

LESSON 1

Stressed? Who's Stressed?

IT'S 10:00 A.M. The five-year-old is in school until 11:00. The one-year-old is taking a nap, and the three-year-old is screaming at the top of her lungs because she just spilled her milk. Elaine is on her hands and knees, wiping up the milk when the phone rings. She answers, trying to sound cheerful above the wailing of her upset daughter.

"It's my turn to bring cookies for Cubbies tonight? Thanks for reminding me," she says and hangs up the phone. Sighing, she hopelessly looks at the unwashed dishes stacked in the sink as the baby in the next room joins in the chorus with her sister.

Did someone say stress? We all experience it in one way or another. God didn't promise us a rose garden, but what did He promise?

1. What is the promise in Hebrews 13:5?

2. God showed His care of individuals in the case of Adam and Eve and Noah. Can you name other people in the Bible to whom God showed His care?

This young mother is having a bad day that just keeps going. Nights run into each other as one child or another has needs. Lack of sleep and too many demands are raising her stress to a level of overwhelming proportions.

God Is Faithful

Elaine may be tempted to walk out the door and keep walking. She is a believer; she does not doubt that she's a child of God. But right this minute she's not sure if that knowledge is enough to get her through the day.

First Corinthians 10:13 contains a promise for times of confusion: "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it."

3. What does "able to bear" mean?

Elaine picked up her son, Bobby, from school and baked cookies while working with Bobby on his verses for Awana. She washed the dishes, cooked dinner, changed the baby several times, and refereed arguments between siblings. Her husband, a youth pastor, dashes in at 5:30, looking for dinner. He needs to be at church by 6:00 for youth group.

He looks into the pot. "Is this what we're having?" he asks unhappily. "It looks awful." Then he looks around and says, "Look at this place; it's a mess. What have you been doing all day?" He grabs a handful of cookies and leaves for church.

Elaine looks mournfully at the door, then turns and starts

the laborious process of getting everything ready for church. She bundles the kids into the car. Upon her arrival at church, she deposits the children and the cookies in their respective places. She rushes up to the youth meeting where she is in charge of choosing the music and playing the keyboard. She smiles and greets all those she encounters along the way.

To the people she meets, Elaine seems to be happy and in control. She has followed one of the options for handling her emotions. She is stuffing her feelings.

4. What could happen to a person who continues to stuff feelings?

Am I Balanced?

Elaine needs to stop and evaluate her stress level. She is tired, hurt, and angry. Everyone wants to be her top priority, and she is trying to please all of them. Can she juggle everything and still maintain spiritual and emotional balance?

God designed our bodies, souls, and spirits to work together in balance. Sometimes we discover that our emotions have tipped the scale, and we find ourselves totally out of balance.

5. How can we tell when we are out of balance?

6. What should we do if our life is out of balance?

The psalmist requested of God, "Lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:24). To discover where we are out of balance, we need to go to the One Who created us.

We are the only ones who can examine ourselves to see if anger, bitterness, or jealousy is present. Proverbs 14:10 tells us, "The heart knoweth his own bitterness."

Pain is personal. We have private issues that we don't share with others. At times we don't even know ourselves where the source of our pain lies. Only God knows what is in the depths of our hearts. "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23, 24).

We may lie to ourselves to cover pain. It is easier to call those lies "rationalization." If we refuse to address a painful situation long enough, the stress fractures show in other areas, like in our relationships with loved ones.

We must be careful *not* to look to people to meet a need that only God can meet. "My soul, wait thou only upon God; for my expectation is from him" (Psalm 62:5).

Read Psalm 62:6-8.

7. In many of the psalms, David wrote from personal experience about trusting God. Can you think of times when David's trust was tested?

Understanding Our Losses Gives Balance

8. What kind of losses was Elaine suffering?

It is not enough to acknowledge and understand our losses. Sometimes it's necessary to grieve for them.

The Goal of Grieving Our Loss Is Acceptance

Recognizing what upsets us is a step toward dealing with the overwhelming demands on our lives. When we can *accept* the loss, we are ready to move on. Acceptance doesn't mean we are whipped puppies, going on our way with our heads down in despair. Acceptance is, instead, an acknowledgement that God will provide grace to carry on, just as He has promised.

Sharing the Load

Elaine confronted her husband later that evening. She waited until the kids were in bed and there were no pressing distractions. She said, "Honey, I have a problem, and you're the only one who can help me."

She presented the facts in a nonthreatening way. "I know you have a busy schedule, and I appreciate the way you are taking good financial care of us. But you should know that after you came home and complained about the house and the dinner, I felt bad all evening."

John looked at her and, for the first time that evening, considered how his actions had affected her. "I'm sorry, Elaine. I was in such a hurry. I'd been running all day from meeting to meeting. The truth is that I stopped by the house only to grab my books for the youth meeting. I didn't have time to stop and eat."

Elaine explained how those few hurtful words could have long-lasting effects on the children's attitude toward her and their parents' marriage.

John nodded in response, "I know you're right. We need to pray for wisdom in our relationship and that God will open our eyes to the influence we have on our children. If we want our children to learn to walk with the Lord, we need to be role models for them."

9. Read John 8:32. What are some important Biblical truths you can tell yourself in stressful times?

Where Is My Focus?

The things we focus on affect our emotional balance. For instance, if a child breaks a favorite vase, I might shrug my shoulders and say, "Oh well! It's no big deal." Then as the day wears on, I bump into a table, leaving a painful bruise on my leg. The laundry has a pen in it, and all the shirts get ink stains on them. All day long I continue to rehearse what went wrong. Each person I meet hears, "I have had the worst day. It all started when Sally dropped my favorite vase. . . ." It's time to admit it: dropping that vase was a big deal. It hurt to sweep up the precious pieces of glass. I should have stopped right away, acknowledged the loss, put it in perspective, and gone on with the day. I should rehearse in my mind the good things and let go of the painful mishaps.

10. How can our focus affect our attitude?

11. Why should we take time to grieve our losses?

12. Does God care about a broken vase?

Luke 10:38–42 records an incident involving two sisters. Martha was obsessive about her work. She wanted her sister to be obsessive too. But Mary wanted to listen to Jesus. She wasn't being lazy; she just couldn't tear her attention away from what was going on. Martha became angry and complained, "Lord, don't You care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me."

Jesus answered, "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary

hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her" (vv. 41, 42).

Jesus cared enough about that small argument between sisters that He recorded it in His Word. Other personal incidents in Scripture indicate God's interest in people's daily lives.

Do I Share Too Much?

There is another response to stress that sometimes causes more pain than stuffing does: *dumping* your stressful situations on anyone who will listen. Think carefully about the things you share with others—especially those private disagreements you have with your spouse. Consider Elaine's position as a youth pastor's wife. If Elaine recounts to others the little fractious moments with her husband, her friends in church could "take sides" and adversely affect his ministry. If she has told them about the insulting way John spoke to her at dinner but hasn't been able to share with them how they resolved the situation in a godly way, her friends might continue to carry a grudge, possibly never forgetting the incident.

Think of good things to report to your husband or friends. If your day wasn't spectacular, share a promise you read in Scripture. "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 5:19, 20).

Let your life be exuding the love of God, not covering up a cauldron of repressed emotions.

Kim was coaching the girls' basketball team at the Christian high school. She arrived for choir practice a few minutes late because of an important game. Her team had lost. She was upset but tried to act as though the loss was unimportant. Her friend Donna asked, "Are you okay?"

Kim shrugged her shoulders, "Oh, it's nothing. We lost the game, but it's no big deal."

Donna put her arm around Kim's shoulders. "Kim, losing the game was a big deal to you and the girls. You need to admit it and grieve the loss. If you keep silent about your disappointment and stuff it inside, it will continue to bother you. Face it

squarely; then put it behind you. Believe me, it will be better for you and the team. That doesn't mean that you have to run around saying, 'We lost! We lost! Oh! Woe is me.' Just make sure you tell yourself the truth: the game was an important event to you."

13. How did God provide for His servant, Elijah, during a difficult time? Read 1 Kings 17:6.

When we see how God provided for people throughout the Bible, we can be assured that He will provide for us as well.

The Right Focus

14. A great way to keep your focus on the right things is to read Philippians 4:8. What does it suggest we think about?

Things that are _____

Things that are _____

Things that are _____

Things that are _____

Things that are _____

Things that are _____

Things that are _____

Things that are _____

One way to focus on things that are true and praiseworthy is to keep a journal of blessings, including answers to prayers and things for which you are grateful. Keep your journal current, and add to it frequently. Anytime you need a lift, look at your blessings list and focus on what God has done.

Where Does Joy Come From?

Joy does not come from material possessions. Sometimes I hear people say, "If only I had a new house, I'd be happy"; "If only I had a new car, I'd be happy"; or "If only I could go shopping for a new wardrobe, I'd be happy." Houses get messy and need cleaning, the paint peels, and weeds grow in the garden. Cars get scratched. Clothes wear out. And so goes the joy of possessions.

The joy of possessions changes with perspective. If you have a cupboard full of raisins, they don't seem too important. (You might not even like raisins.) But if you are hungry and have only one raisin, that raisin becomes very important.

God's Word can be like that. We have the Bible to read and encourage us, but we don't always take advantage of it. However, in times of stress, the Word takes on a huge new meaning.

Joy does not come from circumstances. In most cases we can't choose our circumstances. Circumstances involve our own health and the health of our loved ones, the places we live, weather conditions, and national disasters. If our joy depended on these events, it would come and go constantly.

15. What is the source of joy? Read Galatians 5:22.

16. How can we maintain joy in our lives in spite of circumstances?

18 *MAINTAINING BALANCE IN A STRESS-FILLED WORLD*

17. Read Colossians 3:1–4. Where should our focus be?

18. Read Jeremiah 9:23 and 24. In what thoughts of ours does God delight?

Maintaining balance is a matter of both completing the tasks God has supplied us the ability to accomplish and placing the unattainable into *His* hands.



Placing our struggles into God's hands is a key to maintaining balance in a stress-filled world.
