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STRESSED BUT CONNECTED

by Cheryl Lewis

All Stressed Out and Nowhere to Go

Do any of these describe you?

- Tired of living under too much pressure
- Looking for a way to get out from under all the stress
- Wanting to try something different

Feeling stressed out is not uncommon. As a matter of fact, if you don't complain about the amount of stress you're under, you may be in the minority. Everybody is stressed! Right?

Wrong! Everybody has stress, but not everyone is stressed out. If stress has been controlling your life, this booklet may be just what you need. Not only does it offer strategies and techniques for managing stress but, more importantly, it offers a bigger picture of life and the promises of the One who is in control ... the One who gives peace.

Often, the things that are beyond our control cause the greatest stress in life. An employer downsizing, an auto accident that wasn't your fault or a sickness that just won't go away are all stresses that come from beyond us, sources of stress that we cannot control.

A few months before Lou Gehrig's disease (a nervous system disease) took his life, Pastor Mark Spitz said these words at a fundraiser: "When Lou Gehrig retired from baseball, he called himself the luckiest man that ever lived. He said this before knowing exactly what he had. I can echo his words tonight. Even though I know exactly what I have, I also know exactly what I've got: generous and loyal friends, family that has surrounded me with unconditional love and support and a God who says, 'My strength is made perfect in your weakness'"

"I no longer walk with a determined step and head held high, but do not think my head is bowed out of shame or embarrassment about my 'sorry condition,' I have simply lost the muscles that held it up. In the same vein, do not mistake my tears for sadness or grief over all that I have lost. My tears flow from the awe and wonder I feel as the unworthy recipient of such grace and love from friends old and new, near and far, and especially from the Almighty God who has poured out so many riches that I am overwhelmed."

Mark believed the words of Jesus to be true: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matthew 6:25-27 NIV).

Mark knew that this same Jesus who told him not to worry about the basics of life because his heavenly Father was caring for him also promised to take care of his eternal life. Mark knew that this same Jesus died and rose again so that Mark could have eternal life in a body free from disease—life that God also offers you in Jesus.

While Mark knew that he wasn't in control, he was connected to the One who is in control ... the One who gives peace.

Once we're connected to the One who's in control, stress—even though it is still part of our daily lives—becomes much more manageable. It becomes easier to learn how to manage your stress so that your stress doesn't manage you.

The 12 principles in this book will help you

- address the root of your stress;
- make better choices in the face of stress;
- find a greater degree of the peace that escapes so many today.

You will also discover more about a master plan that was set in place even before you were born. *"The LORD said, 'I am your Creator, and before you were born I chose you ...'"* (Jeremiah 1:4-5a). I believe that God made you and he loves you. And he does *not* want the stresses of life to overwhelm you.

For that reason I have added a section at the end of each principle called "Embracing God's Best." Here you will find passages from the Bible, God's Word, which have helped me. I hope you will take time to read and consider these selections. If you are wondering what a difference God can make in your life, you might find it helpful to talk with someone you know who has already embraced God's best.

Let's get started!

Principle #1

Know Your Stress Level

I am so stressed I could

- a) kick the dog;
- b) use a nice stiff drink to calm my nerves;
- c) hit someone;
- d) spend all my savings at the casino
- e) chuck everything and walk away;
- f) scream at the top of my lungs to let off a little steam.

Much of our stress comes from day-to-day pressures: work, family obligations, personal problems, financial problems, etc. As a matter of fact, before we even get out of bed we can become stressed just thinking about what lies ahead.

Sometimes we're stressed simply because of our role in life—husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, single parents, employees, you name it! Our stresses may be different, but they all have impact. That's why it's important not only to learn about your own particular level of stress, but to also learn *what* stresses you out.

Maybe you know all too well the stress that comes with the role(s) you fill in life. For example, if I work under pressure my chest begins to tighten. The less time I have to get something accomplished, the tighter my chest becomes. If I can identify the stress, I can decide what to do about it.

I've come to know that it's better to manage my schedule so that I'm not working under pressure. But when it *does* happen and my stress level gets out of control, I get out and take a walk. This is not a cardiac workout, but a nice long walk at a comfortable pace that allows me to loosen up. As I walk I ask myself what absolutely *has* to be done that day and what could possibly wait until another time.

Think about it. What is your level of stress? Maybe you've found that sometimes taking a walk won't do—the pressure is too overwhelming and you know you can't handle it on your own. That's when I find it comforting to remember that God is there for me, offering a sense of peace. When I turn to the following passage from Scripture, I feel my burden lifting.

Embracing God's Best ...

When I was really hurting, I prayed to the LORD. He answered my prayer, and took my worries away (Psalm 118:5).

Principle #2 Think Before You Act!

Making decisions under stress is not a good thing. When stressed people make snap decisions, they may well regret them later as stress distorts our ability to be calm and to think rationally.

I know someone who says, "If you ask me how I am on a really bad day I just might answer, 'I'm thinking about running away. Thank you for asking.'" She continues, "Sometimes the pressures are so great I feel like changing my hair color, walking a little taller and disappearing into a crowd of people."

Something happens inside when we are under stress—we either want to stand and fight or run away. Perhaps the one we choose depends on what we think the outcome will be.

Consider Aileen: She not only thought about running away, she did! One evening she got all four of her children ready for bed, helped pick out their clothes for school the next day and packed their lunches. Then she told her husband she was running to the supermarket. And the rest "is history."

As Aileen says, "I remember my cell phone ringing after about an hour or so. I looked at the number and turned it off. I just didn't want to deal with anything. I didn't have one dollar to my name. I had no clothes and nowhere to go, but I didn't turn around. I drove about three hours before I stopped, crying the entire time. The sad thing was I wasn't crying because I regretted what I'd done; I was crying because I felt such relief! I didn't want to go home! Home meant the same old problems, the same old stresses—problems I thought we couldn't possibly get through."

Two years later, Aileen shares, "At the time I couldn't see any other way out. In retrospect, I now know it could have backfired. I'm blessed it didn't. At the time it was the only solution I knew, but now I'd tell anyone to not allow stress to get you to that point. Going that far is dangerous. Stressed-out people don't think ahead!

"My husband and I have come to an agreement that in the future, if either of us feels truly stressed we will talk to each other. I'm delighted we were able to make things work. Our problems have not disappeared, but together we're finding ways to deal with them. It's bearable; it's much better. At least I'm not tempted to run away again."

Have you ever been tempted to just run away? Escaping is *not* the answer. Leaving does *not* make the stress go away, it only adds to it. And it opens the door for much more.

Stress clouds everything so that it's difficult to think clearly. If you're under a lot of stress, take your time and think things through. Weigh out all the possibilities: Is what I'm planning to do really reasonable? How will my decision impact my life (or the lives of those I'm involved with) in the long run?

Perhaps you've gotten to the point where you feel like you can't take one more thing. Know that God provides a peace that leads to a calmer, more rational way of thinking. He leads; he guides; he directs. I turn to the following passages so often they seem permanently etched in my mind and on my heart! I know I am not alone in my decision-making. I hope you may come to know the same.

Embracing God's Best ...

The LORD gives strength to those who are weary. Even young people get tired, then stumble and fall. But those who trust the LORD will find new strength. They will be like eagles soaring upward on wings; they will walk and run without getting tired (Isaiah 40:29-31).

Our God says, "Calm down, and learn that I am God!" ... (Psalm 46:10a).

Principle #3

Don't be Ashamed to Get Help!

Some things are a sure signal that you're not handling stress very well, like choosing to use alcohol or drugs to cope, to dull emotional pain, or to keep from dealing with day-to-day frustrations. (Heavy drinking is not the same as taking a drink at a social event. Heavy drinking is what you do in order to escape from the daily pressures of life.) The same is true when using over-the-counter or prescribed medications to do the same thing. Using these long past their prescribed or effective time is a warning that you may become addicted.

Or what if you've resorted to hitting your children or spouse out of frustration or anger. This is abuse, and it comes with severe consequences—legal action and sometimes loss of family, to name a few. Throwing tantrums, having difficulty sleeping, sleeping too much or chronic fatigue, unexplained crying, lack of energy and prolonged periods of depression are also signals you are not handling stress.

All of these are flashing yellow lights; they warn of us approaching danger. We are wise to heed them and not ignore them. They will not go away on their own; as a matter of fact, they are apt to get worse before getting better.

If you can relate to Aileen (in the earlier story) who ran away because she thought she'd crack under all the pressure, or if you're entertaining thoughts of harming either yourself or others, *now* is the time to get a different perspective. Seek counsel from a professional who can help. There is no shame in doing so, and you may be pleasantly surprised at the light they shed.

If you don't know how to go about finding counsel, your local mental health agency can provide a list of possibilities.

I personally recommend asking a trusted friend if they know someone who provides Christian counseling and can help you see more clearly God's plan in your life. These professionals will handle your problems with care and hold them in the strictest of confidences.

Feeling stressed is nothing to be ashamed of. Everyone is stressed from time to time, but high levels of stress can lead you to do something you might regret later. Now is the time to change some behaviours ... before they become regrets.

God knows what you are going through. He invites you to share your thoughts, worries and cares with him.

Embracing God's Best ...

(Jesus said) "Ask and you will receive. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened for you. Everyone who asks will receive. Everyone who searches will find. And the door will be opened for everyone who knocks" (Matthew 7:7-8).

Without good advice everything goes wrong—it takes careful planning for things to go right (Proverbs 15:22).

Principle #4

Become a Participant in Your Life!

I vaguely remember playing totem tennis as a child. Attached to the top of a pole was a rope and on the end of the rope was a tennis ball. We'd take turns hitting the ball, without letting it stop or drop down. You didn't want to get in the way of the swinging ball, and sometimes you just had to duck. You needed to keep your eye on the ball at all times!

Consider Richard: He finally landed his dream job. Since he had no formal training he knew he would have to work twice as hard to prove himself. He felt stressed, but it was a good stress. He finally felt as though he was achieving something in life.

Several months later his father died, leaving him, an only child, to care for his sick mother. This meant moving her into the small house he shared with his wife and three children. "That's when things started going downhill," he shares:

"There's a lot of tension and chaos. My wife is unhappy; the children are upset, and I feel caught in the middle. It's a no-win situation. My work is slipping, and I think they may give me the boot. I'm really stressed, and it's not the good stress either!"

As Richard discovered (and you probably have as well), you can't control whether or not stress comes into your life. But just because you're under stress does not mean you need to live life as a victim, unable to do anything to improve your situation. Taking charge means keeping your eye on the ball (the thing causing the stress) and preparing to take whatever means necessary to keep it from becoming a destructive force. It means being in tune with your weak areas and strengthening them; it means knowing when you can't handle things on your own and turning to one who can help; it means actively participating in the solution.

Some problems that seem beyond our control actually are not. Take financial problems, for example. When there's not enough money, your fears may be real—homelessness, hunger, no transportation, no way to work, and eventually no job—but, it doesn't mean it has to become your life's stress. Maybe for a while you will need a second income. What things can you cut out of your monthly budget?

Does your life feel out of control? Do you feel like you are batting that ball back and forth, trying to duck before it hits you? There is a way to stop the destruction stress can bring. And you don't have to do it on your own. God sends others to help: a trusted friend, a close family member, a trained professional, and he is always there to help carry your burden.

Embracing God's Best ...

(Jesus said) *"If you are tired from carrying heavy burdens, come to me and I will give you rest. Take the yoke I give you. Put it on your shoulders and learn from me. I am gentle and humble, and you will find rest. This yoke is easy to bear, and this burden is light."* (Matthew 11:28-30)

I know what it is to be poor or to have plenty, and I have lived under all kinds of conditions. I know what it means to be full or to be hungry, to have too much or too little. Christ gives me strength to face anything. (Philippians 4:12-13)

Principle #5

Learn to Mind Your Ps, Qs, and Relationships

Cupboards are convenient places to store things we don't necessarily want out in the open. Once, when selling our home, a potential buyer inquired as soon as she entered the door, "I just want to know, how many catch-alls do you have?"

The real estate agent's blank look must have indicated that he had no idea what was meant because her husband chimed in, "She means cupboards. She needs a lot of them because she has a lot to put in them."

Some of our stress comes from issues that pile up and accumulate over the months or years. These are usually the things we really don't want to deal with, or have the energy to deal with, so we put them in a mental cupboard and close the door. But at some point something is bound to happen that forces us to deal with them.

What clutters your mental and emotional cupboard? Do you have unresolved issues in your marriage? Are problems placed on the back burner concerning family members? Do you have misunderstandings with friends or coworkers? Have unhealthy habits placed your finances in jeopardy? Are there neglected health issues? The list goes on ...

It may seem like the best thing to do, but when you stash things away they eventually become an "issue," and issues eventually become stress. Suddenly you feel it: tightening of the chest, tension headaches, can't sleep, etc. It's as if you can't get free.

Why do we tend to stash these issues in a safe place? Perhaps, because we're fearful that if we deal with a particular situation, a relationship might never be the same. We are afraid things may not work out as we'd hoped. I've been there myself, but I've also found that it's better to face the situation head on and talk it out. Sometimes even a carefully worded letter can resolve heated issues.

If part of the stress you feel today comes from unresolved issues with others, you will benefit from addressing each one. Though it is hard work and calls for lots of prayer and patience, you will be pleasantly surprised at the weight that is lifted when you find the courage to do so. Pray that the Lord enables you to do what these passages say.

Embracing God's Best ...

God's Spirit doesn't make cowards out of us. The Spirit gives us power, love, and self-control (2 Timothy 1:7).

*(Jesus said) "So if you are about to place your gift on the altar and remember that someone is angry with you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. Make peace with that person, then come back and offer your gift to God."
(Matthew 5:23-24)*

Principle #6

Learn to Separate Your Stresses!

I don't know about you, but when I'm feeling overwhelmed, it's usually because I haven't sorted everything out. At times I lump all the issues needing my attention together in my mind, which makes them seem unapproachable and unsolvable. I picture some massive obstacle I can't get past. I can't see an ounce of hope, and the future doesn't look very bright. My mess defines my mess and my mess says it's too big to overcome, so I want to give up, give in and accept it!

Stress, all lumped together, sets us up for regrettable action. We are more likely to explode and say harmful, hurtful things, and to accuse others, usually innocent bystanders. While all stress is significant, not all stress is life altering. Once we determine whether our stress is a long-term, life-altering stress or whether it will go away when the project, incident, or season is over, we can deal with it more effectively.

We can see it for what it is and much of our tension disappears. For example, the stress of locking your keys in the car or changing jobs is not as long-lasting as the stress that comes with finding out you are ill or losing your job.

Use the space provided on the next page to write out some of the stresses you are currently experiencing. Mark them LT for long-term or ST for short-term.

LT ST

I hope this exercise helps you sort out your mass. Take time to separate the situations and issues and examine them one by one. This is a critical step in getting rid of a lot of the stress you carry.

Sometimes I need to remind myself the stress I'm currently living with is not forever, even if it's going to take a while to work through. I need to remind myself that God is the source of the strength I need in order to endure. With his help, I can do just about anything for a season!

Embracing God's Best ...

Everything on earth has its own time and its own season. There is a time for birth and death, planting and reaping, for killing and healing, destroying and building, for crying and laughing, weeping and dancing, for throwing stones and gathering stones, embracing and parting. There is a time for finding and losing, keeping and giving, for tearing and sewing, listening and speaking. There is also a time for love and hate, for war and peace (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8).

Principle #7

Who Is Designing Your Life

Maria is a single mother of three, ages 8, 10 and 14. Up until last year she held two jobs. She was worried that her children wouldn't have everything all the other kids at school had. She could remember growing up in a family without a father and how she felt when she didn't have all the latest clothes, or couldn't afford what others could.

"My biggest thing was making sure my kids had everything everybody else had—clothes, shoes, the best of everything. I didn't want them to feel deprived because they don't have two parents so I worked and worked, almost around the clock. I was tired most of the time, but I was never satisfied that my kids had what everybody else had.

"What stopped me? It was a heart attack at age 38 and a daughter who went into big-time rebellion, for starters. I had to stop and take stock of what's truly important. I'm one of the lucky ones. I survived and my daughter got back in line as soon as I was around more. But it doesn't always come out that way. Some people don't make it and some kids don't stop rebelling. 'Mummy,' my kids tell me now, 'didn't you know we'd rather have you around than all the stuff you could buy us?' I can't believe they're the ones teaching me!"

This type of stress is not limited to single parents. Those who feel a need to fit in or have the same things as everyone else feel it most. The pressures from society are phenomenal! There's pressure to look a certain way, dress a certain way, be a certain size, live in a certain neighbourhood or area of town, drive a certain model of car and on and on. These pressures can drive us to do some unthinkable things. Young children and teens sometimes resort to stealing just to have what their friends have. Others take on two or three jobs— not just to make ends meet, but in order to have more!

The "pursuit of things" is typical today. But if we're not careful, we'll find the world running us, telling us what we should have and whom we should be. This prevents us from thinking independently and being the person God intends us to be. Read what the passages from God's Best say to us about the pursuit of things in this world.

Embracing God's Best ...

(Jesus said) *"What will you gain, if you own the whole world but destroy yourself?"* (Mark 8:36).

(Jesus said) *"Don't store up treasures on earth! Moths and rust can destroy them, and thieves can break in and steal them. Instead, store up treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy them, and thieves cannot break in and steal them. Your heart will always be where your treasure is"* (Matthew 6:19-21).

Principle #8

Learn How to Give It a Rest

At a certain point, grappling and worrying only produces *more* grappling and *more* worrying. Sometimes the best way to handle a problem is to *not* handle it. The key is to be "in tune" and to be discerning—to recognise that certain gut feeling: the one we get when we "just know" the best thing to do is to leave something alone.

In this case, I can't help but introduce something from God's Best early, simply because I know first hand the benefits of handing a problem or concern over to someone greater than me.

Apart from Jesus Christ, there are many things people try in order to accomplish this. Some try taking a long vacation, like going to the mountains or taking a cruise. Many take up yoga or meditation. The drawback is that many of these solutions are not only costly, they are short-lived and do not offer permanent peace. At best we receive only a temporary answer for an ongoing problem.

But Jesus offers a permanent solution; he fills the void our own attempts cannot. In this world, he offers to bring peace into the lives of those who enjoy a relationship with him—a rest from troubled times. While our problems won't miraculously evaporate into thin air (though sometimes this happens!), for those who live in the light of God's grace, the cares and worries of this world take a back seat. He offers a new perspective.

The words of an old hymn phrase it this way:

“Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in his wonderful face.
And the things of earth will grow strangely
dim, In the light of his glory and grace.”

How does Jesus come to fill us with his unexplainable peace?

He does this through time spent in his presence—going to worship, reading and meditating on his written Word, the Holy Bible, and receiving his forgiveness. When we learn to listen for his voice, we discover that it usually comes in the quiet, when we least expect it. God helps us to give up our own thoughts and agendas; we learn to be less me-focused and more God-focused.

Embracing God's Best ...

If you have a Bible, I hope you will get it out. If you do not have one, I hope you will ask someone to help you find one. For this principle, I think it will be so much more beneficial to suggest passages for you to look up on your own. I encourage you to ask Jesus to speak to your heart concerning each one. As you read the passages, ask him to soften your heart so that you might receive the healing message he has prepared especially for you.

I love having a heavenly Father who has promised to care for all my needs and is concerned about everything that bothers me in this life. I eagerly go to him about all my cares—not just the big, but also the small.

Would you like to experience peace even in the midst of stress? It is possible! Read and study the following from God's Best for your life: Isaiah 26:3-4; 1 Peter 5:6-7; Matthew 11:28-30; Galatians 5:22-25 and Philippians 4:6-7.

Principle #9

Become a Today Person

Are you an “I'll get to it tomorrow” person, you know, a procrastinator? Are you someone who never quite gets to anything today, instead it's always on your calendar for tomorrow? How little the accomplishments of a tomorrow person! If there were ever a sure-fire cure for stress, it could well be embracing that life begins with the decisions you make and the actions you take *today*!

You may be thinking that I don't know your stresses. There's no way they can be solved in a day's time! You're right! I don't know exactly what keeps you up at night or causes you to worry or brings you to tears. But I do know that anything you begin to do today will start chipping away at your block of stress, even if only a fraction.

Every positive action we take, no matter how small, brings results. Degrees aren't earned overnight; it's more like over the course of years. But taking classes this semester and the next will certainly move you toward your final goal. Problems can't always be solved right now, but agreeing to talk for 15 minutes at a time or going to weekly counselling sessions to address deeper issues go a long way toward resolution.

The steps you take today are important; in fact, they're imperative!

So deal with it ... today.
Pray about it ... today.
Stop it ... today.
Start it ... today.
Talk about it ... today.
Resolve it ... today.
Tomorrow you will feel so much better!

Do you have decisions, conversations, apologies or tasks you've been putting off? Are there things that, night after night and day after day, eat away at your peace of mind? Whatever they may be, today is the best day to begin bringing about a positive change. Today is the day to start a new outlook on life.

Embracing God's Best ...

It is just as the Holy Spirit says, "If you hear God's voice today, don't be stubborn!" ... (Hebrews 3:7-8a).

You must encourage one another each day. And you must keep on while there is still a time that can be called "today." If you don't, then sin may fool some of you and make you stubborn (Hebrews 3:13).

Principle #10

Let Others Off the Hook, a Lot!

This is a tough one because, honestly, people do some pretty unforgivable things! They take advantage of you, hurt you, betray you, walk all over you and talk about you behind your back. It's very hard to get over some of the terrible things people have done!

But, if we are honest, we do some terrible things, too! We hurt others (even if it is unintentional), betray others, say things against people, take advantage and manipulate, in order to get our own way. We need to be forgiven for the way we often treat others.

But when we're hurting or angry, it's natural to forget about our own imperfections.

A few years ago I was having a difficult time matching what I needed to do with what my heart felt. Although I had uttered, "I forgive you" to a particular someone, I still felt deep hurt and pain every time I remembered what had happened. Eventually this blocked my ability to truly forgive and I began to feel ill—physically and spiritually.

Then the Lord helped me to see that living with an unforgiving heart was actually hurting *me* more than the other person. I was the one placing obstacles in the way and preventing healing. I remembered a story that Jesus tells in the Bible, one that teaches about undeserved love and forgiveness. A young man had deeply hurt his father, yet the father welcomed him home with outstretched arms; he showered him with acceptance and forgiveness (see Luke 15:11-32). That's the same kind of love and forgiveness God, our Father in heaven, showers on us because of what his Son, Jesus, did on our behalf.

God sent Jesus into this imperfect world to live a perfect life. I could never do that, so he did it for me. Then he took the punishment for my sin—every wrong and hurtful thing I've ever done—and took them to the cross.

He paid the penalty in my place, and then God raised Jesus from the dead. And because of that, I am forgiven and he helps me forgive others.

Embracing God's Best ...

(Jesus said) "You can see the speck in your friend's eye. But you don't notice the log in your own eye. How can you say, 'My friend, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you don't see the log in your own eye? You show offs! First get the log out of your own eye. Then you can see how to take the speck out of your friend's eye" (Luke 6:41-42).

Christ died for us at a time when we were helpless and sinful. ... But God showed how much he loved us by having Christ die for us, even though we were sinful (Romans 5:6,8).

Principle #11

Learn to Live by Three Little Words

Change means work! It means breaking from what has become tradition (yes, especially an unhealthy one) and adopting something new. In order to do this, ask yourself these vital questions:

1. How sincere am I about adopting a new lifestyle? Am I willing to do all the work that change requires?
2. Am I committed to doing these things, which will—in the long run—benefit not only me but those in my life as well?

These three things are vital for making important changes in your life: commitment, limitations and respect.

First, make a *commitment* to yourself. Resist taking on obligations to every project, meeting or engagement you are asked to participate in, before consulting with those who have your best interest at heart. Keep in mind how easy it is to be fooled. Someone might say, "It's just one little thing." But that statement alone should signal *danger!* Remember, that's how you reached overload in the first place. Old habits die hard, but if you want them to die badly enough, they *will* die!

Make a commitment to your family, to give them your best. When asked to do something, first consider the following:

- How will your "yes" affect other areas in your life? How many things will change because you agree to do something?
- Will your "yes" cause you to feel frazzled and out of control?
- Will it keep you up at night when you should be getting rest?
- Will "yes" mean you won't see your children or partner for an extended period of time? Will an off-the-cuff "yes" bring discord into your house?
- Will saying "yes" introduce unnecessary burdens or reintroduce stress levels you've just backed away from?

If you can honestly answer each one and still have a peace about this new commitment, then go for it!

Second, set some healthy *limitations* (boundaries). This gets tricky; setting limitations on your availability and how far you are willing to go will sometimes seem more callous than friendly. But if you don't set limits, others will. And chances are, what others see as your limitations will be as broad and wide as their own needs!

Setting limitations simply means having a healthy and realistic understanding of what you can and cannot do, and what you are and are not willing to do. People will grow to respect you for knowing yourself so well.

Here are some key questions to help you set boundary limitations:

- Am I physically and emotionally able to pull this off?
- How far will I allow this to intrude into my routine, work or family life?
- Am I willing to risk placing demands upon myself that might require me to act as two, three or more persons?
- Will I, at some point, resent this and see it as an intrusion and perhaps not do such a good job?

Third, learn to *respect* yourself. Everybody has a set of “been-there-done-that” moments in life. Out of respect to ourselves there is a point when we should stop trying to force-feed a nonworking situation and/or relationship. Others may try to fool you into “this time will be different,” but if there comes a point when you know a relationship or situation is only producing added stress, then gracefully remove yourself from that situation or relationship.

We cannot keep all stress away from our door. Stress will come, whether through the demands you’ve set on yourself, from others or from day-to-day living, but when you learn how to keep stress under control, you will have accomplished something tremendous.

I personally find the passage below a breath of fresh air. I do make mistakes; I have and I will from time to time make a mess of my life. But I can be assured that because I believe in the work and power of Jesus, I am forgiven and he is constantly making me over. He has already fixed what I cannot—He took my imperfections and my failings to the cross and died for me. And he did the same for you. Perhaps you, too, can come to know what a tremendous difference Jesus can make in your life.

Embracing God's Best ...

Anyone who belongs to Christ is a new person. The past is forgotten, and everything is new. God has done it all! He sent Christ to make peace between himself and us, and he has given us the work of making peace between himself and others. What we mean is that God was in Christ, offering peace and forgiveness to the people of this world. And he has given us the work of sharing his message about peace (2 Corinthians 5:17-19).

Principle #12

Keep Your Baggage to a Minimum

Since 9-11 (2001), it's become a major challenge to fly, attend professional sporting events or even gain entrance to a government facility without proper clearance. Yet some really good things have come out of this, like becoming more aware of our surroundings and discovering, for the most part, that we do not need to carry so much “stuff.” The lighter we travel ... the better off we are!

This is probably the most valuable principle in living a life with less stress—learning how to travel light. The bottom line for living this principle is remembering not to carry yesterday's baggage into today. Keep your mistakes (or the mistakes of others) and your failures (or those of others) in the best place possible—yesterday.

I heard a story about a man who began travelling to a nearby town, pulling a cart with a few small bags behind him. He intended to do a little shopping and needed the cart to hold his purchases. Along the way he encountered many friends who kindly asked him (since he was going to town anyway) to deliver a few things for them. Being a good friend, the man agreed.

You can imagine how his cart became filled with all their bulging, heavy bags. Yet he didn't complain and simply continued on his way. Well, in order to get to town he had to climb a fairly steep hill. Because of his heavy load, he slowed down and began moaning and crying. An older gentleman, also going to town, stopped to check on him.

"Young man," he said, "I've noticed for some time your anguish as you've climbed this hill. I must ask whatever gave you the idea to bring all this baggage on your trip, knowing you would have to bring it up such a steep hill and such a distance?"

The man explained how he had acquired the extra cargo. "I'm really sorry to hear that," the older gentleman said. "Let's check to see what might possibly be taken off to lighten your load."

Bag after bag was opened. Each time they pulled out piles upon piles of rubble, heavy rocks and useless items. "My dear fellow," the older man said. "It seems all your friends have given you is the trash they neglected to put out for collection by their own door!"

How full is *your* cart? What unnecessary items are *you* pulling from day to day? Much of your stress comes from things you refuse to let go of, things from yesterdays gone by. If you are feeling stressed about events, conversations or offenses from long ago, now is a good time to let them go. You cannot, no matter how hard you try, change anything that happened before today. And remember not to borrow from tomorrow by worrying about what might happen or what you may or may not have enough of. Consider the following thoughts from God's Word that show his great love:

Embracing God's Best ...

How far has the LORD taken our sins from us? Farther than the distance from east to west (Psalm 103:12).

"Don't worry about tomorrow. It will take care of itself. You have enough to worry about today" (Matthew 6:34).

Where Do You Go from Here?

It's time to put these new principles into action. You may find it helpful to build a support system. One way to do this is by connecting with a community of believers who are dedicated to following God's Best in their lives. Through this community, you will be encouraged to seek a more personal relationship with Christ, to receive guidance and clarity about God's Word and to pray.

Are you ready for Christ to make a new person of you? Are you ready to embrace God's Best for your life? I hope you answer yes and would love to explore more!

If you would like to know more about how to embrace God's best, please get in touch with your local church or visit our website at www.messagesofhope.org.au.

My Action Plan

My Connecting Community (names and contact information)

Things I Want to Remember



For more support,
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