

Powerful Stress Management principles for all of God's people.

God In Our Stress: The Christian's Guide to Stress Management

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/4695.html?s=pdf>

GOD in OUR STRESS

the christian's guide
to stress management

JAMES
KLOTZLE

God In Our Stress

The Christian's Guide to Stress Management

Written and Published by:

James Klotzle
Founder and Coach of
www.Christian-Life-Coaching.org

Cover art by:

[Ryan Cox](#)

ESV - Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are taken from the *English Standard Version*, Copyright © 2001. The *ESV* and *English Standard Version* are trademarks of Good News Publishers.

KJV – Scripture quotations marked (KJV) are taken from the *King James Version*. Authorized King James Version of the Bible.

NIV - Scripture Quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by the International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

© 2010, James Klotzle

All rights reserved.

The information in this book is not intended to diagnose, treat or prevent any physical or mental illness. Please seek qualified professional help for all medical and mental problems.

For my mother and first teacher:

Thanks for giving me a love for learning and the vocabulary to articulate what I have learned.

Table of Contents

Just Click on a Chapter or Heading and jump straight to it!

Introduction

- [Four Years Later](#)
- [Using This Book](#)

Part I: Stress and the Christian Experience

Chapter 1: The Promise of Peace

- [The Peace of Another Martyr](#)
- [What Does This Have To Do With Stress?](#)
- [Real Life](#)
- [The Promises](#)
- [Chapter 1 Activity](#)

Chapter 2: In the Garden

- [Our Fearless Leader](#)
- [The Real Question](#)
- [God Cares for You](#)
- [Chapter 2 Activity](#)

Chapter 3: Our Limited Vision

- [The Rest of the Story](#)
- [Everything We Don't Know](#)
- [Like Little Children](#)
- [If The Lord Wills](#)
- [Chapter 3 Activity](#)

Chapter 4: God's Purpose

- [Purpose of the Commandments](#)
- [Our Own Strength?](#)
- [Little Things Matter](#)
- [Stress, Fear and Love](#)
- [Chapter 4 Activity](#)

Chapter 5: On the Mountaintop

- [Mountaintops and Rollercoasters](#)
- [God's Built-In Solution](#)
- [Powerful but Dangerous](#)
- [Good Habit Formation](#)
- [Choosing the Right Habits](#)
- [Chapter 5 Activity](#)

Chapter 6: The Potter's Wheel

- [The Potter's Lesson](#)
- [The Stress of the Clay](#)
- [A Beautiful Paradox](#)
- [Differences Between Vessels](#)
- [Chapter 6 Activity](#)

Part II: Dealing with Stress

Chapter 7: Understanding Stress

- [Types of Stress](#)
- [The Stress Response](#)
- [Chapter 7 Activity](#)

Chapter 8: Sources of Stress

- [Physical Stressors](#)
- [Metaphysical Stressors](#)
- [Acute vs. Chronic Sources of Stress](#)
- [Stress at Work, at Home and at School](#)
- [Chapter 8 Activity](#)

Chapter 9: Numbing and Stimulating

- [Numbing the Stress Response](#)
- [Stimulating the Stress Response](#)
- [The Sabbath Principle](#)
- [Chapter 9 Activity](#)

Chapter 10: Reducing Stress

- [The Jubilee Principle](#)
- [Taking Stock](#)
- [Preparing Yourself](#)
- [Chapter 10 Activity](#)

Chapter 11: Managing What's Left

- [Lesson from the Vine](#)
- [Yara's Story](#)
- [Managing Yara's Stressors](#)
- [Chapter 11 Activity](#)

Chapter 12: Coping with Stress

- [The Relaxation Response](#)
- [Coping Strategies](#)
- [Self Care](#)
- [Chapter 12 Activity](#)

Printer-Friendly Activities Section

Designed for those who want to work on these helpful exercises by hand!
Just print pages 101-113

Chapter 1

The Promise of Peace

It is 45 A.D., in an outlying province of the Roman Empire. We are looking down on a crowded hall. A religious trial is underway.

A crowd of bearded faces surrounds one man, standing at the center of the room. The respectful silence of this solemn trial has given way to a low rumbling sound from the witnesses and onlookers. They mutter among themselves; some in disbelief and some in spiteful, self-righteous tones. The one man stands, unshaken, his work-weary face glowing with a peaceful luminosity. Some would later recall his appearance as angelic.

An older man sitting nearby raises his hand, and the crowd becomes quiet. The heavy trim on the older man's robe matches his authoritative tone. He addresses the one with the angelic face.

"You have heard the accusations against you. What do you have to say for yourself?"

The man with the peaceful countenance looks at his accusers and draws in a deep breath. Everyone in the room leans forward to hear his defense. No one has been able to win an argument with this angel-faced servant of God since he started caring for the poor and comforting the sick-at-heart some months before. He speaks.

"Brothers and fathers, listen to me."

His words are a simple request, not a plea. They listen. For the next fifteen minutes, his voice rings clearly and passionately over the crowd. He speaks of God's faithfulness to their sacred ancestors. He speaks of God's work as an archeologist might speak of a beautifully preserved discovery. Everyone in the room has heard these stories before, and yet they listen as if they were little children once again.

Recounting their history lessons one after another, the man in the center of the room reminds them of all that God did, time after time, to bring their fathers back from the brink of destruction. His voice shifts and becomes even more earnest. He reminds them of all the times that their ancestors had wandered from God. The crowd grows restless. They are proud of their heritage and suspicious of this man's intentions. Then he pauses. The history lesson is over. He holds their eyes in a level gaze.

"You stubborn people. You could not hear God when He was speaking to you in person. You cannot even see His work when you are looking at it with your own eyes. Your fathers killed the prophets who tried to tell them about the Savior. Now you, who are supposed to be guardians of the law and models of righteousness, have followed right along in your fathers' footsteps. You betrayed and murdered the very One Who was sent to save you."

Like a lightning bolt, his accusation electrifies the crowd. Conviction penetrates the hearts of his audience. Their guilty consciences cannot listen to another word. They cannot allow themselves to even *imagine* that he is speaking the truth. There he is, just standing there with the confidence of one who speaks from authority. He dares to slander *their* fathers? He dares to accuse *them*? *He has gone too far.* Wait. He is gazing upward, speaking again.

“Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”¹

The wounded pride of the self-righteous crowd of men wells up out of their jealous hearts in one unstoppable flood. Generations of misguided tradition, fear and guilty emotion overwhelm all reason as the court becomes an angry mob. *The angel-faced man must die.*

Teeth gritted in rage, the crowd boils out of the hall and surges toward the city gate, carrying the angel-faced man along in its turbulent, seething core. Outside of the city they throw him to the ground and shed their ceremonial robes, already sweating beneath the sun. Grabbing up the rocks that lie scattered about, they begin to hurl them at the man who dared to accuse *them* at *his* trial.

As stones crash against his body with dull, crunching thuds, this peaceful man turns his gaze upward. The object of so much misplaced wrath is calling out to the only person within earshot who will listen to him in these last moments. He does not plead for his life. He does not breathe out condemnations. *He is praying.*

“And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”² Stephen is widely known as the first of many Christians to be killed for his faith.

The Peace of Another Martyr

It is late in the winter of 1569 A.D., just outside the township of Asperen, Holland. Two men are racing across a whitened landscape; one for a tidy sum of money, the other for his life.

His breath billowing in the frosty air, the prisoner pauses, hands on his knees, listening intently. From behind, he just catches the sound of his pursuer crunching through the old hardened snow. Spring is coming. Partially melted by yesterday’s sun and refrozen by the night’s chill, the snow is slowing the prisoner’s pace. Sometimes he crunches through the icy surface and the hard edges rip at his clothing. Sometimes the crusted snow resists his weight and he skids along with uncertain steps.

Weakened by confinement and months of poor rations, the escaped man wearily straightens up and looks over his shoulder. The bounty hunter is closer than he expected. Staggering forward, he scans the country before him. A large icy pond lies directly in his path. He cannot see a way around. He is trapped. Unless.... Pausing at the edge of the pond, he tests the ice with his foot. From behind, he hears the heavy breathing of his pursuer. He knows what fate is in store if he is recaptured. Some of his brothers in faith have already endured torture and been handed over to the executioner.

With a whispered prayer, he takes a step of faith and puts his full weight on the edge of the frozen pond. The ice holds. Fastening his eyes on the opposite bank, the prisoner forges

¹ *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version, Acts 7:56

² *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version, Acts 7:59-60

ahead, trying not to think about the cold dark water waiting below or the chains waiting behind him. The malnourishment that slows his pace has also claimed much of his bodyweight. Creaking ominously, the early spring ice protests but does not fail him. Freedom lies ahead. Freedom to worship, freedom to speak the truth and freedom to gather with his brothers and sisters drives the prisoner forward across the treacherous surface. Surely his well-fed pursuer will not dare to follow his footsteps....

Crack! A cry. Another crack and a muffled, scrambling splash! The escaped prisoner wheels around and skids to a halt, looking back along his dangerous traverse. A dark, jagged hole is spreading near the bank he had left moments before. A hand reaches out, grasping the air. Contorted with fear and numbed realization the bounty hunter's face breaks the surface, gasping for breath. Without hesitation, the prisoner retraces his steps and halts a wagon's length from the struggling man. Fractured by his considerable bulk, the ice refuses to support the weight of the pursuer. The prisoner creeps slowly around the edge of the watery hole, searching for stable footing. Precious seconds slip away and the drowning man rasps out a plaintive cry: "help!"

Finally, the escaped prisoner finds a solid piece of ice and reaches out toward his pursuer. Eyes meet. Hands grasp. One hangs on numbly, desperately. The other pulls with all of his depleted strength. Slowly, painfully, the heavier man is heaved onto the sloping bank of the pond. Exhausted and wet up to his knees, the prisoner collapses beside his pursuer. Both of them lie there, breath puffing toward the hazy sun.

Because he stopped to save his dying pursuer, Dirk Willems³ did not escape in the end. Upon his recapture, he refused to deny his faith despite torture and threats of death. Willems freely confessed to preaching the Gospel and baptizing others in his home, crimes that the state church deemed punishable by death. On May 16, 1569, Willems called out as his body was being consumed by the executioner's flames. He did not cry for mercy. He did not curse his captors, his executioners or the state church. He simply cried to his beloved Savior: "Oh, my Lord; my God."

What Does This Have To Do With Stress?

Okay, wait a minute. This was supposed to be a book about stress management, right? What are these stories of martyrs doing in here? What does this have to do with managing my stress; right here, right now in my busy life? Is this James guy just trying to shock me into thinking that I have an easy life? Compared to martyrs!?

Well, maybe a little ☺. But the real reason for including these stories runs much deeper than their surface shock-value. Besides, you can get a bigger shock just by watching the evening news! No, my goal is not to shock you or to stress you out or to minimize what you are going through right now. Instead, I want to show you something that God has brought to my attention during my own struggles with stress over the years.

³ The escape and execution of Dirk Willems are described by John S. Oyer and Robert Kreider in *Mirror of the Martyrs*, p. 36-37 (Good Books, 1990) and by Thieleman J. van Bracht in *Martyrs Mirror*, p. 741-42 (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1950).

We read and hear all of these amazing stories about Christians undergoing great persecution. They endure without complaining; without cursing God or the injustice of their plight. Persecuted Christians even *forgive* the very ones who are causing them so much physical and emotional pain. Amazing.

Amazing is right. Amazing grace, that is. We know that the only way a human being can endure such mistreatment without losing hope is through God's amazing grace. The Holy Spirit, our great Comforter, is present in those terrible moments of grief and pain. He gives strength to endure. He gives peace to the troubled soul. His presence wipes away all doubt. Confidence in His provision even allows suffering Christians to show kindness to their very enemies.

We know all this. It is Sunday-school review, right? Well, here is the strange part... ready for this?

We know all this to be true, but we don't live like it is. We act every day as if this power, this grace, is only a reality for far-off characters like Dirk Willems and St. Stephen.

Maybe it is. Maybe this grace is really only given to the special few who are called upon to endure persecution. Perhaps our Comforter is busy with all of those persecuted believers in developing countries, and He does not bother with us comfortable, well-fed Christians. After all, do we really need Him? We have insurance for this and that, clothes to keep us warm, food in our refrigerators.... We have one safety net after another. If our family fails us, there is always the local church to catch us when we fall. If the church fails us, there are always government organizations or charities to which we can turn. Why would we need that divine level of Holy-Spirit comfort? No one is throwing rocks at us. No one is piling firewood around a stake with our name on it.

Real Life

But still... we are under such incredible stress! So what if we're not being burned at the stake or pummeled with stones for our faith? Life is still difficult!

Our child throws a fit in the supermarket. People stare and mutter under their breath about how rotten a parent we must be. Blood pounding in our head, our first instinct is to grab the child and flee in disgrace. But now we are seeing red, and we feel like throwing the child over our knee right there in the aisle and giving him a few good swats on the behind.

Our spouse is eyeing yet another pricy purchase. They know that money is scarce. The bills are piling up, and we are drowning in the ridiculous interest payments. Why do they always do this to us? Why does it always such a battle? Where is the sweet and agreeable person we married!? We feel like stomping out and slamming every door on the way. Voices rise. Ultimatums fly.

The boss has asked us to take on yet another assignment. We are always fixing our co-workers' mistakes. And this one involves the pain-in-the-neck customer that everyone loathes. Are we the only responsible ones around here!? We have been staying at work late for months, and restful weekends are just a hazy memory. This is the last straw. We fantasize about grabbing our co-workers by their ties and knocking their heads together.

Our loved one has been ill for years. At first it was a tragedy. There was sympathy, there were helping hands. Now it has become normal life. The helpful friends have drifted slowly away. Family is avoiding us, or they are just stopping by to ease their consciences and then rushing away before we ask for any more favors. And worst of all, we find ourselves becoming annoyed and impatient with the very one we love so much. This makes us feel guilty. How could God allow this to happen!? Why do we feel so trapped?

I don't know the particulars of what you are going through at this moment. Only you (and God) can plumb the depths of your stress and trace its many sources. But it must be serious, because you *did* open up this book, and you are still reading it. You know that you need Holy Spirit's comfort, just as much as those who are persecuted for their faith. You long for the joy that they sing about in hymns and praise choruses. Where is that amazing grace they talk about in church? Is it available to you too? Well, I have good news:

It IS available to you! How can we know that for sure? Take a look at this:

The Promises

In St. John's account⁴ of the Gospel, Jesus Christ Himself said that He was going away for a while. But He left a promise for everyone who demonstrates love for Him by hearing and keeping His commandments. He promised that He would not leave us alone like orphans. Christ promised that His Father would send a Helper, the Holy Spirit to remind us, to teach us and to comfort us. This Helper, our Comforter, the Holy Spirit, is not just present with the persecuted church. He is not only promised to those who are being tied to stakes. He is not only sent to those who are being pummeled by stones. He is not overloaded by too many calls for help. He is not napping. He is not distracted by more important things.

He is sent by God the Father to everyone who has a life-changing love for Jesus Christ.

In the Apostle Paul's letter⁵ to the early Roman church, we are assured that God works everything for the ultimate good of people who love Him and are called according to His purpose. Not just for those being martyred for their faith. Not just for celibate, cloistered contemplatives. In the end, God works everything for the good of everyday Christians who are trying to make ends meet, Christians who are struggling with physical ailments, Christians who are being pulled in fifteen directions at once and Christians who are living every day "in the world" and on the front lines of the spiritual battle.

I could go on with scripture after scripture, but remember this: The promise *IS* for you. Now for the next question: *How do we grasp this promise of peace in times of stress?* How did the martyrs do it? How did they maintain their peace? How did they find joy even in the middle of extremely stressful situations? Keep reading to find out!

⁴ *The Holy Bible*, John 14:18-27

⁵ *The Holy Bible*, Romans 8:28

Chapter 1 Activity

After every chapter, I will give you an activity.

Complete the activities.

If you read through this book *without* completing the activities and then set it aside, all of the warm fuzzy feelings will wear off pretty quickly. Before you know it, you'll be right back where you started... tangled in a mess of stress and searching for a way out. If you doubt me, read James 1:22-25. It is time to be a doer, and not just a hearer of the good word. So, harried warrior... strap on your sword and clear your throat for one more wild-eyed battle cry. It is time to conquer stress! *Humming to myself... "God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help indeed, Who in the time of trouble sends, His grace to meet our every need..."*⁶

Here is your first activity:

- Get out your Bible.
- Open it up to the Gospel of John, chapter 14.
- Read verses 18 - 27, out loud.
- Now turn to Romans chapter 8.
- Read verses 26 - 28, out loud.
- Yes, really... read them out, loud and clear.

That's it! See, the activities aren't so bad...

Here is some space to take notes... you can use this book as your personal stress management journal or start a separate one!

⁶ O. M. Seamans, *Hymns of Zion: God Is Our Refuge*, p. 4
(Milford, IN: Apostolic Christian Publishing Company, 1958).

Chapter 12

Coping with Stress

Now that we have reduced the number of stressors (stress reduction) in Chapter 10 and looked at ways of managing what's left (stress management) in Chapter 11, it's time to cover Coping with Stress! When most people think of ways for dealing with stress, they are usually thinking about different ways to cope. I hope that you now see the importance of reducing the number of stressors in your life and learning to manage what's left before settling down to the coping part.

In many ways, coping is the fun part of dealing with stress. Some people really enjoy knocking stressors off of their hit list in the stress reduction phase, and some people are born organizers who thrive off of structuring their lives through stress management principles. However, to most of us, stress reduction and stress management are a lot of work and don't come naturally. That's okay; anything worth having usually does not come easily... just think of the effort that goes into maintaining a good marriage or a neat back yard or anything else that we truly enjoy.

Lots of people try the coping strategies without doing the work of stress reduction and stress management first. Maybe you have tried to relax in a spa or a quiet place, but have found it very difficult to enjoy because stressors are crowding your mind. Trying these coping strategies without taking care of the root of the problem first is like trying to heal a bullet wound by placing a band-aid over the hole. It might make it look better, but in the long run, something more serious must be done (like surgery to remove the bullet and clean the wound before bandaging).

The stressors in our lives are serious and powerful, and it takes purposeful action to keep them from robbing us of our peace and joy. It is much easier to relax knowing that we have already done everything within our power to handle stress well. More than that - if you have followed the steps in this book - you can be confident of what you believe about God's will for your peace and joy, trusting fully in His plan and being obedient, through His grace, to the powerful principles that He has outlined. After all that, the coping strategies that we will discuss in this final chapter will be able to have their full and lasting effect on your life.

The Relaxation Response

Okay, now that you have done the hard work of stress reduction and stress management, (and I hope you have) it is time to look at coping strategies! Please remember as we discuss coping strategies that every person is different. There are some basic principles that define effective coping, but much variation in what works best for each of us. It may take some experimentation to discover your own best coping practices.

What is the "relaxation response?" Well, remember the stress response that we discussed in Chapter 7? If not, it might be good to go back and review it. The relaxation response is essentially the opposite of the stress response in our minds and bodies. Sometimes

the easiest way to describe something is by contrasting it to its opposite... like explaining light as what drives away the darkness, or kindness as the opposite of meanness.

So that is how we will try to understand the relaxation response; as the opposite of the stress response. In his excellent book [*The Relaxation Response*](#), Dr. Herbert Benson first coined the term and described it as being the opposite of the stress response. Dr. Benson was a cardiologist who studied yoga practitioners and others who claimed to be able to lower their own blood pressure through the practice of transcendental meditation.

What Dr. Benson discovered is well known but still fascinating today: There is a mirror opposite of the stress response that occurs when people participate in certain relaxing activities. During this “relaxation response,” a certain area of our brain - the hypothalamus - is stimulated, causing an overall sense of wellbeing and satisfaction. There is decreased sympathetic nervous system activity and the body’s metabolism slows, using up less oxygen and energy. The breathing rate then decreases, and the heart rate and blood pressure both drop measurably.

At first, Dr. Benson and his colleagues looked for ways to use the relaxation response to help people who were struggling with heart problems. Instead of just throwing one medication after another at his patients, he found that the added component of regularly evoking a relaxation response could be much more effective at treating hypertension, or high blood pressure. This was great news, because high blood pressure is a serious risk factor in all kinds of medical conditions like heart attack and stroke.

When he first wrote about it, Dr. Benson thought that a person needed four things to evoke the relaxation response: 1) a Quiet Environment, 2) a Mental Device, 3) a Passive Attitude and 4) a Comfortable Position.⁴¹ However, after many years and much research, he found that only two of these things are really necessary to get a relaxation response out of someone. That is good news for those of us who have a hard time getting all four components to come together at the same time in our lives!

It turns out that the two essential components are the Mental Device and the Passive Attitude. It does not really matter whether you are in a quiet environment (although this helps some people) or whether you are in a comfortable position. Dr. Benson found that you can be jogging (not comfortable) along a city street (not quiet) and still get a relaxation response out of your body!

- 1) Quiet Environment
- 2) Mental Device**
- 3) Passive Attitude**
- 4) Comfortable Position

But what about the Mental Device and Passive Attitude? What do those terms mean? Let’s start with the Mental

Device... this is simply something that will bring your mind into focus and prevent it from wandering. Maybe you have lain in bed before, unable to fall asleep because your mind was racing? Well a mental device is designed (by you) to bring your racing, troubled thoughts under control and settle into a more-relaxed mental state. Because it does not matter if your body is really relaxed... the important thing is that your mind is relaxed. A good mental device is the best way to get that kind of relaxation.

⁴¹ Herbert Benson, M.D., *The Relaxation Response*, p. xviii-xix (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2000)

A mental device should be something simple that can be repeated over and over without much thought. For us as Christians, it is important that we choose something that honors God and does not compromise our faith. We can choose to focus on something that draws us closer to God, such as the name of Christ or the thought of His resurrection. Or, we could focus on our own breathing, because each breath is a gift from God. The Mental Device can be an object or a sound, a silent or spoken word. Anything that we can use as a Godly focus will work. Have you heard of counting sheep to fall asleep? That is just a type of mental device to get the mind to focus and relax. Tasks that we have practiced and take very little thought also work well: walking, running, knitting, swimming, cleaning, biking, rocking a baby, and repetitive motions like assembly-line work are just a few that pop into mind at the moment.

What about the Passive Attitude? What does that look like in practice? Well, it looks very different from proactive attitude that we need to have when eliminating stressors and managing what's left. I like to reserve the Passive Attitude for those moments when I truly need to get my body into a relaxation response. The rest of the time, having a passive attitude is a good way to get *nowhere* in our life's journey.

To have a Passive Attitude, we can't worry about how well we are performing. Thoughts like "is my mental device working?" or "am I doing this right?" can intrude upon us. When we have a truly passive attitude, we do not condemn ourselves for these thoughts or "beat ourselves up" about it. Instead, we just acknowledge the thought, let it pass and turn our focus back to the Mental Device. This part is very important. Without the passive attitude, we cannot get the relaxation response, no matter how quiet it is or how comfortable we are or how appropriate our mental device.

*Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, **casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.** – 1 Peter 5:6-7, ESV*

When we have a passive attitude, we are content just to let the thoughts and worries of the day slide by, and to let the relaxation happen. Relaxation is not something that we can wrestle into submission... it is something that we need to allow. That is where the passive attitude comes in... allowing our minds to relax and thus relax our entire being. When things come up to take our focus off of the mental device... to distract us or cause us to worry about anything, the passive attitude simply turns us back to our focus without passing judgment. A good way for us to think about this is giving those distracting thoughts and worries over to God, "casting our cares" upon Him, because He can handle them, and we don't have to!

Coping Strategies

If we could go around the world and hook everyone up to a blood pressure cuff, a heart monitor and an F-MRI brain scanner, we would find that everyone has the physical capacity to relax. The relaxation response is as human as a heartbeat. Everyone has a relaxation response and some people experience theirs every day... some people even multiple times per day. For most of us who are dealing with a lot of stressors, *the trick is to make the relaxation response happen in our bodies on purpose*. Most of the time, it is our minds that get in the way. We can't

stop thinking about the stressors in our life which leads to worry and anxiety... very un-relaxing emotional states.

In the last section, we covered the two necessary factors that must be in place for the relaxation response to occur: the Mental Device and the Passive Attitude. I even alluded to a few activities that could bring about a relaxation response. Here is the challenge for me as an author: even though every single human being has a potential relaxation response that is set off by two necessary factors, we are all unique and no single activity works for everyone.

Want proof? Go online some time and search the "Top 10 Stress Relieving Tips." You will find a lot of "Top Ten" lists meant to conquer stress, but they will all have variations. True, there may be a few similarities, but everyone has his or her own idea about what will work best.

What does that mean for you? It means that you will have to discover what works best to help you elicit your own relaxation response. I have shown you the two necessary components (mental device and passive attitude) to create a relaxation response within yourself. Chances are, you already have an idea of what works to get you into a relaxed state.

Many people already use the mental device and passive attitude to fall asleep at night, even though they don't know it. Having a relaxation response while awake is very different from being asleep, but the way we get there is sometimes similar. For example, one person may make a cup of calming tea every evening, then sit in bed reading for a while before falling asleep (the sip-tea-and-read ritual is the mental device). They are not thinking about sleep, and they are not trying to either sleep or stay awake (this is the passive attitude). Next thing you know, their eyes get heavy and the book falls to floor and the rest of the tea grows cold on the bedside table... they are fast asleep.

To have a relaxation response, you will need to discover what mental device works best for you. And, you will have to learn how to maintain a passive attitude while engaged in that mental device. Here are a few ideas to help you get started... you can check out my website, www.Christian-Life-Coaching.org for more helpful information (I'm always adding helpful info).

Christian Meditation – The easiest way for me to describe Christian meditation is to contrast it with the Eastern mystical traditions that most people think of when someone mentions meditation. The meditation goal of many Eastern spiritual traditions (and new Western variations on them) is to clear the mind completely. Christ warned against this when He told the story of the man who had a demon. This man finally got the demon out of his house and swept it clean. But, he did not move God in to occupy the space. The demon wandered around for a while then came back and found the house clean but empty. So, the demon found seven of his buddies and they all moved back in together. In the end, the poor guy was worse off than in the beginning. (see Christ's story in Luke 11:24-26)

Some people hesitate or think there is something evil involved in "meditation," but the word is used many times in the Bible itself. The main thing to remember is that our focus in Christian meditation should not just be on "taking out the trash." This is what Eastern meditation is so good at. However, there is another step to Christian meditation: replacing the trash in our minds (worries, anxieties, stressors, etc.) with God. There are many ways to do this. I like to focus on the Father, Son and Holy Spirit each in turn (mental device). Maybe there is a specific aspect of God that you find helpful or inspiring or peaceful... focus on that as your

mental device. While you are meditating on that aspect of God or something else that points you to Him, don't worry about how well you are meditating or whether you are relaxing effectively or not (passive attitude). This will allow the relaxation to occur naturally.

Washing in Truth – Sometimes our minds are too full of turmoil to focus on a single aspect of God. We try, but intrusive thoughts keep disrupting our focus and turn our passive attitude into a sour attitude. When this happens, we can just return to the exercise and work on the discipline to keep the mental device and passive attitude going. However, sometimes we need some immediate relief from the stressful worries and we don't have the energy to develop mental/spiritual disciplines. That is completely understandable... I've been there many times myself. Also, some people simply find that Christian meditation is not comfortable or effective for them. In these cases, you can try what I call "washing in truth."

To wash yourself in truth, you need to start with... you guessed it... some truth! Where do you find truth? I like to find mine in scripture. Also, God has inspired many people around me at various times in my life to speak very important truth. These are truths about God or our relationship with Him or some other aspect of life. I try to remember these or write them down as a reminder. These are *great* for washing.

Once you have a truth (maybe it is a simple thought, or a sentence or a long paragraph that you have written down) how do you wash in it? Imagine you were sent to get some water with a muddy old bucket. We can wash ourselves in truth the same way you would wash that bucket to bring back clean water. Rinse the truth over your mind again and again. Fill your attention up with the truth and empty it back out again and again until you feel clean once more. I like to repeat the truth, sometimes out loud and sometimes quietly in my mind. It helps if the truth is directly addressing a particular stressor that is worrying you. As you repeatedly wash your mind in the truth (mental device) without worrying about how well you are doing it (passive attitude) it will eventually bring about a relaxation response.

Prayer – This may seem terribly obvious, but prayer can be a great way to bring about a relaxation response. Please remember, though, that there are many different kinds of prayer and different attitudes that we can have during prayer. There are many reasons to pray, and we should live our lives as a prayer ("pray without ceasing")... but some prayers will not bring about a relaxation response (at least not right away). Think about prayers of intercession, where we are pleading with God on someone else's behalf. That is not very relaxing. Think about the heart-rending prayers of painful questions, the joyous prayers of thanksgiving, the conversational prayers with our personal Savior, the awe-struck prayers of adoration or the needy prayers of supplication.

All of these prayers must be prayed, and they all have a place in the Christian's life. However, these prayers will not bring about a physical relaxation response until we have exhausted all of our thought and emotion, finding ourselves still in the presence of God. This stillness may be silence, or it may be a simple repeated petition or praise. When we can be content in God's presence (mental device) and not worry about what to say (passive attitude) prayer is an excellent way to bring about a relaxation response.

Create Your Own – Using what you have learned so far, you can be creative and design your own coping strategy. Find some particular piece of scripture, some truth that diffuses your worry or some aspect of God that calms your racing thoughts. You know what you need, and God knows what you need even better. Pray for direction (as I hope you have been doing throughout this book). Ask God to show you what mental device will work best, and how to have a passive attitude that glorifies Him and does not leave you open to sinful influences.

Finding a coping strategy that works for you and turning it into a habit is one of the best ways for you to handle stress.

Whether you choose to create your own coping strategy or use one of the strategies that I described above, remember three things:

- 1) It is best to use your coping strategy to evoke a relaxation response when you are not tired. If you fall asleep while using your coping strategy, set aside more time to get some good sleep. Only bring about a relaxation response when you are awake and alert.
- 2) Set aside time for your coping strategy before meals. For some reason, the human body cannot access the relaxation response after meals... especially after large meals. (Remember, sleepiness is not a relaxation response... it is just sleepiness.) Most people find that the best time for coping is before breakfast and before supper, with an empty stomach and a clear mind.
- 3) Make sure that your coping mechanism contains both a mental device and a passive attitude, and that you have 15-20 minutes of uninterrupted time to put these to good use. Any less, and you will feel rushed... the relaxation will not happen. Any more, and most people don't have the mental discipline to stay focused... they get bored and frustrated. If it helps, set a timer and then forget about it until it alerts you that your time is up. Continually checking the clock is a distraction, and something you want to avoid.

Remember how King David was called “a man after God’s own heart?” Read the Psalms that he wrote some time... you will see that he was always taking his cares to God. Developing a coping strategy that brings our cares before God is a very Christian thing to do. Even Christ Himself continually went to the Father. The scene in the garden where Christ was under incredible stress and sweating blood was not the only time He went to the Father... it was a habit that He had developed during a lifetime of prayer. Remember the habits we discussed in Chapter 5? Finding a coping strategy that works for you and turning it into a habit is one of the best ways for you to handle stress.

Self Care

So far, most of the tactics for dealing with stress in this book have been exercises of the mind/spirit, with a few list-making and schedule-changing activities to make real change in your life. We cannot forget, however, that we are physical human beings. We have bodies AND souls! In fact, what we think of as our “mind” happens in our brain... which is a very physical body organ just like the heart or the colon or the liver. Of course, the brain is amazingly complex and still not very well understood by science (although we are learning more every year!) Even though the brain is complex and wonderful and sometimes mysterious, it is still just an organ in our bodies. Our brains are fed by the blood pumping through our vessels, and they are affected by things like food, sleep, sunlight... even the invisible molecules in the air we breathe.

“This is all pretty amazing,”

you say,

“But what does it have to do with stress?”

Think about this: If you don’t take care of your body (and thus your brain, a critical body-part) then you will be fighting a losing battle against stress... no matter how well you have the spiritual part of stress under control.

Every person has a different idea of what “taking good care of myself” looks like. For some people, this will mean unplugging the television and going for a walk every evening. For others it will mean cutting back on soda pop consumption. For others it will mean training for that marathon they always meant to run and cooking only organic locally-grown foods at home.

The important thing to remember is that our self-care is on a continuum. In other words, we all have a certain level of self-care in place already. We could backslide and take worse care of ourselves, and there are things that we could do to take better care of ourselves. We can’t go around comparing ourselves to other people.

The most productive thing to do is to look at where we are at now, and find ways to improve our self-care. Chances are - if you are still reading this book - you are already interested in taking care of yourself physically to some degree. Also, if you are struggling with stress, there are probably areas where you could do a better job of taking care of your body.

Now I am entering the realm of medical doctors, so I will have to point you in their direction. I am a coach and counselor, not a physician... so please consult your doctor before making any big physical lifestyle changes. Other important resources are exercise physiologists, personal trainers, nutritionists, dieticians, sleep specialists and countless other traditional, alternative and complementary practitioners. It is up to you to figure out what kind of professional input you should have to take care of yourself physically... and then get that help.

Overall, there are a few general areas that you should look at. If you get these under control, then you will be much better able to handle stress:

Sleep – Did you know that human beings can actually develop psychotic symptoms if they do not get enough sleep? That’s right... lack of sleep can literally drive you crazy. Not to mention other things like depression, fatigue, memory loss, irritability and a lowered immune response. Lack of sleep is a serious problem in many people’s lives, amplifying and aggravating every

stressor while reducing our mental and physical capacity to handle stress. I cannot use strong enough language to get this point across: GET ENOUGH SLEEP.

How much is enough? Estimates hover around 7 hours per day, but every person has different sleep needs. Little babies and adolescents need much more sleep because of their rapid growth. People tend to sleep less as they age. If you feel tired when you are doing something important (working, driving, socializing with friends, talking with your spouse, praying to God, reading *God in Our Stress*) then that is a clear sign that you need to get more sleep ☺. Set aside more and more time for sleep until you no longer feel tired when you are doing these things.

If you have recently begun sleeping significantly more or significantly less than is normal for you, and these changes have disrupted your life somehow, see a psychologist or medical doctor. Serious changes in sleep patterns are linked to clinical depression and other physical ailments. If you cannot seem to fall asleep or stay asleep long enough to meet your sleep needs, see a sleep specialist. Ask one of these helpful professionals to help you to adjust your environment and cope with medical sleeping challenges as well.

Diet – This is not a diet book... too many of those have been written already! People and their need for dietary change are very unique... some people have serious dietary limitations (for example, I can't eat any dairy, sugar, or gluten grains for health reasons) while others can and do eat just about anything under the sun. I'm not going to put my dietary limitations on you, or try to whip up a quick two-paragraph diet in this book. What I will do is give some very general guidelines that you can take to a dietician, nutritionist or medical doctor for approval. Work with one of these certified/licensed professionals to put together a diet that will be optimal for your physical (and thus mental) health.

- “What is good for the heart is good for the brain.”

Most people know what kinds of food are good for their heart... those guidelines are widely published. Follow them, and your brain will be healthier as well.

- Try to eat food that is as close to the way God created it as possible.

For example:

high fructose corn syrup = bad, theatre popcorn = better, sweet-corn on the cob = best

- There is no perfect diet plan or book for every person. However, here is the diet book that I recommend with the fewest reservations: [The Maker's Diet](#)⁴² The principles in this diet are good to follow even if you are not overweight, and there are lots of helpful workbooks and supplemental materials written by the same author.

⁴² Jordan Rubin, *The Maker's Diet* (Lake Mary, FL: Siloam Press, 2005)

Exercise – God created the human body for activity. In many developed parts of the world, it is possible for human beings to go about their lives with very little physical activity because of the advances of industrialization and modern technology. This is a good thing and a bad thing. It is good because - at least in theory - we are no longer physically struggling just to survive. It is bad because our bodies are not getting the kind of exercise they were made for.

Again, this is not an exercise book... take these general guidelines to a qualified professional such as exercise physiologist, physical therapist, personal trainer or medical doctor to design the optimal exercise plan for yourself. Here are some general guidelines:

- When you exercise, be active enough to work up a good sweat. This is the amount of exercise that will have a measurable positive effect on your physical and mental health.

- Continue this level of activity for 15-30 minutes at a time. Any less will not have the same measurable positive effect on your physical and mental health. At the same time, any exercise is better than none at all.

- Get this much exercise 3-7 days per week. Every day is best, but for some people this is not realistic. Get as many days per week as you can, but make sure to be active at least three days per week.

--

When working on your self-care, remember this: *the mind and the body are completely connected*. What happens to one affects the other. You can change physical processes by changing mental habits (for example, lowering your blood pressure by meditating). And you can change mental processes by changing physical activities (for example, thinking more clearly because you are eating right and getting enough exercise).

Our bodies and brains are gifts that God has given us... we are to take good care of them and to use them for His glory. We maintain our bodies not because we are vain or prideful, but because we want to be fit for God's service. Take good care of your body and you will be much better equipped to handle the stressors that life throws at you.

Chapter 12 Activity

There are only two parts to this final activity:

1) Choose or create a coping strategy that will bring about your relaxation response.

See the guidelines in Chapter 12 for tips and hints on how to find or create an effective coping strategy that fits who you are and what you need. Remember that you can always go back and try a different coping strategy if you want some variety. First find one thing that works and make it a habit. It takes about **3 weeks** of daily practice to form a habit.

2) Choose one of the three major areas of self-care for improvement.

Take stock of your sleep, diet and exercise... decide which one should be your priority for improvement. Consult the appropriate professionals, and set a **SMART goal**. Once you have accomplished one goal, choose another area for improvement and set another goal. Keep doing this until you are satisfied with your self-care.

SMART Goal-Setting Strategy:

S – Specific	<i>What exactly do you want to accomplish?</i>
M – Measurable	<i>How will you know when you have accomplished this?</i>
A – Action-oriented	<i>Does this goal include an action that you can take?</i>
R – Realistic	<i>Is this a practical and reasonable goal to set for yourself?</i>
T – Time-bound	<i>By when will this goal be accomplished, if God wills it?</i>

For more information on coping strategies, I recommend the following book:

[The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook](#)

Powerful Stress Management principles for all of God's people.

God In Our Stress: The Christian's Guide to Stress Management

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/4695.html?s=pdf>