

Stress: *the Good*, **the Bad**, and **the Ugly**

“Stress is the natural way we gear up to meet life’s demands. It’s the way we react to all the challenges of our day-to-day existence.”
(Luskin & Pelletier, *Stress Free For Good*)

The problem is not stress itself, but...

- 1) how much stress
- 2) how often you feel stressed
- 3) what skills you have to deal with stress

The Good

1. It energizes and improves our performance
2. It helps us meet the every day demands of life
3. It prepares us to face a threat and is necessary to survive – **Fight or Flight** response
e.g. a car crossing the divider and heading toward you, encountering a bear on a hike, smelling smoke in the house (Type 1 stress)

Type 1 Stress:

- The source of the stress is immediate and identifiable
- Can be resolved in a short period of time
- Dealing with it is necessary for survival

Physical Effects of the Fight or Flight Stress Response:

- Our **heart starts pounding** to circulate more blood to our muscles
- Our **breathing becomes faster** to move more oxygen to our blood
- Our **digestion stops** so blood is available to our brain and to the large muscles in our arms and legs
- Our **muscles tense** to get ready for quick action
- We **sweat** to cool our body
- More **blood flows to the primitive part of our brain** that is responsible for self preservation
- Our **pupils get bigger** and our **senses become stronger**
- Our body sends an **adrenaline rush** = increase in energy

These physiological changes are part of our body’s 911 emergency response system that enables us to respond to a threat or danger.

The Fight or Flight response is effective and necessary for dealing with Type 1 stress. When the threat or danger is gone, our body activates another response system to bring us back to normal and to calm, restore, and heal.

The Bad

We are bombarded with everyday non-life threatening situations that trigger the Fight or Flight response, e.g. traffic, deadlines at work or school, financial worries, kids + laundry + dinner.... This is known as Type 2 stress. Even though we are not in danger, we perceive them as threats.

There are problems with the Fight or Flight response for Type 2 Stress:

1. It's useless in most Type 2 stress (e.g. traffic)
2. It can make things worse (blowing up at your co-worker/kids/spouse)
3. We develop a constant state of fight or flight and it takes a serious toll on our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health.

Physical	Mental, Emotional & Behavioral
Increase in muscle tension (back & neck pain, headaches)	Worry, anxiety, fear, panic
Changes in breathing (shortness of breath or rapid, shallow breathing)	Irritability, impatience, bossiness
Increased heart rate (irregular or rapid heartbeat, high blood pressure)	Nervousness, forgetfulness, difficulty concentrating
Intestinal disturbance (irritable bowel syndrome, diarrhea, heartburn, reflux)	Anger (turned outward and/or inward)
Prolonged heightened vision (eye strain)	Rigid, intolerant, critical, judgmental, defensive
Weakened immune system (increase in colds/flu, risk of infections, longer recovery time)	Sadness, depression, loss of enjoyment and motivation
Inflammation and heart disease	Compulsive eating, drug & alcohol u
Sleep issues, fatigue, exhaustion	Emotional exhaustion, emptiness

The Ugly

1. There are serious mental, emotional, and physical health risks when we are in a perpetual state of flight or flight.
2. We tend to use ineffective and unhealthy strategies to deal with our stress. The Primitive Brain is in control – it's main function is self-preservation, to protect and defend. Our Executive Brain (logic, reason, self-control, problem solving, planning ahead, weighing good vs. bad choices, etc.) is not engaged.
3. We are prone to perceiving everything as a threat and respond defensively and/or aggressively. Our relationships suffer. We feel alone, or as if the world is out to get us.
4. Negative cycle:
Type 2 Stress ▶ Fight or Flight ▶ Ineffective & Unhealthy Strategies ▶

Physical, Mental, Emotional, Spiritual and Relational Pain ▶ Type 2 stress

“Pain is inevitable, but misery is optional.

We cannot avoid pain, but we can avoid joy.”

Tim Hansel You Gotta Keep Dancin’

Two Life Skills for Managing and Reducing Stress and Increasing Peace, Love, and Joy

1. Belly Breathing

- As you inhale, imagine that your belly is a big balloon that you’re slowly filling with air.
- Place your hands on your belly while you slowly inhale.
- Watch your hands rise with your in-breath and watch them fall as you breathe out, letting the air out of the balloon.
- Make sure your belly stays relaxed as you exhale. Keep your attention on the rise and fall of your belly.

Belly Breathing gives our body the signal that we are not in danger and we can calm down, relax, and think clearly. It shuts down the fight or flight stress response and saves wear and tear on our heart and nervous system. It gives us the opportunity to “let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts” (Col. 3:15).

2. Thankfulness

- Gratitude
- Appreciation
- Counting our blessings
- Noticing the good
- Praising God

Stress makes us lose sight of what’s good in our lives. This increases our sense of suffering and in turn, increases our stress. Being thankful reverses the fight or flight stress response and calms our mind and body. It retrains our brain to scan for good instead of only the bad. Opens our heart and eyes to see God in our lives and to tell a different story about our pain. Counteracts selfishness and narcissism.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of power may be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

2 Corinthians 4:7-10

Practice, practice, practice

Just knowing about the importance of breathing and being thankful is not enough to create change. Be aware of when:

Your intention to stay the same > Your intention to change

1. Practice Belly Breathing

- Take 3-4 belly breaths every day
- Sometimes practice for 5-10 minutes
- Practice when you're not under stress (e.g. while waiting at a stop light, watching TV or reading, lying in bed, sitting at the computer...)

2. Practice Thankfulness

- Write down or share 3 things you are thankful for
- Does not need to be profound or complicated
- Does need to be specific ("I am thankful for the hug from my son after a hard day" "I am thankful for getting take out food tonight because I was too tired to cook" "I am thankful for warmth of the sunshine")

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things.

Philippians 4:4-8

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can,
and wisdom to know the difference.*