

5 Spirit-Filled Steps to Break Free From Stress

I suffered from debilitating panic attacks and agoraphobia for many years, which kept me a prisoner in my own home. I believed I was doing all the “right things” –reading the Bible, praying, going to church—but I could not break free of my own negative thoughts and self-inflicted stress. Many times, we as Christians feel we should know better or “have it all together.” The reality is, life can be stressful, and we can easily get caught up in the day-to-day pressures that make us feel anxious and cause us to worry. Along my journey, I learned five steps that eventually led to freedom from stress:

1. Identify the source of your thoughts. In order to reduce stress, we have to first get a handle on where our negative thoughts are coming from. We can’t have a feeling without first having a thought. The apostle Paul gave us clear direction to “take every thought captive” (2 Cor. 10:5b, ESV). If you’re feeling anxious, sad, angry or fearful, it is because you are *thinking* in an anxious, sad, angry or fearful way. I have found that most people can trace their negative thoughts to three sources:

–**Past abuse or trauma.** If we are still reliving those past traumas and have never received healing from them, these wounds are going to continue to fester and be a source of negative thoughts which produce stress in our life. We need to journal, talk to a good friend or perhaps even see a counselor to take the bandage off these issues and heal the root.

–**Generational learned patterns of thought.** You may say, “My grandmother was a worrier” or “My dad had a temper.” Many times, we learn how to think from previous generations. In order to move past this, we have to first recognize this generational pattern of thought. Then, we need to follow the

guidelines of Philippians 4:8 (MEV): “Finally, brothers, whatever things are true, whatever things are honest, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue, and if there is any praise, think on these things.”

–**Demonically-inspired thought.** You remember our enemy, the one Jesus said in John 10:10 comes to “steal and kill and destroy.” Our adversary would love nothing more than to sit on your shoulder and whisper destructive thoughts into your mind. This is where we hold up a mental stop sign and say, “Not today, devil! God has given me the gift of life, and I’m not going to waste it listening to you!”

When you are feeling stressed, ask yourself, “Where are my thoughts coming from?” This will enable you to know how to defeat those negative thoughts which will lead to peace.

2. Learn how to shut the door on anger and strife. Do miscommunications and arguments with people stress you out? There are two appropriate ways to handle anger. The first is to go to the person in a loving manner and say something like, “I don’t know if you realized it, but when you said [fill in the blank] it really hurt me; can we talk about it?” Most people will respond well to that request. As Proverbs 15:1 (ESV) says: “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” However, if you go to them in love and they respond to you in anger, you will need to go to the next step, which is to bring the person and circumstance to the cross. Vent your concern to God, pour out your heart to Him and give the person and situation over to God. Then, let it go. Don’t replay in your mind all the things you could have said. Forgive them. Trust that God will work all things out for your good.

3. Stop being so hard on yourself. In my practice, I see people who struggle daily with verbally beating themselves up or talking to themselves in a berating way. Does verbiage

like, “How could you be so stupid?” or “Why did you say that?” or “I just know they won’t like me,” sound like a tape recorder in your head? Instead, talk to yourself like you would talk to your best friend. You would never tell your friend, “You are so stupid,” or “Why did you say that?” or “How could you make such a dumb mistake?” We shouldn’t be talking to ourselves like that either.

4. Get outside and breathe. When you are stressed at work or at home, step outside and breathe the fresh air for five minutes. You will be amazed how getting out in nature can reduce the stress hormone cortisol that is coursing through your body. Studies show us that nature is calming. I lived in Connecticut for many years during months of frozen tundra, and there was nothing more beautiful than going outside and taking in the shades of white and blue that danced across my yard. Regardless of the season or temperature, going outside and enjoying God’s beautiful creation can lighten any weight of stress you are feeling.

5. Let food become your medicine, so medicine doesn’t become your food. This insightful phrase did not originate with me, but it sure does resonate with me. The fact is, what we consume can affect not only our physical health, but also our mental health. To live a healthier life and reduce stress, eating as close to nature is a must. Nourish your body and your central nervous system with the healing food God has given us. Part of my own personal healing came when I changed how I ate. The food we eat does have an impact on our mind and body, so get to the grocery store and start shopping those outer aisles.

The Bible is filled with Scriptures telling us how to handle stress, anxiety and fear. We need to spend time every day in the living, breathing Word of God, asking Him to renew our minds. We can find an abundant life with less stress when we set our minds and hearts on His everlasting promises. {eoal}

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