

GILLIAN BETHEL

FROM STRESS TO

Joy



AMAZING FACTS

INTERNATIONAL

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Introduction

BEYOND FIXES FOR STRESS

How would you like a vacation on a palm-fringed tropical island right now? Would it remove your stress? Temporarily, no doubt, but the stress would be back. More practical for most of us would be an evening spent in a relaxed setting, doing something we enjoy. But for how long would that relieve our stress? When it comes to lasting stress management, we definitely need something beyond quick fixes.

A wealth of websites, articles, and books already exist to help us conquer stress. But often they treat stress like a virus that can be isolated and remedied. This booklet is different in two ways: It looks at stress as part of a life story, and it shows how God intervenes *in the life* and not just in the stress.

Each one of us is unique, and our personal stress levels depend on how we react to *all* the events of our lives. Because stressors—the triggers of stress—are interwoven with the fabric of our daily experience, true stress management requires a change in the way we relate to life as a whole.

Christianity holds the key to managing this stress. But God is interested in doing more for us than just helping us handle stressors. He wants to make our entire experience in life glow as a result of our

knowing Him. He wants to fill our emptiness and be our continual source of guidance, strength, and joy; as well as a place of refuge when things get tough. Yet God does not force anything on us. He gently works to attract us to Him, and we may not feel a need for His help until our stress level becomes overwhelming. In this way at least, stress can be a blessing.

The main purpose of this booklet is to increase your awareness of how God works in the background of our lives by showing you one real-life story of stress, and also to help you realize just how much stress management (and more) He wants to make available to you. I want to share the story about stress that I know best—my own—in the hope that it will encourage you as your life story unfolds.

Chapter 1

SURPRISED BY JOY

First, let's look at a few facts about stress: Certain stressors, from lack of sleep to noise and even heat, are biologically threatening to our physical functioning.

Other stressors (by far the majority) are often only threatening because we consciously or unconsciously *perceive* them to be threatening. These might range from the loss of a loved one to running out of

gas. They also include work overload, time pressures, poor social relationships, and constant interruptions.

Our resulting reaction to these stressors is called the “fight-or-flight” response. This instinctual reaction enables us to rise to the occasion, such as performing unusual feats of endurance and strength. However, it is ideally suited to handling only short-term challenges and emergencies.

So when a particular stressor or series of them requiring a “flight or fight” response is continuous for months or years because of our life situation, the body and mind sustain strain and ultimately injury unless some other remedy is found to handle the stress.

The symptoms of a long-term “fight-or-flight” stress response will vary from person to person according to their weaker areas in personal health. (You can check for stress symptoms in the appendix.) These “red flags” tell us that we are heading for a complete breakdown in mental and/or physical health unless we reduce the impact of, or eliminate altogether, the stressor.

Yet stressors often cannot be easily isolated. Stress is woven into our lives, and this is not a book designed to show you how to handle a particular kind or group of stressors. Instead, by looking at a life story, you will better understand both how stress

works generally on you over time, and how God intervenes, perhaps even using the stress itself to show you can win the battle to overcome it.

As a teenager in England, my stress developed from having unreachable goals. I wanted to look like a fashion model, but I didn't. I wanted to be popular, but I was shy. I had a huge inferiority complex, and I agonized over not measuring up to other people.

Still, at 18 I was full of hope and had many dreams as I started out on my own at college. Hungry for the missing something in my life, I determined to find it in the next few years. But I was naive about this search, and always looking for fun, I was soon following my roommate and her friends into a life of partying. I also started taking drugs, hoping they might help me discover spiritual powers within myself. But even as I began to set this mistaken course in my search, I had a strange experience.

Among the whirlwind of new acquaintances and experiences in those first few weeks, I met Martin. Good looking and always smiling, he spoke with shining eyes about Jesus. My roommate emphatically warned me that he was in the "God Squad," and spoke scornfully of the campus Christians, but I was intrigued with his happy spirit.

One evening, a throbbing headache kept me home and gave me some time to reflect. Listening to music and curled up in bed, I began to wonder why Martin found Christianity so exciting. Although I had been educated in Christian schools, I never really understood the belief system and thought of the religion as only a collection of myths. “What about Martin’s Jesus?” I mused. “Was he a myth or a real historical person?”

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a voice said, “Yes!”

The answer was as decisive as it was shocking, and in that moment I was completely certain Jesus was real. An incredible joy flooded into me! I was totally amazed.

Despite this wonderful feeling, I felt too afraid of my roommate’s ridicule to talk about it with her. Furthermore, I made a huge mistake by not going to Martin to ask him about the experience. Shyness held me back, and the knowledge of how to cope with that conviction was lost to me. Without guidance from Martin or other Christians, I began hoping that something more exciting than regular Christianity was behind my experience, even wondering if that night I had received a telepathic message from extraterrestrials.

I missed finding my heart’s desire in the first weeks of college by not following that message to the

feet of Jesus. Of course, I never realized that the path I was following was going to lead to all the stress of disappointment, emptiness, frustration, and disillusionment. I had in my grasp all the enjoyment and enlightenment that I would be seeking for years, but it slipped through the cracks. With compassion, Jesus had pointed me in a different direction in an attempt to save me from stress and regret. If I only had followed it right then, He would have helped me so much in my college years. But I didn't—and I continued to struggle with stress without Him.

In hindsight, I now see that Jesus reached to me many times, drawing me to Him continually, even during my childhood. Sometimes it was through thought impressions, sometimes through music or books, sometimes through someone's words or actions. He never stopped speaking to me or guiding my life so that whatever turn I took, I bumped into Him. At times I even responded, though only partially. I usually just pushed Him away. But He never gave up.

Am I unique? No! Jesus wants to save all of us from the stress we bring on ourselves. He has said, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with loving kindness have I drawn thee" (Jeremiah 31:3). He is working behind the scenes in all of our lives,

and there isn't a single person who He isn't patiently, lovingly trying to reach. Most of the time we don't pay any attention. And Jesus, a respecter of free choice, will never forcibly stop us from making mistakes and taking wrong turns. Yet His love for us is steady and inalienable.

In your present situation, Jesus is with you. He is actively involved in your very existence moment by moment, although you may not yet perceive it. "He is not far from every one of us, for in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). You can even speak to Him at any time, and He will hear and answer you. You might not necessarily hear a voice, but you will recognize the answer if you look for it.

Just as He had a better plan for me if I had turned to Him, so He has one for you. He promises, "Call unto me, and I will answer Thee, and show thee great and mighty things which thou knowest not" (Jeremiah 33:3).

Chapter 2

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

Although I missed the opportunity to find the source of that joy I experienced that evening, I pursued it relentlessly for the next three years. I sometimes turned to drugs, but whatever enjoyment

they gave me evaporated when I came down from a “high.” I also tried to unearth inner powers of telepathy and ESP without results, and I tampered with various forms of meditation. All the while, my personal life staggered into an even worse mess every step I took.

Other journeys into religion brought me close to that joyful feeling again, like studying Hinduism and scouring the writing of mystics, yet it remained ever elusive. Though they stirred my imagination, I always sensed their emptiness—the way to enlightenment seemed too hard. During all this disappointment, I neglected my studies as I tried to fit in with the crowd and find a fulfilling relationship. It was all in vain. Gradually, the stress of depression from unfulfilled hopes became a constant feature of my life. I wondered if life was even worth living.

Sometimes we have to hit bottom before we realize we can't really win. We fight stress in our own strength, but we gradually run out of energy using up our “flight-or-fight” resources. The human body is made to withstand a barrage of multiple stressors, but it eventually succumbs to physical and mental ailments, even disease, if the stress goes unrelieved for too long.

At some point, we decide we just can't beat the problem. That's when God can step in. If we already know Him, we can ask Him to take over the situation. But if we don't, and the time is right, He just may do it anyway! That's what happened to me.

Life was continuously stressful. I was disillusioned with partying, and I had failed in my spiritual quest. I even lost my boyfriend. As my three-year college program came to a close, I realized I was on the verge of failing and making a complete mess of my life. I had to make a change.

Having lost so much, I started thinking of my parents and their dreams for me. They had sacrificed for years to give me an education, so I devoted myself to turning around two-and-a-half wasted years. Fortunately, everything hung on a couple of major projects and final exams—it was worth the try.

Amazingly, my stress was tapered when I at last gave up on the social and spiritual struggles. And as I began to focus on someone else's need, my parents', and doing what I knew to be right, God began rearranging my life completely. It was nothing short of a miracle.

By God's grace, I received my degree in Social Anthropology. Although I had been accepted many

months before into graduate training as a social worker, I received a letter stating funding for that training was no longer available. I shuddered at the thought of more studying as the college's anthropology department recruited graduates for research positions, but the department head practically begged me to take an amazing opportunity. Even though I had only wanted a job reference when I went to see him, he surprised me with a fully funded graduate research project in the Caribbean.

Part of what's so amazing is God's timing. It was unheard of to just walk into the department head's office without an appointment, and it was also the very last afternoon before the funding for this project would have been given back to the payee!

An all-expense paid trip to a tropical destination was too tempting to turn down. The past year had seen an amazing turnaround—from near college failure to a graduate dream assignment in the West Indies! Of course, I simply thought this was just a lucky series of events—I never saw the Divine Hand until later. But I did realize that Someone was looking after me.

One evening, before my final exams, I had been studying late in the college library. I was very tired and gathered my belongings to go home. It was a wet and windy night, and I had to ride several miles on

my little motorcycle to make it home. Confused by fatigue and temperamental weather, I made an ill-timed turn onto a four-lane highway. In a heartbeat, I came within inches of being struck by a car. I reached home still shaking from the experience. I lit a cigarette and paced my room. I had narrowly escaped death and could only say to myself, "Someone up there must want me alive!"

Yes! Someone, in fact, did. It was yet another intervention by the One in whom I unknowingly lived, moved, and had my being.

If your stress seems overwhelming and you feel like giving up, you are in just the right place for God to do something wonderful in your life. "He healeth the broken in heart and bindeth up their wounds" (Psalm 147:3). Give your situation to Him, even if you don't know Him yet. I didn't even know enough to do that, but I did give up my own attempts to run my life in a vain attempt to find fulfillment. And God had much more in store than I could have ever found on my own! "I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock and established my goings" (Psalm 40:1, 2).

Jesus takes us where we are. He can pick us up out of the deepest hole—the most discouraging circumstances. “Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh: is there anything too hard for me?” (Jeremiah 32:27). He can give us something much better than we could ever find for ourselves.

Jesus never forces His plans on us. Instead, He invites us to respond, even in the smallest way, so He can take us another step. “O Lord thou hast searched me and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compassed my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before and laid thine hand upon me” (Psalm 139:1–5).

Chapter 3

THE WONDERFUL BOOK

Ah! The Caribbean. Tropical beaches, azure waters! I thought surely doing research there would be nothing less than a paid vacation.

But it certainly wasn't . . .

I had greatly underestimated the culture shock, homesickness, and social isolation I would feel. Worse, the island people did not want to be studied by an

aspiring anthropologist. They even dubbed me “the spy” and proceeded to treat me like one. My research stalled because it took a long time just to understand their dialect. Even more, I was under constant scrutiny on the tiny island—and it wasn’t respectable for a woman to smoke, drink, or party. All my usual “crutches” were denied me if I wanted to be accepted.

College stress was nothing compared to this. Here my back was completely against the wall. The only escape would be paying back the research grant and heading home, but that would greatly disappoint my parents who were thrilled with my academic achievement.

I was trapped. The stress of facing a situation that I could neither control nor cope with was a daily experience for months. My stress symptoms multiplied. Yet I had no choice but to persevere, and eventually my research made progress. Part of that research meant attending church. (God surely must have a sense of humor!) I had to understand the island people’s religious beliefs, and much of the women’s social life focused around their churches.

To fit in, I bought a Bible to carry to church like everyone else. For weeks, that was all I did with it. But one day, I lay down on my bed and opened the

Book. It opened to Isaiah 40, and I read until I came to this part:

“Have ye not known? Have ye not heard? Hath it not been told you from the beginning? Have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is He that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers ... that bringeth the princes to nothing; he maketh the judges of the earth as vanity.”

It was a kind but chiding voice speaking to me. “Haven’t you known all along that I was real?” The lights went on! Of course! The place I should have been looking for something spiritual was the Bible. I never did—why had I thought it was so boring?

From that moment, I started reading the Bible seriously. I didn’t understand everything, but it fed my soul. I found verses that were like notes from a friend. A special favorite was Isaiah 41:10: “Fear thou not for I am with thee, be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.” This helped when I felt in great need of strength but had nowhere else to turn for it.

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27). It was this peace amid all the stress that I really longed for. “These things I have spoken unto you that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). With all the challenges I was having, this one was really encouraging!

Even though I didn’t completely understand these verses, they were so comforting that I wrote them on cards and stuck them on my mirror. I read them often, and eventually memorized them. When I found myself in stressful situations, thinking about them brought peace to me in a way I considered magical. I had never read a book that kept on “speaking” to me like the Bible did.

Many people avoid the Bible, thinking it is just too hard to understand, if not simply old fashioned. It might well be difficult to grasp sometimes, but it is surprisingly up-to-date for the situations in your life. Why? Because it speaks to human needs.

And it’s actually not hard to understand the parts that speak to *your* need! These passages are loud and clear—and wonderfully personal.

If you're not in the habit of reading the Bible, I encourage you to begin. Start in Psalms, or the Gospel of John, or wherever you feel led to look. You don't have to start in Genesis, and you don't need to worry about the things you don't understand. Just read until you find something that "jumps out" at you—and cherish it as God Himself speaking to you.

While on the island, it was more than just the Bible that helped me cope with stressors. Although I did not realize it then, my changed lifestyle, though forced, was excellent for stress management.

At college, I went to bed late, ate irregularly, and drank endless cups of coffee. I smoked and binged on candy, spent the days mostly indoors, and rarely exercised.

But on the island, I was out in the sun and fresh air. I walked everywhere. I went to bed early, ate regular meals and had little or no coffee, candy, or cigarettes. All this helped tremendously to strengthen my body and clear my mind.

Years later while working at a Lifestyle Center as a stress counselor, I found that exercise, rest, and a good diet often relieved the clients' stress before we even sat down to discuss their crisis. Sometimes a daily walk in the fresh air, more rest,

and lots of fruit and vegetables—rather than the foods full of salt, sugar, oil, and caffeine we crave—are all it takes to help us see a way through the stress. However, as simple as it sounds, we still need God’s power to make changes. But all we need to do is ask Him for it.

Something else happened to me during my research. I saw something in people’s lives that I didn’t have but very much wanted. They seemed so happy and stress free.

I found that when I spoke to them, they talked about Jesus as if He was their next-door neighbor. They also always spoke encouragingly. In fact, they reminded me of Martin, the Christian man I had met in college but never approached to find answers.

But this time I didn’t make the same mistake. I began to search again, but now within Christianity. I wanted to find out what it was really about, not for anthropology fieldwork, but for my soul.

God was working vigorously in my life, stirring me up to feel in need of Him. He spoke to me through the Bible, cleared my mind through lifestyle, and positioned me so that I would finally be able to connect with Him and find that longed-for joy. “And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search

for me with all your heart. And I will be found of you, saith the Lord” (Jeremiah 29:13, 14).

God works in each person’s life differently. He doesn’t necessarily place us in worse stress to help us realize we need Him, but as C. S. Lewis observed, “Pain is God’s megaphone to arouse a deaf world.” If He knows we’ll cruise on indefinitely without Him when things are tolerable, He may turn up the heat! “When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, then thou knewest my path” (Psalm 142:3).

Of course, He does this with great care and concern. We are truly safe in His hands only, and He won’t allow us to be destroyed by the experience. “The Lord hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with loving-kindness have I drawn thee” (Jeremiah 31:3).

Our temptation might be to run. In fact, I nearly accepted an invitation to drop the fieldwork and sail to the Pacific Islands with a group of young people. But if we run from His lovingly crafted guidance, we will miss God’s best for us.

Yet even then, He will not give up on us. But it’s important not to take the easy way out unless we perceive His guidance and timing in that direction. He has something better in the end—His rest.

“Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28–30).

Chapter 4

LIFE MORE ABUNDANT

Early on in my fieldwork, I was invited to a church book sale. I felt obligated, so I purchased a copy of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. I remembered listening to it long ago at elementary school, but I doubted I would ever read it. So I left it on my bookshelf to collect dust.

A year went by. I was working as a part-time teacher to try to shake off the “spy” image, and I was beginning to understand the culture quite well. Life as an anthropologist was still difficult and challenging, but the Bible was bringing an increasing glow into my life as I tried to better understand Christianity.

Then one weekend, grounded with a low-grade fever, I noticed *Pilgrim’s Progress* sitting idly on my bookshelf. I picked it up thinking I’d read just a little, but I ended up reading it cover to cover in just two days. Amazingly, the book had answers to almost all

of my questions about Christianity. It taught me what it really meant to take Jesus as my Savior.

When I finished it, I knelt down and asked Jesus to take my whole life into His hands. I begged for His forgiveness and asked Him to make me clean and new. That wonderful joy I felt that night in college and had longed for came flooding back—this time to stay.

Now Jesus was not just someone I knew *about*, but a living person whom I admired and loved. Even better, I knew that He loved me more. I could hardly believe it! At last, I had found the “something” that had been missing all my life, and it was a wonderful “Someone.”

For a long time, I had thought turning my life over to God for His guidance was a scary thing to do. I imagined He would force me to do things I didn't want, like be a missionary to somewhere outlandish.

Of course, I didn't know Him well enough then, nor did I understand the real meaning of the Christian life. I have learned that God lets us “try Him out” for as long as it takes to know to trust and love Him. By the time we are ready to fully commit our lives to Him, we want to do it, knowing by experience that it is the happiest way to live.

We do it knowing that we aren't puppets, that He treats our power of choice with the utmost respect. He does ask us to do specific things and make sacrifices, but He also gives us the willingness or desire to do them—and the ability too! We are always free to say “no,” and to leave His service. The struggle then for a Christian is to actively stay close to Him.

My life was transformed! I woke each morning remembering that Jesus was real, and I talked with Him about the day ahead, asking for strength and guidance. There was so much joy in hearing Him “speak” through prayer and Bible reading or simply in the way He worked things out through the day. “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Now when stress came up, I could talk to Him about it and find help in the Bible. I would also pray for the people involved. Many people said they could see in my face that something good had happened to me.

I even experienced God's deliverance from addiction. Prior to really turning to Him, I always kept a pack of cigarettes and smoked when things got extra stressful. I had “given up” smoking many times

by finishing a pack and vowing to never buy another, but that only worked until another onslaught of stress. This time I threw away a half-full pack, knowing I would not need cigarettes at all any more. And I have never wanted one since.

I felt in awe of this ability—this gift from Jesus. For some people, it's a much harder battle to stop smoking, but I have seen so many people delivered from addictions that I know there is nothing too hard for God. It was as if He was saying to me, "You won't need these anymore; I will help you cope from now on." "Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh. Is there anything too hard for me?" (Jeremiah 32:27).

In addition to God's power over bad habits, I saw more clearly how He protected and guided me in stressful situations. Before I returned to England, a friend and I decided to travel in South America. We took overnight bus trips to save hotel expenses, but we soon found that bus travel wasn't very predictable. Our first bus was to take us overnight from Caracas, Venezuela, to Bogota, Columbia, but on the way highway repair on one mountain pass stopped the bus in its tracks. A giant pile of dirt stood in the road. We spent a cold, uncomfortable night waiting for the work crew to return.

We finally arrived in Bogota late the following evening, eight hours behind schedule. But the adventure wasn't over yet. On the outskirts of the city, the bus collided with a car. The drivers started shouting at each other, and we realized we wouldn't be moving until the police arrived to clear things up. Desperate to reach our destination, we got off the bus and started to walk.

Of course, we had no idea where we were and couldn't speak enough Spanish to ask for help. But suddenly a young man approached us and spoke to us in English! He asked if we needed help, and we gratefully requested help in finding a hotel. He walked with us to a clean, cheap hotel and said goodbye.

Before, I would have thought this young man was just a happy coincidence. But now I often wonder if God in His mercy sent an angel in disguise to help two very vulnerable girls lost on the streets of a strange city, late at night. Certainly He sent us help just when we needed it. "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God" (2 Corinthians 1:3, 4).

When I decided to give my life to Jesus, I had no idea how it would be affected. All I really knew was that I wanted to walk on His path for me. As time went by, I found I had gained a friend who was so very present with me that I could turn to Him at any moment for strength, guidance in a decision, help in a struggle, or anything else I needed. “Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore” (Psalm 16:11).

And between those times of struggle, I could praise Him for all the good things in my life, and talk to Him about other people and their needs. I also realized that I could help Him bring joy to others, and one of the greatest pleasures of life was to be His co-worker, helping others as I had been helped.

The Bible continued to become dearer and dearer. It was now a book about someone I knew, and it was full of messages from Him to me. I continued to memorize Bible verses and found them powerful weapons against stress. There seemed to be a promise for whatever challenge I faced! “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

More than that, I learned to simply give stressful situations over to Him instead of trying to handle

them by myself. It saved so much worry! It was amazing how difficulties resolved with God's intervention. So often He worked things out "exceeding abundantly above all we can ask or think," and I would just marvel! (Ephesians 3:20).

"I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).

Chapter 5

DON'T CHRISTIANS

HAVE PROBLEMS WITH STRESS?

If knowing God and giving Him our life is the ultimate answer to stress, does it mean that our stress problems are over? Well, it depends!

Obviously, Christians still face stressors, yet they have the means to meet and overcome them in God's power—the most powerful force possible! The Bible even portrays Jesus' followers cheerfully facing imprisonment or death. Surely we should be able to handle a difficult work situation or an obnoxious person!

While stressors can still stimulate our natural God-given "fight or flight" response, it can now be directed to fleeing to the refuge of prayer and the grace of God's promises. God will show us how to fight in His way and in His strength. He promises, "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” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

With God, there is always hope. Even if you find yourself under a continuous barrage of stressors, God’s comfort and strength will let you enjoy regular relief from the stress response that breaks down your mental and physical health. If this is not happening in your life, you are missing out on one of God’s greatest promises to you.

Here are some questions to ask yourself:

1. Am I turning this over to God and trusting Him, or am I worrying about it?
2. Am I allowing God to work out His will, or am I doing *my* own will?
3. Am I dwelling on negative thoughts, or am I asking Jesus to take them away?
4. Am I counting my blessings, or am I wanting more and more?
5. Am I looking for and claiming Bible promises for this situation, or am I hiding from truth?
6. Am I spending quality time with Jesus, or am I so tired and overloaded that I miss out?

7. Am I taking care of my health by eating healthfully, drinking plenty of water, getting enough sleep, and exercising regularly?

Some time ago, my husband and I experienced several stressful months during which he had no regular job. We live in a rural area by choice, and jobs are often not very plentiful. As time passed and our financial situation looked bleaker, it was a real temptation to worry. For our daughter's sake, we wanted to stay in our beautiful country setting, where she has good friends and an ideal environment.

As time passed, I found myself falling down on the wrong side of nearly all of these questions, so I was experiencing a lot of stress. I had to ask for the Lord's forgiveness, and His power to make the necessary changes in my heart and life. As I prayed, my peace of mind was restored.

The Lord will often remind us of the many ways He has already taken care of us in the past, so in complete confidence, we must give the situation to Him to work out. Eventually, work came to my husband from an unexpected quarter, as things often do under the Lord's watch, with the added blessing of giving him a much-needed change of pace. God is so good!

Stressors can come as a vicious cycle in which one problem leads to another, creating intense stress and eventually a breakdown in physical and mental health. Most of the time when a bad situation comes up, we strive in vain for the outcome that *we* want. In this process, we get tired and frustrated so that even more things go wrong, and in turn we are more likely to dwell on negative thoughts—the downward path begins. We sleep poorly and start the day late, without spending quality time in Bible study and prayer. We worry about the situation until we begin to experience stress symptoms and may ultimately become sick or depressed.

But Jesus is very tender and merciful. “And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). He doesn’t leave us to spiral downwards into despair but reaches to us in every way He can, reminding us that He is more than able to handle things for us if we ask Him. “He hath said, I will never leave thee nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me ... Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:5, 6, 8).

Our part is simply to trust and obey. If we take time to remind ourselves of all His promises to us in Scripture, things fall back into their true perspective, and our stress is relieved. “And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work” (2 Corinthians 9:8).

We need to make the well-known prayer our own: “God, help me to remember that nothing is going to happen to me today that you and I can’t handle together.” That is the bottom line in stress management.

Appendix

SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Symptoms resulting from continuous, unmanaged stress vary according to each individual, but the more of the symptoms listed here you experience, the more likely you are to be suffering from excessive stress, which may eventually contribute to major illness or a mental breakdown if unchecked.

If you find yourself experiencing one or more of these symptoms, I encourage you to seek help. Your first stop should be on your knees, and the second should be found in the Bible. After that, listen for God's will in your life, look for the answer, and act accordingly.

- *Physical*

Frequent nervous "tics" or muscle spasms

Frequent infections and viruses

Dry mouth

Stiffness, tension, and pain of neck, back, and joints

Frequent abdominal pain

Frequent indigestion, diarrhea, or constipation

Itchy skin

Arms crossed or fists clenched while conversing

Clutching the steering wheel in traffic

Easily startled

Frequent headaches

Frequent insomnia, fatigue, loss of appetite

- *Psychological*

Frequent feelings of panic and/or not being in control

Frequent depression for no apparent reason

Difficulty concentrating on the simplest tasks

Frequent impatience

Frequent forgetfulness

Sudden emotional outbursts and crying spells

Frequent worrying or feeling trapped by circumstances

Frequent mood swings

Frequent irritation over small difficulties

Routine tasks become nearly unbearable to accomplish

Frequent boredom and/or need for excitement/escapism

Increased use of coping mechanisms: alcohol, caffeinated drinks, smoking, drug taking, eating, sleeping, etc.