


48. STRESS, HOW DAIMONDS ARE FORMED

A woman with blonde hair tied up in a bun is shown in profile, looking upwards towards a bright, orange-hued sunset sky. She is wearing a light-colored, possibly tan or beige, jacket. The overall mood is contemplative and hopeful.

*It's not the load that breaks you,
but how you carry it.*

#NCSAMENTALHEALTHDEVOTIONS

STRESS: THE WAY DIAMONDS ARE FORMED

John 14:27: "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give unto you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

Have you ever felt like life is just getting a little too much, like there are just too many things to worry about? These days the world around us is filled with so many stresses. Pressures are building up, responsibilities are becoming more, demands are heightening, expectations are shooting through the roof, and yet we still have the same body as those who lived many years ago. Our mental and physical capacities to deal with these stresses haven't magically increased over the past decade, but all of us within our society and within our jobs and our workplaces, at school and even sometimes in our own expectations, are expected to carry the load. Somehow we should be able to go through the pressures of this modern, fast-paced, instant gratification kind of lifestyle that is promoted out there in the media.

When do we have time to relax? When do we have time to de-stress? When do we have time to really just enjoy the finer things of life? I think there are times that we can change some things, but there are also things that we cannot. We need to evaluate which ones can be changed and which cannot be changed in order to de-stress our lives, to prioritise and create a stress-free environment for ourselves. Therefore this topic of stress.

If you have said to yourself that you do not have time to relax, Sydney Harris says that is exactly when you should take the time to relax.

**DE-STRESS YOUR LIFE, PRIORITISE
AND CREATE A STRESS-FREE
ENVIRONMENT FOR YOURSELVES.**

Not only are we living in this fast-paced world, but as Christians we are warned that as the time approaches and because we are allies with God, the world is filled with hate for us and we are going to be faced with many stresses, trials and tribulations. There is the fear of persecution and even the fear of our own family members turning against us. I am not here to be a dread doctor and to tell you all the horrible things that are still in store, but the reality is that we live in a world that is filled with a lot of stress. The Bible says as much as the people hated the Lord and giving Him a hard time, we are also going to be hated and we will also have a hard time.

Stress has become a great part of our reality, but the Bible gives us encouragement. Psalms 34:19 says: *“Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him from them all.”* This is a beautiful promise. The Bible says, yes, there are many afflictions, but God will deliver us from them.

What is stress? We have to look at a definition of stress because we sometimes do get confused with the different terminology that are used out there – fear, stress, anxiety, PTSD. All of them are related to the feeling of discomfort and a heightened sense of anxiety, but they are not the same. Sometimes stress is referred to as normal anxiety, not to be confused with anxiety disorders or abnormal anxiety.

Stress is the response of the body to an actual threat. In other words, stress has a direct cause, whereas abnormal anxiety or anxiety disorders basically come from something that does not have a specific cause. Stress and anxiety and what it does within the body manifest in different ways. *Stress is something that comes and goes, while anxiety is something that lingers and stays.*

**STRESS IS SOMETHING THAT
COMES AND GOES, WHILE ANXIETY
IS SOMETHING THAT LINGERS AND
STAYS.**

If you were to think of stress, I want you to think of stress as the alarm at your house. An alarm is there to tell you that something has gone wrong or somebody has broken in or somebody is doing something wrong. An alarm usually goes off when somebody has broken in. There is a **real** threat, there is a fear, an **actual** thing that needs to be dealt with. **Abnormal anxiety** is like a house alarm that keeps going off, but there is no real threat, there is no burglar that is breaking in. Nothing has happened to set the alarm off. The alarm is just irritating and keeps going off over and over and over again.

Many times we use these terms interchangeably. We say that we have anxiety, but actually what we have is stress. Stress is circumstantial. There are things that are causing our stress, whereas with anxiety there is nothing causing it, but we still feel this unrest inside of us. Both of these create the emotion of anxiety inside us. Stress can give us the feeling of anxiety, but with abnormal anxiety and anxiety disorders, the anxiety lasts longer. Stress related anxiety is much shorter within its endurance, stress only lasts for a short while. When the threat is removed, the stress dissipate. Anxiety however has no real source, it is more long-term and chronic and it does not dissipate. It does not go away, it remains, it lingers and it is very difficult to get rid of.

Stress as we said, is the response of the body to an actual threat. Let me give you an example of this to demonstrate what should happen within the body when you experience a real threat like a snake that wants to bite you, somebody that wants to hit you, a burglar trying to break into your house, your boss wanting to fire you or any stressful situation you can find yourself in.

ABNORMAL ANXIETY IS LIKE A HOUSE ALARM THAT KEEPS GOING OFF, BUT THERE IS NO REAL THREAT.

Normal anxiety or stress is basically what will take place within the mind and the body, physiologically and emotionally, when you are in a real dangerous situation. If a truck, for example, comes speeding onto your car and he doesn't apply his brakes, you are going to be in a stressful situation and you are going to experience what we call normal anxiety.

A few years back, I had this happen to me. While I was driving on the highway between Pretoria and Johannesburg, the traffic all of a sudden slowed down. I assumed that there had been an accident. I had enough time to respond. I applied my brakes to slow down and I successfully came to a halt without hitting any of the cars in front of me. As I stopped, I looked in my rear-view mirror and I saw a truck heading straight down onto me. I could see that it was going fast. I could also see that the driver didn't realise the traffic had slowed down and I realised that he wasn't going to have enough time to stop. All of this, by the way, happened within a split-second. I somehow managed to put my car into first gear and I moved from the lane in which I was and in which the truck was into another lane so that if he was not able to stop, I would not be in the lane where he would literally crash into me. And sure enough, by the time he stopped, he stopped where my car was going to be if I did not move.

How did I feel? After I got out of his way, my whole body was in a panic. My physiological response was the following: my heart was beating, I was sweating, I was breathing very heavily, I was shaking, I was feeling nervous and I felt scared. I felt a heightened level of anxiety within my body at that moment, but I was alive. As soon as my brain realised that the threat was gone and nothing was happening anymore, it slowly started to calm down.

**NORMAL ANXIETY OR STRESS IS
BASICALLY WHAT WILL TAKE PLACE
WITHIN THE MIND AND THE BODY,
PHYSIOLOGICALLY AND EMOTIONALLY,
WHEN YOU ARE IN A REAL DANGEROUS
SITUATION.**

The shaking reduced, the breathing slowed down and the sweating started to stop until eventually I returned completely back to normal. My physiological response, my bodily response, was back to normal and my emotional response of fear was back to normal. I was not scared anymore. My heart wasn't racing and my body wasn't sweating anymore. This is what happens when you deal with stress or normal anxiety. When the situation that was causing the stress and the pressure is dealt with and it is done away with or handled, your anxiety levels will normalise. The anxiety levels or stress levels should calm down.

This response is called the fight or flight response. This physiological and emotional response you feel within your body is there to protect you against threats. With anxiety you feel the same way, but the body does not calm down, the body does not go back to the place where it is supposed to be.

When the body senses danger, whether physical or emotional, it releases stress hormones. Be aware of the fact that it is not just physical danger that is going to befall you, but also emotional danger. If you feel threatened emotionally, you can go into the same type of response as if there was a truck. Your brain does not differentiate between the truck and the emotional stress you have. It responds in exactly the same way. What happens in the body is that certain hormones – *stress hormones*, adrenaline and noradrenaline – are released into the bloodstream and your body reacts quickly. Your emotional responses are also there to put you into action so that you can get away from the danger. That was how I got away from the truck so quickly.

**WHEN THE BODY SENSES DANGER,
WHETHER PHYSICAL OR
EMOTIONAL, IT RELEASES STRESS
HORMONES.**

What should happen in a normal, healthy body is that it should release another hormone to counteract the stress hormone so that the body can calm down once the fearful situation, the stressful situation, has dissipated and has been dealt with. Then you feel better, you feel normal again.

What are the things that are causing stress in our lives?

What are the real threats in life that we know are adding pressure or stress to our lives? The stressful situations are different for each person. We have triggers for normal anxiety and fearful responses within our bodies. Something that scares you, will not necessarily scare me. When I was young, I remember that my grandmother was completely frightened of snakes. I had a little snake, a little 'tabakrollertjie', I used to feed and play with. It was not a poisonous snake, or at least it couldn't bite me. I remember when my grandmother came to visit, my dad told me I had to let the snake go because my grandmother was absolutely petrified of it. It was very stressful for her to be in the presence of a snake, while for me it wasn't stressful. Some people are extremely scared of dogs, while other people are not scared of dogs. These are just two examples I am using to demonstrate that something that stresses me, is not necessarily something that stresses you. **Stress triggers** are very **different** from person to person.

Stress comes from three different places. It comes from worries about the past (mistakes that we've made), from current situations that place us in danger or in experiences where we feel fearful or anxious (the normal anxiety), and it comes from worrying about the future. So, our stress comes either from the past, from the present or worries about the future.

**WHAT ARE THE THINGS THAT ARE
CAUSING STRESS IN OUR LIVES?
WHAT ARE THE REAL THREATS?**

For you to deal successfully with your stress, you need to ask yourself: "What is the source of my stress? Is the source of my stress something from the past, is it something that I am currently dealing with or something that I am worried about for the future? Are they real worries? "

There is a saying that goes: *'Do not stress the could haves, if it should have, it would have.'* The Bible tells us that we should not worry about the past. This is actually what the quotation is saying. We need to learn to live in the here-and-now, to deal with the current stresses and not worry about the ones that have already passed or the ones that might possibly still happen in the future.

So, causes of real anxiety (normal anxiety) and stress are things like fear for snakes, burglars, dogs fighting which you cannot pull apart, or if you are in an unhappy job or you have a heavy workload, working long hours, planning insufficiently, working in a dangerous environment, having a death in the family, kids running around the house and screaming, illness or financial difficulties. All of these, just to mention a few, are called **stressors** because they can cause stress.

We have what is called **internal** and **external** stresses. When you are stressed, don't only ask yourself what your stress is about, but also ask yourself whether your stress is internal or is it external? Is your stress caused by your own thoughts or is your stress caused by your environment? This is important in order to know how to deal with stress. When it is an external stress, you need to realise that for most times you cannot control it. External stresses are usually outside of your control, but internal stresses that are caused by your own thinking and your own feelings or worries about the future, can be changed.

**DO NOT STRESS THE COULD
HAVES, IF IT SHOULD HAVE, IT
WOULD HAVE.**

You must ask yourself: "Should this be something that I should be **stressing** about or is it something that is causing **anxiety** within me. Stress comes from internal and external places, some of it can be controlled and some of it cannot be controlled. Internal stresses you can control are things like:

- Your own *irrational* thoughts and fears.
- Your *expectations*. This can cause a lot of stress. If you expect that life should be a specific way and it doesn't turn out that way, you are going to be stressed.
- Your *attitude*. Are you seeing the cup as half-full or are you seeing the cup as half empty? That is going to cause stress for you. Are you able to see the positive together with the negative as we said the other day?
- *Uncertainty* caused by thoughts of what the future is going to be like. Is my spouse always going to love me? Am I going to be able to get that promotion? Is my boss going to be fair?

There is a saying that goes: *'It is not the load that breaks you, but it is how you carry that load that determines whether you will be broken or not'* (Lou Holtz). A lot of the internal stresses are stresses that come from how you handle the external stresses. You stress internally because you struggle to carry the external load. If you are struggling with carrying the external load, maybe you should re-evaluate and ask yourself: "Are all the things in my life, all those stresses that I am experiencing, the things that I have to do, the deadlines I have to meet, all the expectations the society around me has, really necessary?" Sometimes you need to sit down and do an evaluation of your life and ask whether you can reduce your own stressful environment by cutting out the things which are not important.

**IT IS NOT THE LOAD THAT BREAKS
YOU, BUT IT IS HOW YOU CARRY
THAT LOAD THAT DETERMINES
WHETHER YOU WILL BE BROKEN
OR NOT. LOU HOLTZ**

If you suspect that you are struggling with stress, you might experience some of the following **symptoms**:

- an elevated heart rate – when you feel your heart beating in your chest;
- shaky hands;
- trembling legs;
- sweaty hands;
- excessive perspiration – some people haven't realised that they dealing with stress or even anxiety when their hands start to sweat. They think it is a normal thing for the hands to sweat, when it is actually a physiological outworking of stress or even anxiety (normal and abnormal);
- a trembling voice;
- being frightened;
- feeling anxious and overwhelmed.

Other symptoms include:

- headaches;
- sleeplessness;
- body aches;
- light-headedness;
- concentration lacking;
- irritability;
- no energy and
- even a low libido.

You will find that many mental illnesses have similar symptoms, especially the last ones. Even grief has these symptoms. When you look at your symptoms, it is difficult to see whether you are depressed or anxious or grieving or just stressed out. That is why you need to look at the environment around you and to ask: “What am I dealing with? Am I feeling very low or sad? Am I feeling on edge?”

SOME MENTAL ILLNESSES HAVE THE SAME SYMPTOMS, WHICH MAKES IT DIFFICULT TO SELF-DIAGNOSE. SEE A PROFESSIONAL.

This will tell you whether you are **depressed** or whether you are **anxious**. **Depression** is that sad, down feeling. **Stress** is that alertness where it feels like the alarm is going off and you need to move in – there are things pushing and pressurising you. **Anxiety** is when the alarms are going off but there is really nothing to make the alarms go off. You need to not only look at the symptoms, but also ask what is happening around you in order to differentiate if you are feeling stressed or if you are feeling abnormal anxiety or if you are feeling depressed.

There are two types of stresses – good stress and bad stress. **Good stress** is something which psychiatry has termed 'Eustress'. This stress is good because it motivates you. These are things like getting married – it could be stressful, but it is a good stress. Having a new baby is stressful, but it is a good stress because it is going to motivate you to be a good mother, to be responsible. The project deadline that is coming up is a good stress because it is going to push you to do better, to work harder. Other activities causing stress can be something like moving into a new home or the excitement of a possible new promotion. These are all good stresses because it motivates you, it pushes you into action.

I believe the Bible speaks about good stress in James 1:2 to 4 where James refers to the various trials. He says that we should be happy about these trials: *"You know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing."* I truly believe James refers to good stress when he talks about how we should consider trials.

GOOD STRESS IS SOMETHING WHICH PSYCHIATRY HAS TERMED 'EUSTRESS'. THIS STRESS IS GOOD BECAUSE IT MOTIVATES YOU.

On the other hand, I also think he meant that even bad stress can sometimes be good for us, because the good stresses as well as the bad stresses are trying to tell us something.

What is your body trying to tell you when you are feeling **bad stress**? Why is your body responding physiologically with the fight or flight mode? It is telling you that there is too much happening? It is telling you that you are in danger of emotional burnout, that you are in danger of physical burnout and that you need to try and do something to calm yourself down? To maybe reduce the environmental stress around you, if you can or to reduce the internal stress, if you can? This is why the body responds to both – good stress and bad stress. Bad stress on the other hand, is stress that paralyzes you. Bad stress are things that will not be good for you in the end, things that do not push you into action.

We need to realise that both of these are good for us in the sense that it teaches us something. When your body does not feel good, it is telling you something. Listen to your body. Listen to your body when it says it is tired and it needs a little bit of rest. Listen to your body when it says it is over-worked or that your schedule is not working out because you have too much to do. Cut on your schedule. Change your routine. Determine whether the things you are doing are truly important or whether they are not important.

Yes, you can become diamonds under pressure. You can sit and say: “Hey, let me look at the stresses of life. Let me reduce those stresses that are not needed. Let me look at my priorities and cut down where I can and let the rest form my life so that I can be that diamond.” The good stress will automatically turn you into a diamond because it is going to motivate you and push you forward.

**DESPITE YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES
LIVE LIFE AS NORMAL AS
POSSIBLE. LIKE JESUS, DANIEL,
PETER & PAUL.**

What the bad stress should do in order to form you into a diamond, is to show you the dirt that you should cut away so that only the good remains. Some of you have so many things you want to do, have to do, and sometimes some of these stresses are unnecessary. There are things you can change. Those you can control, control them.

How do we cope with stress? James 1:12 says: *"Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test of time, he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love Him."* This does not mean that godly people are going to allow unnecessary stress into their lives. It does not mean that they are not going to plan. It does not mean that they are not going to evaluate their lives and say: "Hey, maybe some of these things are not necessary. Maybe some of these things I can change." We are the authors of our own happiness. We, together with the Lord, are the authors of our lives. Sometimes we need to just sit back and ask: "Can I cope better? Can I reduce my stress? Can I change my environment in such a way so that I can cope better with stress?"

Here are some tips on how to cope with stress:

- If you are stressed about the past, let go of the past. Learn to forgive yourself.
- There will be things in your current situation that you cannot change, things that are outside of your control. Remember all you can do about circumstances beyond your control, is to pray for the courage to accept them and for God to take care of them. Matthew 19:20 says: *"But Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man, this is impossible, but with God, all things are possible.'"*

**BLESSED IS THE MAN WHO REMAINS
STEADFAST UNDER TRIAL, FOR WHEN
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- My recommendation for the things you cannot change, the things that are stressing you out, is to go to the Lord with them and say: "Lord, take care of this because I do not know how and I cannot handle it."
- There is a saying: ***Nothing is permanent. Don't stress yourself too much, because no matter how bad the situation is, it will change.*** 1 Peter 1:6 says: *"In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials."* Did you hear what it says? For now you have been grieved with various trials, but it will not last.
- There are things you can change and you should. You should reduce your stress levels by doing things which alleviate your stress. You should get rid of those stressful things if you can. You should prioritise. You should add things into your life which bring joy into your life, which bring relaxation into your life, which bring calmness into your life, which bring peace into your life. The verse we've started off with is so beautiful. Jesus says: *"My peace I give unto you. It is a peace that the world cannot give you, but that I can give you."* Part of living a peaceful life, a stress-free life, is to start your day off with God because God is ultimately going to give you peace. It is so calming. When you go through a stressful day, just stop whatever you are doing and go to the Word of God. Read a verse and gain some energy from the Bible, get some much-needed strength. Also pray about it, go to the Lord and pray about it. This is always my first recommendation.
- There are things you can do to your environment as well. One is to **plan better**. There is a saying that goes: *'The key is not to prioritise what's on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities.'* You need to get your priorities straight. There are things you are doing which you really shouldn't be doing.

THE KEY IS NOT TO PRIORITISE
WHAT'S ON YOUR SCHEDULE, BUT
TO SCHEDULE YOUR PRIORITIES.

- There is a saying that goes: 'You can do anything, but not everything.' This is very important. Cut out the unimportant. Do not try and do everything. Yes, you can do anything, but prioritise those anythings. Choose which anything you are going to do.
- Remember to **rest**. Get enough sleep during the night. This is going to reduce your stress levels significantly.
- **Exercise**. Why exercise? Exercise burns off stress and it also makes you happy because it releases endorphins. To exercise doesn't mean you need to go to the gym and push weights. Go for a little walk. If you cannot go for a walk during lockdown, do jumping jacks in your backyard. Stagnant jumping jacks inside your house can also work.
- Do something you **enjoy**. Oftentimes you are so pushed by schedules, you are so pushed by stressors that you forget to enjoy life. Get a hobby, so that life can become more balanced. Do something like painting, singing or building. I love to build pallet furniture in order to de-stress myself. The reason I enjoy this is not just because I can see my handiwork at the end of the day, but I get to hit stuff. I get to pull the pallets apart. I get to hit it with a hammer and that reduces my stress.
- **Laugh** more, have **fun** and **play** more.
- There is a saying by Mahogany SilverRain that goes: '*My body needs laughter as much as it needs tears. Both are cleansers of stress.*' Sometimes stress does become hard and you cannot always laugh and have fun and do the things you want. Sometimes you need a little bit of a good cry. If stress is getting much and you feel the pressure is building up, it is good to cry. Give yourself permission to cry to let a bit of steam off. There are various ways how you can let steam off, e.g. by resting, exercising, laughing and planning better. All of this will help to reduce your stress

MY BODY NEEDS LAUGHTER AS
MUCH AS IT NEEDS TEARS. BOTH
ARE CLEANSERS OF STRESS

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*Northern Conference, Pastoral Counselling Department
Revive, Refresh, Restore
fleming@nc.adventist.org
Cell: +27836584296
Author: Nandi Fleming
Editors: Kobus & Adele Beukes*