

Overcoming Stress



Laura's a sales manager for a software firm specializing in human resource information systems. She presses her team hard, and she makes no apologies for it. Year in and year out her sales reps make their quotas, and the owners of the privately-held firm reward her handsomely for it.

Her staff describes her as driven, a term she also uses to describe herself.

Turnover among her direct reports is high, but only slightly above industry benchmarks for the profession. Exit interviews tend to describe an atmosphere where goals are set but never celebrated when reached and where the slightest slip in productivity results in sharp rebukes.

When pressed by an owner after one star performer resigned, Laura was unapologetic, but objected to the owner's description of her tactics as "unreasonable stress." She argued that in such a competitive industry, only continuous pressure kept the firm's revenues on the uptick. She described the pressure she put on her workers as "good stress." She also argued that workers in sales jobs are accustomed to such "good stress" and

actually performed better under it. She pointed to the turnover numbers and the sales results from the past five years as an example.

Despite her protests, the owners set new ground rules for Laura's management of the department, including limiting the number of hours they were required to work, opening their doors to complaints from sales reps about Laura, and reducing the number of monthly cold calls each rep was required to make.

Six months later sales were down.

Why?

Is there such a thing as "good stress?"

Who controls the effect of stress on employees? The workers or the manager?

Are there jobs with built-in stress that some people just shouldn't hold?



Scripture Passages

I Kings 18:46–19:14

Study

In the space below, list some of the things that cause stress in your work and career.

Reviewing your list, describe how stress affects you and what it feels like to you.

To see how David (king of Israel in the Old Testament) describes stress, read Psalms 6:6-7 and Psalms 22:1-21. Do these words strike any of the same emotions you've felt during stressful times in your life?

Many workers who write or meet with us in our ministry come with the sense that Jesus was immune to stress. To understand this isn't true, please read just one of the many instances when Jesus faced incredibly stressful circumstances: Matthew 26:36-46. From your own knowledge of Jesus' life, list other times when he faced stress?

What are some of the strategies you use to cope with stress?

How effective are they, and why?

While there are many sources of stress, years of conversations with working Christians reveal the following items to be among the chief sources of personal stress on the job (not listed in order of impact):

- Unreasonable, hectic, or chaotic pace and/or schedule
- Financial duress
- Relationships with coworkers, customers and/or vendors
- Fear (of failure, job loss, embarrassment, etc.)
- Anger (both our own anger and also anger directed at us by others)

No one Bible study can address all stresses, so for this lesson we've selected the all-too-present stress of a chaotic pace as our study item. Begin by reading I Kings 18:46 through 19:14. Here's a list of Elijah's activities for this period of time:

- Elijah travels to show himself to Ahab, who has vowed to kill him.
- Elijah meets with Obadiah, then confronts Ahab.
- Elijah issues a challenge to Ahab, Jezebel and the prophets of the idols.
- For an entire day, Elijah carries out the challenge, including taunting the prophets of Baal and the Asherah.
- Elijah climbs to the top of Mount Carmel to finish the challenge.
- Elijah runs down Mount Carmel and over to Jezreel, outrunning Ahab's chariot as he does so, a distance of about 16 miles.
- Jezebel sends Elijah a promise of death, which prompts Elijah to run to Beersheba, which is another 80 miles.
- He leaves his servant behind and continues on a day's journey into the wilderness to hide from Jezebel.

After all this, we find Elijah in a cave at Horeb, discouraged and disillusioned. Horeb is 200 miles south of Beersheba. Having seen the glory of God and the victory over the prophets of Baal and the Asherah, what possible explanation might there be for Elijah's disillusionment?

Stress can come from positive emotions and activities as often as it does from bad circumstances. The emotional high of a great spiritual triumph takes a physical toll on us, and when tacked on to the stress of Jezebel's threat and an already tired body, it is no wonder Elijah reacted so poorly!

In this account, where might Elijah have reserved his energy?

Think about your own schedule. What activities can be removed in order to improve how you handle the surprises that arise in your day?

The Bible makes it clear that rest is among the most important items on our to-do lists. Not just Sabbath rest, which is intended to shift our attention to a worshipful attention of a holy God, but rest which restores our bodies and enables us to respond appropriately to temptation, frustration, and even opportunity.

In fact, common sense tells us that rest helps us not only by reducing our hectic pace, but makes us better able to face all the other stresses we encounter. In other words, the most important way to handle stress is to build in adequate rest, and to guard our schedules carefully to ensure we get that rest.

Common Sense and Eternal Principles

- While not all stress can (or should) be avoided, we often make choices that introduce or increase the stress in our work world.
- Dealing with the source of stress is more important than dealing with the effects of stress.
- Because work often provides us with the money we use to care for ourselves and our families, we can easily begin to believe we control our circumstances. This idea that “we’re in charge” adds an extra layer of stress to life that Scripture tells us is unnecessary. Our security must rest on trusting God; anything else is self-deceptive and increases the effect of stress.
- Celebrating successes too vigorously or dwelling on failures too long taxes our physical strength and makes us susceptible to the negative effects of stress.
- The Bible continually emphasizes the role rest plays in healthy living, and experience teaches us that rest is a vital tool in handling the effects of stress.