

How to Deal With Stress God's Way

Since 2007, the annual “**stress** in America” survey by the American Psychological Association has shown a nation struggling under a heavy load of tension and anxiety.

According to the most recent study, published last year, 7 in 10 Americans say stress levels interfere with their physical and mental well-being, causing irritability, anger, fatigue, feelings of being **overwhelmed**, sleep loss and eating problems.

The biggest sources of stress cited are money (69 percent), work (65 percent), the economy (61 percent), family responsibilities (57 percent), relationships (56 percent), family health problems (52 percent) and personal health concerns (51 percent).

Glen Ryswyk, an Assemblies of God chaplain and clinical director of the Christian Family Counseling Center in Lawton, Okla., says stress is a symptom of a modern culture obsessed with performance and perfection.

“We live in a world that is constantly pushing us to reach for more, find something better, work harder,” Ryswyk says. “Even in Christian circles, we buy into the idea we have to keep demanding more of ourselves and everyone around us. We turn the crank tighter rather than depending on God’s grace.”

Ryswyk acknowledges it is impossible to avoid stress altogether. Defined as mental, physical or emotional strain, a certain degree of **stress** is a normal part of the human experience.

“Jesus had great stress as He sweated drops of blood at Gethsemane,” Ryswyk says. “But His response to that stress was to pray, ‘Father ... not my will, but yours be done’”

(Luke 22:42, NIV).

Christian therapist and trauma specialist H. Norman Wright says stress becomes problematic when it is chronic.

“When you get to a point where you don’t see any way to relieve the pressure and you don’t see any way out, it becomes overwhelming,” says Wright, author of more than 70 books, including *Success Over Stress* and *A Better Way to Think*. “When it’s constant and unrelenting, it really takes a toll on your body and mind.”

In the APA study, more than half the respondents said they had actively tried to reduce their stress levels during the past five years. Yet 80 percent of those surveyed in 2012 said their stress level had increased or stayed the same compared to the previous year. Twenty percent rated their stress as 8, 9 or 10 on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 representing “a great deal of stress.”

According to the National Institutes of Mental Health, prolonged stress is a serious health risk. Stress releases natural hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol. These fight-or-flight chemicals are designed to aid the body in short-term emergencies. They increase the heart rate, elevate blood pressure, boost sugar levels, and redirect energy from other functions, such as digestion and immune responses.

Chronic stress can keep the body’s chemical switches on, setting in motion a chain reaction that may throw virtually every system off balance. Long-term stress is linked to depression, anxiety disorder, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, sleep disturbances, weight gain, memory loss and concentration impairment.

Wright says stress can be a **spiritual** drain as well.

“You can get to a place where you have no reserves—you’re running on empty,” Wright says. “It can lead to burnout and

crisis in every area, including your spiritual life.”

Yet Wright says **stressed-out** Christians already have access to the relief they need.

“We have the resources for dealing with stress,” Wright says. “We have prayer and the promises of Scripture. Many times we’re stressed because we’re trying to manage it all ourselves. We aren’t relying on God or releasing it to Him.”

Wright says he once faced a major business crisis two days before he was to leave on a fishing vacation. He knew his trip would be ruined if he didn’t find a way to let go of the anxiety. During his daily prayer times on the trip, Wright says he lifted his hands and envisioned God removing his burden.

“The days I did that, I had a wonderful time,” he says. “Many times our mind is really the culprit. Look at what the Bible says: ‘You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you’ (Is. 26:3). That is the real solution to stress.”

Ryswyk says he struggled with stress several years ago when his wife, Diane, was diagnosed with breast cancer.

“I told God I was in worse shape than my clients,” Ryswyk recalls. “The Lord asked me, ‘Are you going to rely on yourself or My **grace** alone?’ When I finally decided God’s grace is enough, it took the pressure off me. It was no longer about my ability to perform or whether I had enough faith or fortitude. It was all about God’s ability to sustain me.”

Liz Bailey was a stay-at-home mom with eight children when her husband, Pat, died of brain cancer in 2011. Eight months later, Bailey also lost her adult daughter to complications from spina bifida. Bailey cleans houses and works other odd jobs to make ends meet, but she says keeping food on the table and fuel in the car is always an exercise in faith.

“When I feel the emotion of **stress** coming on, I remind myself of the Word,” says Bailey, who attends Evangel Community Church (Assemblies of God) in Snellville, Ga. “I feel what everybody else feels, but I get on my knees a lot. I’m totally dependent on God. If I didn’t choose to trust Him, I know stress would overtake me.”

Ryswyk says the Scriptures have a lot to teach Christians about **stress management**, from admonitions to cast off fear and **anxiety** to Jesus’ example of withdrawing from the crowds for prayer.

“I’ve learned we can respond to stress by accepting God’s **grace** or by fighting against our own powerlessness,” Ryswyk says. “We can’t fix everything. But God gives us divine provision for whatever place we find ourselves in.”