

3 Spiritual Strategies to Keep Stress From Killing You

Stripped naked, tied to a post with a gun to his head for hours in front of his little cement block house, my friend kept singing, "Jesus, keep me near the cross ..."

A prisoner, held behind enemy lines in Sierra Leone during the civil war in the late 90s, he subsisted on very little food, and in the end, just fruit and berries. But thankfully, he survived.

I remember a year or so later, as I was driving in a van with six men, the sinking feeling in my stomach when we crossed those same rebel lines. We were on our way to discuss helping the amputees, who were victims from that civil war. In order to do that, we had to meet with the leaders of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) to get permission to aid the very victims of their brutal attacks.

How does one stay centered and focused under such stress? How does one stay centered and focused under *any* kind of stress?

Acute stress can be debilitating. Chronic stress can lead to physical illness or mental illness. It can put a strain on relationships; it can challenge your ability to think straight. It can make you just want to curl up in a corner and give up, or keep you in such a state of panic that you feel paralyzed and unable to move forward.

One person's stress can't really be measured against another person's stress. Each case is individual. Every person has different coping mechanisms, different upbringing, different belief systems that will inform how he reacts to stress. However, if you have a belief system in which you recognize your innate value and feel competent to handle difficult situations, those beliefs can help you come out on the other

side intact, even stronger than before, knowing that you survived.

There are a few basic principles that can help ground you in difficult circumstances, whether or not you've had time to prepare for the situation or not. Having said that, not all stress is negative or externally induced. Our thinking has a lot to do with how we handle stressful situations of any kind.

Back in the U.S., just a couple of years ago, flying 10,000 feet above ground, I was ready to take my first leap out of a perfectly good plane. My choice. But I have to say, sitting there by the open door of the small aircraft getting ready to release myself into thin air, well aware of the risks, I had a final thought that ran through my mind, "Well, if I die, at least the last feeling I get before I land in the arms of God will be one of flying," and then I jumped. Stress-inducing? Oh yeah. Exhilarating? Definitely. But now I have a story to tell that no one can take away from me.

So whether your stress is positive or negative, life-threatening or simply irritating, the principles that can help you manage it are the same.

1. Follow the lead of my friend tied naked to a pole with a gun to his head. He wasn't singing that song, "Keep me near the cross" because he had just heard it on the radio and it stuck. It came from a deep habitual connection to his Creator that he nurtured every day. A regular practice of connecting to your source of life is a foundational practice to keep you grounded and centered. Everyday, you dig your roots deeper into something bigger than yourself, something benevolent and powerful and abundant that can't be overcome. Meditation is not just a popular trend. It can be a lifesaver whenever you need it, as it was for my friend.

2. Remember, what you focus on increases. So just like our team, who purposely chose to cross a line that could

potentially be life-threatening, the focus on the good that we could do for the citizens of Sierra Leone was greater. That is what we focused on, and it helped us minimize any fear and work through the stress. Keep your thoughts focused on what is good—things you can be thankful for—and that will increase in your mind while the negative dissipates.

3. Practice good coping mechanisms on a regular basis. Learn to breathe deeply throughout the day to keep the oxygen circulating. Learn to detach from the drama *du jour* and focus on the bigger picture. Maintain respect for yourself and others. Minimize judgments and jumping to conclusions. Be humble enough to know you don't know everything and there's always another viewpoint. Let go of resentments. Whether they are legitimate or not is not the issue. The issue is that they will poison your soul.

These few basic principles will serve you well as you encounter stress, so it does not become chronic, potentially leading to depression or anxiety or some life threatening physical illness.{eoa}

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