

Stress—A Christian Approach

Let's talk a bit about stress. Since Hans Selye's studies, stress has been in the news. What do Christians have to say about the issue? The word is used in several ways by various people to denote different things. Therefore, it is essential, at the outset, to define the term as I shall be using it in this chapter.

Popularly, the word stress is used as a synonym for what I shall call *pressure*. By pressure I mean force exerted upon an individual's body (or some part of it). This force may be located either without or within the individual himself. In this chapter I shall not use the word stress in that sense. Whenever referring to such force, I shall always use the word *pressure*.

More technically, the word *stress* refers to debilitating bodily responses to these inner and outer pressures. It is a response in which various normal bodily reactions are (1) maintained for too long a period of time, and/or (2) heightened to a more-than-optimal level. Stress, then, refers to any harmful, self-induced strain upon the body or upon various parts of or organs in it.

I have distinguished between these two terms in order to set forth the biblical viewpoint on stress and pressure more clearly. Some such distinction (use whatever terms you prefer) is necessary in order not to confound things that the Bible separates (as some, in speaking of this subject, have done). Pressures from without (or even at times from within) may not be avoidable; stress (since it is part of an inner, learned response) always is.

It is most important for counselors to recognize this point. If stress

is (as many think) unavoidable, then three things follow:

1. The individual undergoing stress is not responsible for it.
2. He is a victim of what others (or circumstances) have done to him.
3. In most instances he can do nothing to alleviate it.¹

Moreover, it is not at all helpful to speak of *stressors* (as if persons could automatically turn on stress in another by their presence, words or actions). Neither persons nor situations can do anything of the sort. They may *exert pressure*, but not *cause stress*. To speak of stressful situations is, therefore, equally bad. Stress, like tension, is in *persons*; not in circumstances. It is fine for authors and poets to rhapsodize about tension "in the air" or "between" people, but it is wrong for counselors to do so. Tension is always in muscles. Stress is always an electro-chemical response in a person that (like tension) is subject to his control by (1) developing and making biblical interpretation and (2) responses to persons or situations that exert pressure. According to some theorists, stressors are persons who always elicit a stress response in the counselee. While it is true that such a response may *regularly* occur, the reason lies in the counselee himself, not in the so-called stressor. The word stressor ought, therefore, to be scrapped because attention ought to be focused primarily on the changeable habitual response pattern of the counselee, and only secondarily upon the source of pressure.

That fact is significant because it indicates that the counselee, far from being a helpless victim, controlled by the whims of others and the winds of circumstances, is responsible for the stress that he (alone) places upon his body.

Stress, then, is the result of habitual, sinful responses. In counseling it is important to make this clear to counselees. They must be given hope by recognizing that stress is sin. Jesus Christ came to deal with

1. I wish to make it clear that I am not including bodily injury or illness, which may cause bodily strain (one system breaking down can place great pressure on another), in this analysis. Sometimes nothing *can* be done about such bodily strain because medical science has no answer to it.

sin. By the Spirit's power, working through His Word, these responses can be exchanged for non-stressful, biblical ones. And the counselee must be held responsible for availing himself of all God's resources for doing so. Stress, as I have defined it, then, is the counselee's own sinful, body-harming response to pressure.

Thus far I have spoken almost entirely of outer pressures. There are inner pressures too. These are *generated* within the counselee by the counselee himself. A sense of guilt arising from unconfessed, unforgiven sin may lead to bad bodily feelings triggered by conscience (the capacity for self-evaluation according to a value standard). Anger, worry and fear (for the wrong reasons, in the wrong intensity, unrelieved by the proper biblical resolution of matters) are others.

In one sense, almost all outer pressures also are inner. Outer pressures do not truly become such (unless they are physical) until (or unless) they are *interpreted* by the counselee as pressures. If a sneer is taken as a smile of approval, it is not very likely to be taken as an occasion for a stressful response. Often, seeing events more biblically, trusting God for his explanation of them, or learning that there is a proper biblical response to them, alleviates the pressure. The outer non-physical event itself really has no power to elicit a stress response. Another's sin cannot make me sin. I won't respond that way unless I am willing to do so. Otherwise, Jesus Himself would have sinned; it would have been inevitable. He would have sinfully injured His body by sinful stress reactions. The fact is—as we know—He did not. We confuse the issue because we look at sinners (even redeemed ones) who so often do respond sinfully—then declare that a pressure → stress response is inevitable. Referring to Jesus makes the distinction I have maintained crystal clear.

Regardless of where the pressure that brings a necessity for response originates—within or without—the counselee must not be viewed as a helpless victim, trapped in its web. The Scriptures teach the counselee how he is to interpret and respond to trials, persecution and other hard times as a Christian. They explain what he is to do about guilt. If he injures his body by responses that set loose harmful chemical and muscular states, that is his fault. If he had fol-

lowed the Bible, stress wouldn't have occurred. He cannot blame stress on pressure; ultimately, to do so is to blame God, Who sovereignly controls both circumstances and persons.

Now, it is unnecessary for the counselee to understand fully how resentment (e.g.) leads to colitis for him to stop putting stress upon his colon. All he needs to know is that the Bible forbids resentment and that it charts another course of action for the Christian in the handling of his anger (cf. Eph. 4:26-32,² where the believer is told not to let the sun go down on his anger, and where he is told how to respond by building the other up with his words, while he destroys the problem that has arisen). If he follows this and other biblical directives pertaining to anger and the responses to other pressure-type situations, stress will not occur.

Whether or not the counselor elects to explain something of the physiological dynamic involved, he must always make it plain that (in the end) the *major* reason for avoiding resentment is *not to avoid stress*, but to please God by obedience. That is why a simple believer, who lives in a manner pleasing to God, can live a stress-free life, purely by studying and following the Bible (cf. Ps. 119:98-100). The one who makes glorifying God his constant goal truly finds that he does *enjoy* Him as well!

Surely the Apostle Paul (not to speak of Jesus Himself) was under unbelievable pressures (cf. II Cor. 4:8, 9, 16, 17; 6:4-10; 11:23-29). Those passages, if they indicate anything, show that he should have had colitis, ulcer, heart problems, etc., if the current pressure = stress view were true. Yet, he had none of these difficulties because even though undergoing greater pressures than any counselee you will encounter, he did not subject his body to stress through sinful interpretations and responses to these pressures. That is why he could go on serving Christ under such trial. Like Christ, Who did not get ulcers on the cross because He prayed for those who were condemning Him to death, Paul handled wrongdoing toward himself rightly (cf. Phil. 1, etc.).

2. See *The Christian Counselor's Manual* for more on this.

Paul's case vividly illustrates the falsity of the modern view symbolized by the simple equation

Pressure → Stress

This is too simplistic a view. A true biblical picture looks like this:

Pressure + sinful response → Stress

Pressure + righteous response → Peace

The difference between the two constructions is the difference between responsibility and irresponsibility, the difference between hope and despair, the difference between health and sickness. Christian counselors will be well advised to maintain a sharp distinction.