

# PERSONALITY AND STRESS

finding ways to manage your stress



# PERSONALITY AND STRESS

finding ways to manage your stress

RUTH FOWKE

CWR

The author is kindly donating all royalties from this book to Feba Radio.

Copyright © Dr Ruth Fowke, 2000, 2009

Originally published 2000 by Eagle Publishing Ltd as *The Last Straw: Resolving the build-up of stress*.

This revised edition published 2009 by CWR, Waverley Abbey House, Waverley Lane, Farnham, Surrey GU9 8EP, UK. Registered Charity No. 294387. Registered limited company No. 1990308.

The right of Dr Ruth Fowke to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission in writing of CWR.

See back of book for list of National Distributors.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the Holy Bible: New International Version (NIV), copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by the International Bible Society.

Other versions used:

RSV: Revised Standard Version, copyright © 1965, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America

The Jerusalem Bible, copyright © 1966, New York; London: Doubleday; Daston, Longman & Todd.

Concept development, editing, design and production by CWR

Printed in China by C&C Offset Printing

ISBN: 978-1-85345-542-1

# **CONTENTS**

<b>Preface</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Part One: STRESS MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>9</b>
1. Take a Break	10
2. Straws in the Wind	19
3. At the Slippery Slope	29
4. Baggage from the Past	38
5. Saying Yes Instead of No	49
<b>Part Two: PERSONALITY AND STRESS</b>	<b>59</b>
6. People Pressures	60
7. The Communications Catch	71
8. Making Friends with Time	82
9. Not Another Change!	93
<b>Part Three: FOOD FOR THOUGHT</b>	<b>103</b>
10. False Images of God	104
11. Slave Driver or Shepherd?	114
12. Consider the Lilies	124
<b>Further Reading</b>	<b>132</b>



## PREFACE

A little neglect may breed mischief ... for want of a nail, the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe, the horse was lost; for want of a horse, the rider was lost ...

Benjamin Franklin

This book was originally published in 2000 under the title of *The Last Straw*. Not long afterwards, the publishing company sadly went out of business – ironically, they had met their last straw. So I was delighted when CWR suggested doing it as a companion book to *Personality and Prayer* under the present title which is equally applicable. What is the last straw for one person often leaves someone with a different personality completely unscathed.

Dealing with small problems as we notice them saves considerable trouble later. ‘A stitch in time saves nine’ is a proverb that was often quoted in the days before our contemporary throwaway age.

Attending to the minor pinpricks of daily life helps to forestall the build-up of major troubles. As a doctor I am primarily concerned with prevention. That means paying attention to the roots of a problem, rather than always dealing with the end result. It is obviously more effective to prevent a fire from starting than to put it out when it is already raging.

Stress affects us all at various times, and in different ways. Some are more afflicted than others, but no one is immune. Apparently small issues often build up and contribute to the sense of stress that plagues so many today. It is important to note what ruffles our feathers, what needles and provokes us in small matters, and then do something about it.

This book is designed to help people recognise their early signs of stress, so that they will be able to make appropriate modifications in their own lifestyle, and enjoy more of life.

There is a sense in which stress is a normal and absolutely

necessary part of life. When it is taken to mean a force exerting pressure which results in some action, then stress is vital. Being without stress in this sense would mean a life without any activity at all.

Engineers use the 'S' word in a more technical and precise way. They use it in the sense of applying force of some sort to a material, so that the material will bend or stretch, or behave in some other predictable and measurable way. The material will then return to its normal state when the stress is removed. When it is not removed at the critical point then the material snaps or breaks. There are parallels to that in human life, but it is not how I shall be using the term.

The word 'stimulation' and its derivatives are used to denote beneficial forces that spur us on to take appropriate action. The word 'stress' and its offshoots are employed in their ordinary, everyday usage. Stress is taken to mean a situation that is unpleasant and uncomfortable, and that places an undue strain upon the person. It denotes something that leads to distress.

Stress is generally undesirable, but not always so. Sometimes when a person realises that they are stressed it can prompt them to look at, and correct, assumptions and attitudes that are no longer necessary or appropriate to their stage in life.

Much of the material in this book is based on the various seminars and workshops on stress I have led in recent years. I am greatly indebted to the members who have taken part, and who have made valuable contributions to my thinking. Part Two would not have been possible without the many insights from, and incidents with, my friend and colleague Di Whitwam. The fact that she and I have opposite preferences in three of the four pairs of traits described (see Chapter 6) has been a rich experience.

I am grateful to other friends who have helped me, especially the three who generously read and commented on the first draft of this book.

**Ruth Fowke, 2009**

**PART ONE**

**STRESS MANAGEMENT**



quit

9-30 interview

3pm me

all num-

clean

3pm pick

put up

wad

e

gran

m

ube

# 1. TAKE A BREAK

Violin and guitar players are careful to relax the tension in the strings of their instruments every time they cease to use them. In this way the vital strings are preserved. They are then ready to be stretched again when next needed. Kept taut, they would easily snap.

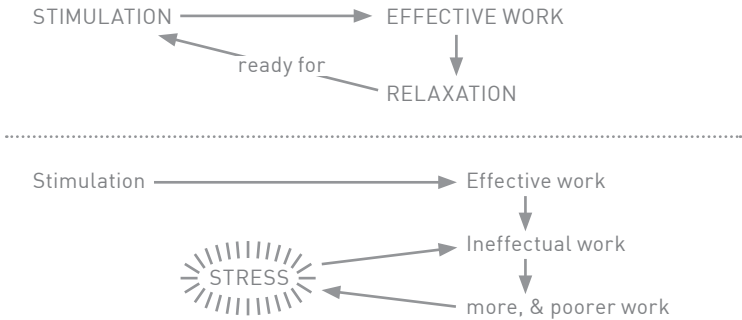
A rubber band does not keep its elasticity when it is constantly taut. It snaps or goes brittle, and has to be thrown out. In our complex society we have lost the rhythm of work followed by play; of toil needing to be succeeded by relaxation, and we need to regain this principle.

Generally speaking, any good and satisfying piece of work is followed by a momentary break. We shift our position in some way, to relax our muscles, so that they are ready for the next bit of work to be done. We do this quite automatically and unconsciously, in order to maintain our ability to carry on effectively for considerable periods.

When our work is not quite up to standard there is even more reason to follow this healthy routine. The chances are that even a mini-break will be followed by a much better result from the very next effort.

What most of us actually do is to follow the poor work with immediate greater effort, without even a minuscule break. The outcome is then even poorer. Lacking that brief respite, what we manage to do next is less effective. Output drops. The probability is that we then redouble our efforts, still without taking any restorative break. We get taut and strung up.

The more tense we are, the less we are prepared to take a break. We get distraught at not being able to achieve what we set out to do. So we have yet another go, still without a break. The more we need to take one, the less likely we are to do so. It is as though some internal pressure drives us on. This cycle is shown in Diagram 1.



**Diagram 1: Efficient and Inefficient Cycles**

There are many variations on the story about a man chopping logs. It was getting dark, he was tired and there was still a large pile for him to do. A neighbour watched, then helpfully suggested that he would make more progress if he stopped and sharpened his axe. ‘Can’t stop,’ the man grumbled. ‘No time for things like that.’ He was unwilling to stop his repetitive action and relax by doing something else. Because he did not take that small amount of time off, he needed to use more effort to get the job done. And it took longer.

When we are provoked, our bodies instinctively respond in a number of finely co-ordinated and interrelated ways. Together these are designed to enable us to deal with the situation. If we put a hand on a hot stove, or see a brick come hurtling towards us, we do not think out what to do. We automatically jerk our hand away or duck out of the line of fire. There are also immediate, involuntary changes that occur internally, and some of them are graphically portrayed in a number of common sayings.

It is no wonder we are ‘sick with fright’. The vascular response to threat is to narrow the blood vessels in the stomach and intestines. This enables more blood to be sent to the muscles we are going to need in order to deal with the situation that has alarmed us. For the same reason we may go ‘white as a sheet’. The blood flow in the face and areas of the body whose function is primarily maintenance is

reduced. Blood is then redirected to those organs which are essential for emergency responses. It is especially increased in the lungs, brain and limb muscles.

Many more undetected back-up forces are also mobilised in the liver and various internal glands. They all go into action in a synchronised way to ensure that the body has the resources it needs to deal with the threat. The hormone balance is altered away from maintaining the status quo and directed towards releasing sugar and fats to provide energy. All this means that our bodies and minds are geared up into a state of high alert, ready for action. When the situation has been dealt with, and the alarm is shut off, both body and mind gradually return to their usual waking level. Muscles relax into their stand-by mode, and blood returns to the areas from which it was temporarily diverted.

The biological purpose for this complex set of internal responses is to enable the individual to either grapple with an aggressor or run for cover. This is the elementary 'fight or flight' response to danger. Civilised life means that in most situations we can rarely indulge in such direct action. Our natural responses are tamed, or shamed, out of awareness. There is no outward physical reaction to the challenge presented, but the internal responses still occur.

If the fats circulating in the blood vessels are not burned up they will get deposited on the walls of arteries, which will eventually become clogged. If the energy that has been mobilised is no longer used up in activity, then tension inevitably builds up. Stress symptoms may affect any organ or function of the body, depending on a mixture of genetic inheritance, personal vulnerability and perhaps a degree of individual prior conditioning.

It is important for people to become familiar with their own early warning signs of impending stress. When they recognise their own particular indicators they can take steps to deal with the situation while it is still manageable. In general, when people are getting tense they lose their sense of humour. Also, the ability to adapt easily to

new situations is likely to be diminished. And, they probably get stuck in their own ways, with their normal characteristics becoming exaggerated. Tolerance of others is likely to be lessened. The people who are usually decisive tend to become more rigid in their views, and are likely to take up entrenched positions which they hold with great tenacity. Those who are more commonly indecisive are inclined to become even more wavering and hesitant.

In addition to these generalisations, many people adopt their own individual, sometimes idiosyncratic, behaviours when stressed. Years ago a friend told me that she always knew when I was bothered about something because I fiddled with my left earring. Never the right one, only the left. I did not believe her but that night I looked in the mirror and, sure enough, the hole in my left ear was twice as large as the one in the right. Now whenever my hand strays to my left ear lobe I ask myself what is bothering me, and try to do something more constructive about the issue.

As our reaction to stress is so very physical it is important that we take physical first aid measures to manage the symptoms. The breathing of most stressed people tends to become shallow and more rapid than normal. This results in an inadequate exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide through the small blood vessels in the lining of the lungs. We therefore need to take conscious control of the process, deliberately breathing more deeply and slowly to correct the imbalance in blood gases. Such action helps to restore a feeling of calm. Try it next time you're getting steamed up when kept waiting in a queue, or your train is delayed.

When I worked in the NHS we used to have regular Hospital Management Committee meetings. During one seemingly endless meeting I realised, with sinking heart, that my bid for more departmental resources was not going well. I attempted to present the situation with greater urgency. A colleague realised that I was being more emotive than objective, and quietly whispered, 'Ruth, breathe'. I knew exactly what she meant and quietly took a few

deep, measured breaths. That was all that was necessary to enable me to calm down, take stock, and resume with a more detached presentation of our case.

At the same time, a more relaxed attitude of mind can be achieved by adopting a more relaxed bodily posture. As well as paying attention to your breathing make sure you relax your jaw; the chances are that you are clenching your teeth. It is important for each individual to notice just where in their body they feel tense, so that they can relax that area. Sometimes this can be achieved paradoxically by first *increasing* the muscle tension there, holding that as long possible, and then letting go totally.

Some people find it helpful to practise this in private, alternately tensing their hands, then their feet, to maximum, and then letting them relax completely. After doing this a few times it is possible to feel a delightful sense of wellbeing spread to other areas of the body as you relax those few muscles, but it does take practice. When you have mastered the technique it is possible to employ it discreetly wherever you are.

Another effect of stress is that we get tunnel vision and cannot see beyond our own particular predicament. It engulfs us so that we cannot see the wood for the trees. In this state anything that helps us to adjust our focus is beneficial. We can help ourselves to refocus our thinking by physically changing the focus of our eyes. By momentarily glancing as far away as you can from the accounts that will not balance, or the people who seem to be being obstructive, you can often get a better perspective on how to handle the situation.

It is worth being disciplined enough to break off from your preoccupation, and look out of the window at the horizon. At the very least, gaze at the furthest corner of the room for a few seconds. Even a momentary change in eye focus really can help you to also re-focus your mind. Try it next time you realise that something, or someone, is getting under your skin.

The maxim 'Don't just sit there, do something' is an excellent

one whenever you feel tension creeping up on you. Walk just a few steps to adjust the window, pick up a book or fetch some papers (even if you do not really need them at that moment). This is a good way of discharging the tautness that is beginning to build up in your mind and in your muscles. Such action also serves as a mini-break from the matter in hand. It provides a short interval that enables you to come back to the situation in better shape to address it more effectively. The situation has not changed, but you have. Not much, it's true, but hopefully just enough to make the difference between handling or mis-handling whatever is causing you concern.

As well as making sure that you breathe slowly, deeply and rhythmically, take a look out of the window and walk about a bit, you can employ another useful first aid measure. This is to deliberately behave in the opposite way to whatever powerful but unhelpful feelings you may be experiencing. Whenever you feel angry, antagonistic, hostile or exasperated, acknowledge this to yourself but smile at your adversary. Smile instead of scowling. It is much more effective. Pass him the jug of water, smiling as you do so, instead of mentally throwing it over him, or shoving it along the table and leaving it just out of reach. To use a personal illustration, being late is one of my pressure points. However, now when I find I have put myself under stress by leaving late I find it helpful to behave as if I have all the time in the world. Rather than driving along in the car wanting to terrorise pedestrians who meander across the road, I have discovered that by slowing down and waving them across with a smile, I soon begin to smile inside as well as on the outside. Slowly, I cease to seethe inside. Many pedestrians are so surprised that they smile and wave back, reinforcing my rising good mood. My journey takes only marginally, if at all, longer and I arrive at my destination in a much better frame of mind. (The real solution is to allow more journey time in the first place!) The matter of time pressures is discussed in Chapter 8.

It is vitally important that we never disown our emotions.

If we do, they are sure to go underground and cause havoc in the future. We can, however, make a deliberate choice to behave in a way that is diametrically opposite to them. While doing so, it is essential that we acknowledge our feelings. By acknowledging our destructive feelings (to ourselves), we are recognising that they are a force that needs to be sympathetically explored at a more opportune time. It may be adequate to talk the episode through with a friend or colleague, but if you notice a repeated pattern in yourself you may need more assistance. A counsellor or pastoral worker may be able to help you unravel what precipitates you into certain reactions. This takes time and patience. Meanwhile, as you keep employing the first aid measures outlined above you will become more proficient in their use. It is a matter of working on both ends at once. Tackle the consequences of your reaction to a particular stress (behaviour), and the personal meaning (why it gets to you), at the same time. The behavioural aspect is sometimes the more accessible, which is why it is important to make changes there. At the same time, or subsequently, it will be wise to explore the emotional component.

It is never productive to blame an outside source for our own reactions. To say anything akin to 'He always winds me up' is shifting the blame and portraying ourselves as powerless. It is far better to take responsibility for our own actions. Say something like 'I always seem to get wound up when ...', or 'I let myself get mad whenever ...'. By making an 'I' statement like this we are putting the onus on ourselves. It opens up the possibility for us to explore our own reactions to any particular trigger. That is a useful thing to do, for we shall most surely meet a similar situation again.

For the Christian, noticing the reactions that disturb us is something to be talked over with the Lord of our lives. It is a matter for inclusion in a review of the day, or at some other regular time of prayer. It is always important not to neglect such a source of growth and grace, as we seek to find a way of dealing with powerful and inexplicable emotions. Sometimes, by noticing the pattern of

events and our reactions to them, we can pick up clues about what is going on within. Until we can deal with some root causes we will continually only be pulling up the shoots that spring from them. In Chapter 4 we will look more closely at some of the background situations that may make us predisposed to react vigorously to certain trigger situations.

Today the things that threaten us are seldom ones calling for a simple 'fight or flight' measure. Despite this, the psychological and physiological responses remain the same. Our bodies and minds are geared up for action, but there is no direct way to deal with many of the situations that confront us daily. Although the basic responses are no longer appropriate, the body still mobilises its reserves in the same way. Energy continues to accumulate ready for action, and some alternative way of discharging it has to be found if stress symptoms are to be avoided.

We cannot avoid stress, so we must learn to utilise the energy it generates. When we become irritated in the office it is usually unwise to give direct vent to the anger we experience, and so we have to find an alternative that is more acceptable than 'kicking the cat'. We must each find our own way of displacing the energy aroused, and discharging it in an acceptable way. For example, constructive destruction in the garden, such as tackling overgrown areas, works wonders. So does pitching in to previously neglected chores about the house. Such activity has a visible result which in itself is rewarding, and the energy expended works off some of the accumulated frustration.

Those who participate in active sports, or who can regularly work off their pent-up feelings on the allotment, know how very much better they feel afterwards. Many people in sedentary occupations find that a good work-out in the gym, jogging regularly or swimming during the lunch break is beneficial. It is good for their general health, and it increases their ability to tolerate the inevitable stresses of life.