. We may need to do a better job managing things. We may even need to seek professional guidance. God gave us physicians (both physical and mental) to help us. He does not always perform miracles and sometimes gives us the tools for success and wants us to use them.

Remember...*"With God all things are possible."* (Matthew 19:26).