

Women & More

Stress and Distress

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From Patricia Sprinkle's book, *Women Who Do Too Much: Stress and the Myth of the Superwoman*, come the following words:

“...When stress operates as it is supposed to, we face challenges, we have the energy to meet them, then collapse with our feet up before going on to something else. **What wears us out, and what most of the time we identify as stress is day after day after day after day of too many challenges to meet and too much to do.**”

God-given stress helps us to get things done, but we cannot afford stress day after day. Abused stress becomes distress, and we're to avoid it like the plague! To be able to identify stress from distress requires discernment, and a moment-by-moment reality check. We need to have our perceptions tuned. Listen to this amusingly true example of misperception:

“While waiting for his flight at an airport, Bruce bought a bag of *Mrs. Fields Cookies*, put it on a chair in the waiting area along with his briefcase and coat and left to get a newspaper. When he returned, a disheveled student was seated next to the bag so Bruce parked himself on the chair on the other side of the cookies. Bruce took his first cookie out of the bag. A moment later, to his surprise, the student helped himself to one. Bruce took another cookie, put the bag back down and focused only one eye on his newspaper while the other guarded his last cookie. The student took that cookie, broke it in half, graciously put the bigger half back, and gave Bruce a nod, a smile and a wave. Bruce was not smiling as he watched the student. That student walked away eating his last cookie.

“When his flight was finally called, Bruce went to get his briefcase and coat and discovered under his coat his own bag of cookies....”

Bruce had misperceived reality! Today, we want to examine the reality of stress in our lives, *distress*, and the difference. And it's sometimes difficult to discern which we are actually dealing with. Perhaps what is amiss with our own perceptions is we think...

- 1) that life has to be lived in the fast lane to be successful,
- 2) that the hectic lifestyle is inescapable and inevitable, or
- 3) that activity galore proves we're alive and living large.

But these perceptions are off-base to the tune of stress-overload—*distress*—because they promote doing above *being*! We've lost the art of doing one thing well, because we're juggling 120 things not so well. We're more-often-than-not over-scheduled, over-extended and over-spent. We are time-deprived, sleep-deprived and resource deprived. The Japanese call it *Koshushi*—overworked to death! The Psalmist in 25:17 cries, “*The troubles of my heart have multiplied; free me from my anguish.*”

In Luke 10:38-42 we read: “*As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But **Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.** She came to him and asked, ‘**Lord, don’t you care** that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!’*”

“*‘Martha, Martha,’ the Lord answered, ‘**you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed.** Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.’*”

Martha was eating cookies out of the wrong bag! She perceived that her busyness, concern and worry would spur the Lord’s defense, but instead, she received his gentle rebuke. Jesus knew that she had gone beyond stress and was now in full-fledged distress. How did Martha get there? And why did the Lord rebuke her distressed state so adamantly?

We know that Martha—in her own words—had *worked hard* to get there! She charged Jesus with not caring because she was busy with the ‘cares’ of this world, producing stressful expectations:

1. **Possessions**—all of the things we have to look after and be responsible for really belong to the Lord, and are on loan to us. We are too often presumptuous.
 2. **People**—relationships: Think how Martha was feeling about her sister Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to his words, while she was slaving. And look at her agitation toward Jesus mounting as he seems not to notice. See how far from reality she’s moving?
 3. **Performance**—Martha was preoccupied with her own performance and the non-performance of others, and building resentment. Martha didn’t hate anyone and I’m not suggesting that we would either, but doctors have said that the stress of hating people can cause ulcers, heart attacks, headaches, skin rashes and asthma—and it doesn’t make the people we hate feel too good either.
- Webster defines *stress* as **a force that tends to distort a body**, a factor that **induces bodily or mental tension**. When we stress, our bodies are in a

distorted situation—and we cannot live there. God-given stress rushes hormones like adrenaline and cortisol through our body to push through childbirth; to energize for preparation and cleanup of a big Thanksgiving meal; to provide emergency strength to endure long hours of caring for a sick child; to run from a burning building or fight off an attacker, etceteras. These events describe needed stress—a **God ordained need to have distortion or extension of our ordinary faculties to get through an ordeal**. It's a good thing, but this *good thing* taken to excess—like Martha did—becomes something not so good for us. It becomes *distress*.

• THE REALITY:

• Distress is defined as suffering of body or mind, pain, anguish, trouble, misfortune, a condition of danger or desperate need: (distressed) **to be subject to great strain, anxiety or difficulties; to be upset** (*remember that Jesus told Martha she was worried and upset about many things?*) Martha was in a state of distress.

Calling stress An Epidemic and America's #1 Health Problem, an article in *Time Magazine* reported that 75 to 90% of all visits to primary care physicians are for stress-related problems. It listed the following physical symptoms of extreme anxiety and stress: Back pain, muscle tension, headache, shaky hands, diarrhea, constipation, pounding heart, chest pain, burning sensation in the chest, shortness of breath, indigestion, gas pains, burping, feeling faint or dizzy, lingering head cold, ringing in the ears, grinding teeth, hives or skin rashes, loss of appetite, nausea or vomiting, stomach pain, lumps in throat; and sweaty, cold hands. These symptoms, if sudden, severe or persistent, need a doctor's attention because they may relate to a physical disorder as a direct result of chronic *distress*.

In another report, Dr. Jeanne Spurlock explained how stress affects the body: “While individual physical and emotional reactions to stress vary, the results are similar. A stress overload activates areas of our brain that then sends involuntary impulses to organs elsewhere in our body. The hypothalamus turns on the tap of our physical sensations when we respond to something emotional, whether in fear, love, anger, frustration or anxiety. These intangible sensations soon become quite tangible as our bodies react....” (Imagine turning on all the taps in your home and then leaving—*mine*.)

“Not surprisingly, a daily regimen of racing heartbeat, pulsing blood, tensed muscles, undigested food stuck in your stomach, and elevated levels of hormones coursing through your circulatory system pose all kinds of

potential health problems. Too much stress also affects your immune system, weakening it and making you more susceptible to colds, coughs and infections. Stress has been traced as the culprit in flare-ups of arthritis and asthma; our urinary tract can also be affected. There is a natural balance of friendly and unfriendly organisms that normally co-exist in our digestive and urinary systems, but constant anxiety can destroy this immunological balance, leading to an overgrowth of the harmful bacteria and an infection.”

Reports from a study on stress revealed that women have a better ability to handle stress by producing the anti-stress hormone called **oxitocyn** particularly during pregnancy, childbirth and nursing. Men also produce **oxitocyn**, but it’s largely cancelled out by testosterone. While men may face more immediate life-threatening occupational hazards, yet women appear to be **more vulnerable to stress-induced illnesses** for the following reasons:

- I. As caretakers, we tend to take on responsibilities that men might not even consider.
- II. We’re less likely to be in positions of power and not as able to control what’s going on in our environment. While we know that no one really controls circumstances, the less control we feel we have over our everyday existence the heavier the stress load—unless we have a strong and unwavering faith in God.
- III. Because it’s difficult for women to say ‘no,’ the stress we can feel while adding one thing to another can be doubly disastrous because we don’t see any escape.
- IV. Sociologists speculate that today’s working women have adopted a male standard for achievement in the work world while maintaining the female standard for perfection at home. **For example:** men who are stretched thin at work often go home to relax, but women go home and keep on working.
- V. Emily Barnes and others have said that 70% of our stresses are caused by disorganization—we’re overwhelmed, frustrated, tired and feel hopeless.

Many women (and men) in America are physically, emotionally, financially and spiritually drained. While we seem to thrive on crisis—putting out constant fires—we’re afraid to take a vacation or even a rest, actually afraid to slow down, because we are worried we’ll get even further behind. Taken in by the marketing machine, we have taken on responsibilities way beyond our ability to cope!

Matthew 9:35-36 “*Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*” When Jesus—the Great Shepherd—saw this disorganized, diseased and distressed mass of matted mutton, he had compassion on them!

- **THE REALIZATION:** We’re to go to the Lord with our distress. The two things that hinder our fellowship with God are sin and **care**. He purposely created us with a need only he can meet: **care** when we’re anxious and distressed. Beth Moore in *Living free*, “Christians can be miserably dissatisfied if they accept Christ’s salvation yet reject the fullness of a daily relationship. As long as our minds rehearse the distresses in our lives more than the strength of our God, we will be impotent—trapped in our distress.”

Remember that our distresses are no match for our God! He wants to heal our distresses, anxieties, worries, frustrations, harassments. Luke 12:25 “*Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?*” and “*Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you*” 1 Peter 5:7. We need to be just as diligent in casting our cares upon God as we should be in confessing our sin. We must re-assess our vision of God, and realize an accurate perception of him. Asaph, in Psalm 77:2a “*When I was in distress, I sought the LORD.*” Go to him!

Psalm 25:18 “*Look upon my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins.*” We need to take time with God and allow him to wash the face of our soul. He will wash while we stand still. Psalm 4:1 “*Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; be merciful to me and hear my prayer.*”

Finally, everyday we need to do three things...

- **Gain** understanding through God’s Word to live each day by itself—**God allocates strength in daily amounts**—because worrying will not empty tomorrow of its sorrow, but it will empty today of its strength. Yesterday is past, tomorrow is uncertain, but **today is here and now**—it’s *the present!*

- **Get** in on God’s plan for our lives. Jeremiah 29:11 “*‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’*”

- **Give** up some activities, and ask the Lord to show us how to prioritize. Anything that’s big enough to worry about is big enough to pray about, and prayer is one weapon that Satan cannot duplicate! Psalm 18:6 “*In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears.*”