

*'tis the  
season...  
to be*

# STRESSED OUT!

MERRY CHRISTMAS

**T**he jingling of bells many of us hear at this time of year isn't coming from a mythical sleigh being pulled across the sky by reindeer. *It's more likely to be the jangling of our frazzled nerves!*

The cost of the Christmas season isn't only tallied up on credit card dockets; it costs us time, patience, and peace of mind.

"Peace on earth and goodwill to all ..."? Puh-lease!

It can be a season of great stress. Think of the host of stressful situations the season brings with it:

- ◆ Christmas parties
- ◆ Shopping
- ◆ A houseful of sometimes unwanted visitors
- ◆ Spending day after day with family members who are normally at work or school all day
- ◆ Having relatives staying over

◆ The change from a work routine to holidays

One frequently-used stress scale (see box on page 9) suggests that the combination of situations that occur at this season of the year may add up to a more stressful experience than losing your job!

Once upon a time only engineers worried about stress.

And they didn't suffer from it, their buildings and roads did. Their job was to make sure their constructions could withstand anticipated stresses. Today that engineering principle seems like such a good idea that a whole industry has been developed to help us "stress engineer" our lives.

We have stress counselling, stress leave, stress consultants, stress management, stress release techniques and stress seminars. It's a serious business.

Some estimates suggest that stress is the underlying cause of up to 80 percent of visits to doctors. One

doctor on the Internet offers a list of 70 stress-related diseases: from angina to vascular headaches and everything in between.

So who gave us all this stress?

### The "invention" of stress

Probably a man called Dr. Hans Seelye should take some of the blame. He "invented" the word in the 1930s and coined its most popular definition: "the non-specific response of the body to any demand made upon it."

Those "demands" may be anything that requires the body to respond, react or adapt: a threat, an opportunity, a change, a surprise. Stress can be good: good stress is called "eustress"; and stress can be bad: bad stress is called "distress".

One of the most common misunderstandings about stress, according to doctor and author John Tickell, is that stress is "out there".

"There is no stress out there to be under, because stress is in here," he

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## Stressed out?

In 1967 Doctors Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe of the University of Washington, created what they called a Social Readjustment Rating Scale in which they gave numerical values to different types of stressful situations. They suggested that the accumulation of "life change units" in any 12-month period correlated to the potential for stress-related illness. The accompanying scale has been adapted from the original 43-point Holmes-Rahe scale, (published in the *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, Vol. 11, no. 2, 1967).



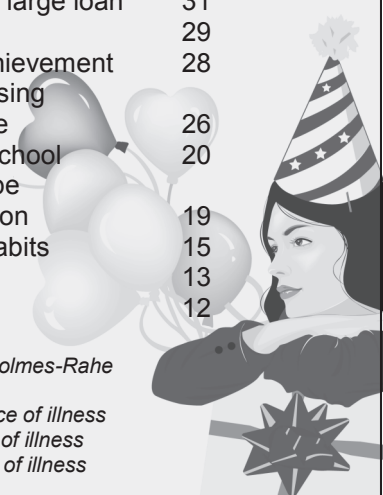
Life Event	Impact
Death of spouse	100
Marital separation	65
Death of a close family member	63
Major personal injury or illness	53
Marriage	50
Fired from work	47
Marital reconciliation	45
Retirement	45
Major change in the health or behaviour of a family member	44
Pregnancy	40
Sexual difficulties	39
Gaining new family member	39
Major change in financial status	38
Death of close friend	37
Change to different line of work	36
Taking out a mortgage or large loan	31
Trouble with in-laws	29
Outstanding personal achievement	28
Spouse beginning or ceasing To work outside the home	26
Change in residence or school	20
Major change in usual type and/or amount of recreation	19
Major change in eating habits	15
Vacation	13
Christmas season	12

*SCORING (based on original Holmes-Rahe scale of 43 elements):*

*Less than 150 points: low chance of illness*

*150 - 299 points: 50/50 chance of illness*

*Over 300 points = high chance of illness*



explains in his book *A Passion for Living* (Formbuilt, 1992). "Stress is an internal phenomenon. What's out there is called pressure. If you put the same pressure in front of six people, how come you get six different stress responses? Because of individual choices. Same pressure --different responses."

Pressure and our response to it--two of the critical elements of the stress equation.

The pressures we face in our lives--the "stressors"--are usually external events, situations or environments, but there are also internal or self-induced pressures that can compound those events. We've all heard the saying, "You're putting too much pressure on yourself."

### Consider these "internal stressors":

- ◆ Some lifestyle choices put

pressure on our bodies and minds: poor diet, lack of sleep, taking on too many responsibilities, not exercising.

- ◆ How we think about ourselves: telling ourselves we're no good, presuming failure or inability, comparing ourselves negatively to others, focusing on shortcomings.
- ◆ Unrealistic expectations: perfectionism and always trying to please others are two common types.

### Now consider these "external stressors":

- ◆ People: aggressive or hostile words and behaviours toward us (or others), not meeting our expectations, being unpredictable.
- ◆ Environment: noise, lack of

personal space, pollution.

- ◆ Life events: death of loved one, change in finances, change in or loss of job, marriage, divorce, separation, child leaving home, problems at school or work, birth of child, relocation.
- ◆ Minor irritants: changes in schedule, running out of milk, spilling coffee, losing glasses, appliance failure, missed TV show.

In each of these types of situations the stress event--whether internally or externally generated--produces an involuntary response in our bodies, as Dr. Selye noted.

The stress reaction is simply the body's way of protecting itself from real or perceived impact. This response includes the adrenal glands producing the hormones adrenaline and noradrenalin which

**"Worry has been described as 'the interest you pay on a debt you may never incur'"**

are released into the bloodstream. This "adrenalin rush" stimulates the heartbeat and raises blood pressure. The liver releases sugars to make more energy available and breathing quickens. Our senses are heightened and we are mentally on "high alert".

"Just as a racing engine will eventually rattle apart if it is constantly revved up and never maintained or allowed to rest, the human body and mind will inevitably rattle apart if placed under constant, intense stress," says *The Complete Life Encyclopaedia* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995). This is where we get "stress-related illnesses" from; things like ulcers, high blood

pressure and skin irritations.

Given that the body's responses are a preparation for action--the old "fight or flight" syndrome--Dr. Selye recommended giving the body an outlet for that energy. Going for walk, a run, even punching a boxing bag can release the energy the body has fired up inside. The alternative--keeping the energy bottled up--is what can lead to illness (see boxes).

Of course, the ways in which we respond vary--and can be controlled, adapted and developed--depending upon the impact of factors including how informed we are about the situation we're facing and what if any previous experience we've had with it, the support network we have about us (and how well equipped they are to help us deal with the situation), and how much personal control we feel we have in the situation.

"Life is 10 percent what happens to us and 90 percent how we respond to it," wrote Richard Koole, *Outsmarting Stress: Biblical principles for handling life's pressures* (Kregel Publications, 1993).

**We need to develop:**

◆ **Awareness**

Acknowledging the reality of the stressors in our lives is an important first step in managing lifestyles that are increasingly taking their toll on our physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health. Once we can admit that there are situations and circumstances that are putting pressure on us we need:

◆ **Appropriate Planned Responses**

"Next time this situation arises, I'm going to ...." It's a simple way of asserting at least some control and limiting the "hyped-up" physical and

## Things you can do to *reduce stress*

These are some of the most commonly prescribed responses to stress:

- \* Say "No" -- it's okay to be pleasantly assertive.
- \* Exercise regularly -- go for a walk, a swim, a bike ride.



- \* How much sleep do you need? (not how much do you have time for?) Get it.
- \* Take a break during the day -- stop for lunch, take a five-minute time-out, walk outside and stretch. Have some fun -- enjoy your hobby, go to a movie or play, go on a picnic.
- \* Laugh -- now do it again!
- \* Meditate.
- \* Nourish your body with a healthy diet -- reduce caffeine, fat, alcohol and sugar.
- \* Change or leave hazardous or destructive environments.
- \* Be realistic -- set some achievable goals.
- \* Identify the pressure(s) you're facing -- what can you do about it/them?
- \* Be positive -- refute and argue with negative and self-condemning assertions you make to yourself.
- \* Face reality -- acknowledge the money, personal, relationship, or time problem and then seek ways to address it.
- \* Express and explore your faith -- if you don't have any, learn about it! Prayer draws upon divine support.
- \* Develop a support network -- share your fears with family and friends who are supportive, positive and mature (and be part of their support, too!).
- \* **Remember: STRESSED is just DESSERTS spelled backwards...**

## Common *Symptoms of Stress*

**Physical:** fatigue, headache, insomnia, muscle aches/stiffness (especially neck, shoulders and low back), heart palpitations, chest pains, abdominal cramps, nausea, trembling, cold extremities, flushing or sweating and frequent colds.

**Mental:** decrease in concentration and memory, indecisiveness, mind racing or going blank, confusion, loss of sense of humour.

**Emotional:** anxiety, nervousness, depression, anger, frustration, worry, fear, irritability, impatience, short temper.

**Behavioural:** pacing, fidgeting, nervous habits (nail-biting, foot-tapping), increased eating, smoking, drinking, crying, yelling, swearing, blaming and even throwing things or hitting.

emotional response to the situation. "People who feel in control of life can withstand an enormous amount of change and thrive on it," wrote Dr. Joan Borysenko in *Minding the Body, Mending the Mind* (Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., Inc., 1987). "People who feel helpless can hardly cope at all."

### ◆ **A Support Network**

This can be hard to do in a transient, busy society. And it can be dangerous to assume such networks are in place. Are you part of someone else's? A healthy support network should probably include:

### ◆ **Family, Friends, Faith**

Family, friends and faith. Too often the first two bring unintended and unwanted stress at this season of the year. But faith can make the difference, because faith in the person who came into our world as that little baby in the manger in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago really does show the way to "peace on earth and goodwill to all."

## Simply meaningful

It was the first Sunday in a long time where we had no commitments. No work, no meetings, no visitors – no nothing!

We bravely gave the kids a "children's choice" day where they could decide, within reason, what the family would do. The possibilities were

endless, providing that whatever they chose cost no more than \$5.00 (total!) and required driving no more than 20 kilometres! Perhaps a swim at the beach, a bike ride, or flying the kite at the park.

They chose to stay home. To go nowhere. To visit no one. Just to play and be with the family, all day.

Like adults, children get caught up in the busyness and complexity of modern life. Their daily schedules are often packed with school, sport, music and other activities, leaving very little time just to simply enjoy "being". Our kids can be stressed out and burned out before they leave primary school!

We all need time just to relax, to enjoy simple pleasures, and to take the time to explore the world around us.

And there's an added element to having some "down" time as well: it gives us space to think or talk through issues of importance and reflect on them, not just muddle through life, make uninformed decisions, or lurch from crisis to crisis.

If we're constantly surrounded by clutter or immersed in the busyness of daily existence, there is rarely time to soak up the simple joys of life. And there is even less time to contemplate anything truly deep or meaningful, to set goals and direction for our lives, to contemplate the future, to dream, and to hope.

It's too easy for our lives to fill up with physical details, drowning us spiritually and emotionally, and numbing our minds, bodies and souls.

Most of us long for meaning and purpose, for something beyond the daily grind that is encouraging, uplifting, and healing. Some words in the Bible are of interest in this regard.

"Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot... there is far more to your inner life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the ravens, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, carefree in the care of God. And you count far more... what I'm trying to do here is get you to relax, not be so preoccupied with getting so you can respond to God's giving..." (Luke 12:23-28).

Take the time to relax and enjoy life in a simply meaningful way.

- Simone Worthing



*Take time to relax*