



MANAGING STRESS

*The Lord helps the fallen
And lifts up those bent beneath their loads.
Psalm 145:14 NLT*

If we are going to be diligent about depression proofing our lives, we must learn how to manage stress. Stress overload is a contributing factor in most cases of depression. In our hectic, fast paced lives, we are faced with hundreds of choices a day from simple to complex. The demands of deciphering all of one's choices can become overwhelming, especially if we tell ourselves that we can never make a mistake because we must be perfect. How we manage our stress and teach ourselves to de-stress can make the difference.

Here are four things that you can learn to do in order to prevent life from getting the best of you. As you learn to do these things and practice them, you will find you are better able to handle stress instead of feeling overwhelmed by it.

1. Take Better Care of Your Body

We've already talked about the importance of taking care of your body through exercise, and diet and exercise for building depression prevention. In addition to those three, one of the best ways to help your body de-stress is to teach it how to relax and breathe deeply. When you are anxious or in pain, your muscles tighten, your body feels tense, your emotions are agitated, and your breathing gets shallow.

There are relaxation techniques that can help you lower your physical tension as well as emotional stress. But you must learn how to use them—and that is not as easy as it seems. When I was pregnant, my husband and I signed up for Lamaze class to prepare for natural childbirth. I attended the class and learned everything I could, but didn't practice. I told myself it was so easy I didn't need to. I was wrong. As childbirth progressed, I could not concentrate or focus on relaxing my body. Just as with any other skill you are learning, it takes repeated and regular practice for you to learn how to relax your body.

Learning how to breathe deeply can help you relax your body and mind and bring a heightened sense of well-being. The physiological changes that deep-breathing produces can counter some of the negative effects of stress on your body. Simply breathe in slowly through your nose, hold it a second or two, and then fully exhale through your mouth. Do that a few times and notice how much better you feel.

Once you've learned how deep breathing feels, you can do it inconspicuously while waiting in a long line, driving in a snarled traffic jam, or anytime you feel tense or stressed in order to relax your body and your mind.

2. Accept Your Limitations

We must emotionally accept the reality that we are human beings. That may sound odd, but many of us try to ignore that reality. We refuse to accept that we are finite, limited people who don't know everything, can't do everything, aren't perfect, need sleep, get sick, and sometimes do wrong.

I'm not saying anything you don't already know, but knowing it and accepting it are two different things. Listen to your self-talk when you are faced with the reality of your limitations. Do you say something like "I should have known better" or "I should have been able to stop that from happening?" If so, you believe a lie that you should be all-knowing or all-powerful.

Do you berate yourself for your sins and mistakes? Perhaps on one hand, you acknowledge that you're not perfect but emotionally you won't accept it.

When you can't emotionally accept that you're a sinner, you can't emotionally accept God's forgiveness or his help. Instead, you tell yourself that you shouldn't need it because you should be better than that. Accepting our humanity means we know, accept, and live within our limits. We don't try to play God or be God. We recognize that we need more than ourselves to manage our life successfully. We need God. That awareness is good because then we can run to the God who loves us and wants us even when we mess up. He doesn't condemn us like we are so prone to condemn ourselves (Romans 8:1). Rather, he forgives us and helps us to change so that we grow to become a holy (whole) person.

3. Prioritize Your Resources

We only have four resources at our disposal. They are our time, our talents, our energy, and our money. We often overspend these finite resources on things that aren't really important, leaving us with no margin for emergencies or fun. How we choose to allocate our resources not only impacts us, but also those we love. It is essential that we give some thought to our deepest values and priorities.

Feeling stressed out often exposes how we have been mispending our resources. For example, many people are overwhelmed these days because of high credit card debt and financial difficulties. Their resource of money has been overspent, and the consequences are now draining them emotionally and financially.

We can do the same thing with our other resources. We go into debt with our energy resources by extending ourselves over and over again beyond our limits, leaving ourselves physically drained and emotionally exhausted. Always hurrying is a refusal to accept the reality of time. We leave no margins for interruptions or delays and try to squeeze every moment out of our day. It's not surprising that we feel like a taut rubber band ready to snap.

Take some time to evaluate how you allocate your resources of time, energy, money, and talents. Ask yourself are you living within your limits or are you always overdrawn?

Do you budget your resources according to your values and priorities and your family's needs, or do you use up your resources in order to live up to other's expectations or gain their approval?

4. Learn to Get Quiet With God

In our time-starved, get more done world, many of us never take a moment to be quiet and still in God's presence. When we're feeling good, it seems like a waste of time. When we're not feeling good, our anxious thoughts and emotional turmoil make it hard to get quiet.

The psalmist tells us to "Be still in the presence of the Lord and wait patiently for him to act" (Psalm 37:7 NLT). Christian meditation and prayer can help us remember what is true and restore a sense of peace when our negative thoughts threaten to overwhelm us.

During these quiet, still times, God works to change the stress that is crippling us into something that can actually strengthen us.

Remember these stress-busters:

- Learn to prioritize and say "no" when you need to.
- Slow down and stop living your life in a hurry.
- Stop procrastinating. It causes stress because things get backed up.
- Remember you're not God and are not omnipotent.
- Meditate on God's perspective and his character.
- Let go of what you cannot control and change.
- Practice deep breathing and learn relaxation.
- Have fun and enjoy the little things of life – beauty, nature, music.
- Exercise – burn off that extra adrenaline.

For more information on handling depression, see my book *Defeating Depression: Real Hope for Life-Changing Wholeness*