



# Managing Workplace Stress

## A Christian Perspective



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# Managing Workplace Stress

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## Contents

Introduction ..... Page 3

What do we understand by stress and pressure? ..... Page 3

How do we cope and deal effectively with  
workplace stress? ..... Page 7

Is it easier for Christians? ..... Page 11

A way forward ..... Page 14

## INTRODUCTION

How many of you reading this booklet have at one time or another experienced stress of some kind, either in the workplace or in the home? The answer, almost certainly, is that most of you have. Although there are a very small number of individuals whose lifestyle and personalities mean that they do not suffer from stress or at least experience lower levels, few of us are immune from the experience of stress, particularly in the workplace.

This booklet focuses primarily upon managing workplace stress and suggests that it is not necessarily the pressures that we encounter in the workplace which cause us stress, but rather how we manage them. Some practical approaches to managing stress are suggested, but in particular, the management of stress is considered from a Christian perspective.

## WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND BY STRESS & PRESSURE?

There are many definitions of the term stress and it is difficult to pick out any one of these as completely definitive. The process outlined below, however, may help give a practical understanding of how the stress process works in relation to employees in the workplace.

When we are under pressure and have to undertake a difficult task we ask ourselves, 'Can I do this?' We often experience what we call 'butterflies', which is due to a chemical reaction in our bloodstreams as we prepare to meet the challenge ('fight or flight'). If we are able to complete it successfully, we become more confident; the next time the task is easier and our body returns to normal. In this sense a challenging task can be motivating. However, pressure can turn into stress when:-

- We try to do something that's difficult but don't have sufficient skills or resources to do it.
- We fail or become overwhelmed by the pressure: then next time, things become more difficult and worry and anxiety can set in.
- Our confidence in our ability to address future problems is reduced.
- Exhaustion and illness may follow e.g. heart disease from prolonged deposits of fatty acids, or raised cholesterol; ulcers.

*Managing stress, then, is concerned with effective management of life's everyday pressures and challenges. This includes the workplace and is a normal part of everyday living. However, failure to deal effectively with pressures and challenges can lead to stress, strain, worry and ill-health. From a Christian perspective, we know that this is not how God wants us to live our lives*

## ***Is stress a product of today's modern world?***

There is an increasingly widespread view portrayed by the media that stress, pressure and strain are all products of modern society. This is not true. Whilst there are undoubtedly many aspects of modern day life which are potentially stressful, from the very first day of the human race people have had to respond to the many different pressures of everyday life. We can find a number of examples in the Bible.

***'The churning inside me never stops; days of suffering confront me' (Job 30:27)***

How many of you recognise the symptoms described by Job? His symptoms are, I suspect, familiar to all of us when we have been under extreme or prolonged pressure. Jesus also recognized the stresses and strains with which the people of his day had to contend and he described them as ***"harassed and helpless"*** (Matthew 9:36). In particular he was referring to their lack of spiritual direction. Does that ring any bells for today's society?

Jesus recognised worry and anxiety in his disciples, and He says at the Last Supper ***'Do not be worried or upset' (John 14:1)***. Jesus knew the importance of calming his disciples and trying to reassure them.

## ***Jesus also suffered from stress & anxiety***

Although He was divine, Jesus was also very much human, so when we are under stress or pressure, we can take comfort that Jesus knows what it is like and what we are feeling.

- At the Last Supper: ***'After Jesus had said this, He was deeply troubled' (John 13:21)***
- ***'Now my heart is troubled – and what shall I say, 'Father do not let this hour come to me?' (John 12:27)***
- Praying in Gethsemane with Peter, James and John: ***'Distress and anguish came over Him, and He said to them, "The sorrow in My heart is so great that it almost crushes Me" (Mark 14:33-34)***

Jesus was not spared from the stresses and strains of life. Neither are Christians!

## ***Why should we be concerned about Stress?***

Jesus knew what it was to be stressed. He also knew that it was damaging to those affected by it. So it is today - living in a constant state of stress is bad for us, bad for our work colleagues, bad for customers, bad for our families and bad for our Christian witness.

The negative impact of workplace stress includes the following:

- Personal Impact – ill health, deterioration in family and interpersonal relationships.
- Costs of stress-related illness: increased levels of sickness in the workplace require additional resources.
- Increased resolution of problems through formal mechanisms such as grievance procedures.
- Increasing criticism and anger with others/clients/customers and problems arising seen as ‘the client’s fault’.
- If we are under stress or strain it may lead to a sense of lack of fulfilment becoming a barrier to the way we relate to others and that includes God!

Managing our stress is important for all of us, but it is particularly important for Christians as it can disrupt our call to the Great Commission. If we are to be at our best as Christian witnesses in the world then being in a constant state of stress does not help our kingdom work.

## ***Why should we be concerned about Stress?***

What do we need to consider when attempting to manage our stress?

There are many factors which combine to determine how well we are able to manage the pressures of everyday effectively.

Some of these are summarised below:

- Individual – our personalities, abilities and experiences
- Work – colleagues, managers, clients/customers
- Micro-social factors – family, friends, interests, physical environment.
- Macro-social factors – recession; world disasters.
- Spiritual – faith for the individual; faith in the workplace; faith in the community.

All these factors interact in our everyday lives and can contribute to the pressures and stresses of life. It’s complicated! Stress at work for example can affect our home lives and stress in the home can affect our work. But we can do something about this if we begin to understand the various pressures in our lives.

## ***Perceptions of Stress***

No matter how well we can define and understand the nature of stress, our understanding of it is very personal. Here are some real life individual perceptions of stress. Do any of these feel familiar to you in your particular situation?

***‘I wouldn’t know who my senior managers were’***

***‘I feel as though I am falling apart at the seams.’***

***‘At home, I panic when the phone rings’***

***‘Stress is feeling out of control’.***

***‘Working harder than your capacity’***

***‘Stress is feeling bored’.***

***‘Feelings of panic.....not able to achieve a goal. ‘***

***‘You need to scream down the phone at management to make them listen.’ (Miles 1994)***

## HOW DO WE COPE AND DEAL EFFECTIVELY WITH WORKPLACE PRESSURES?

### *Martha under pressure*

We can understand more about individuals under pressure and how Jesus dealt with them if we look at some examples described in the Gospels.

***“Martha was upset over all the work she had to do..... ‘Martha, Martha! You are worried and troubled over so many things’” (Luke 10:40-41)***

When Jesus went to visit his friends Martha, Mary and Lazarus, He was probably going there for a bit of time out, but Jesus’ relaxation caused stress for Martha. I always have some sympathy with Martha, after all, how would you feel if Jesus and his disciples descended on you at a moment’s notice, probably looking for amongst other things refreshments? Martha had unexpected guests and unsurprisingly was busy running around and wanted some help from her sister Mary. We will have a look at Mary’s response a little later, but I suspect many of us will sympathise with Martha’s situation.

Are you like Martha when you have a lot of work and are under pressure? People have very different personalities. Jesus didn’t value Martha any less for her dashing around, but he does spot the need for her not to get stressed out by his arrival and he tries to calm her down.

Martha was responding to a specific pressure and of course the pressures in our lives vary from time to time. You might like to think about what pressures you are facing at the moment, be they work; relationships with friends; the current economic situation; or your spiritual life?

Think about how these are affecting you and how you are dealing with them.

### *What can we do about the pressures of life?*

- **Avoid?** It is possible at times to avoid certain pressures that we are facing and to take a break from a situation which is causing us stress. This may be helpful in the short term. However, we have to consider whether this resolves the underlying issue. When employees suffer long-term sickness due to work-related stress, the person’s managers and the employee both need to realise that the pressures which led to the stress might still be there when the sickness period is over. Action by both managers and the employee will need to be taken to resolve the issue.

- **Remove them?** There is a temptation to think that removing certain workplace pressures may reduce employee stress. This may be the case in some instances; for example, an improvement in physical working conditions. There are however, some aspects of certain jobs which carry pressures that cannot be removed such as police officers facing violence, medical trauma workers dealing with patients in life and death situations or auditors delivering tough messages to heads of organisations.
- **Cope better as individuals?** There are a range of practical strategies that individuals can put into practice to manage pressures with which they have to deal. Whilst all of us have to take individual responsibility for managing the pressures we experience in our daily lives, because of our diverse range of personalities, we will all respond differently to particular situations. It is important that managers do not see stress-related illness as just an individual problem. Managers, on behalf of the organisation, also have a responsibility to provide support in this respect.
- **Cope better as teams?** In a study of social work teams (Miles 1994), it was found that it was not the intensity of pressures in the workplace which determined levels of employee stress, but rather the effectiveness with which teams, led by their managers, coped with these pressures.
- **Teams under pressure can be healthy teams!** Indicators of healthy workplaces include: good line manager leadership; high levels of autonomy; good relationships between staff; good relationships with clients/customers.
- **A combination of each?** Both individual and team coping strategies have their place in managing employee stress, but it is unlikely that any single action will resolve the issue in isolation to others.

## ***Some real life coping responses***

All of us have different ways of dealing with pressures that we have to face in the workplace. How do you respond? Here are some real-life examples:

- ‘Do the crossword’
- ‘Take a long hot shower’
- ‘Shout at the kids’
- ‘Leave the phone off the hook’
- ‘Seek solace in the bottle’
- ‘Sit quietly by myself and try to think things through’
- ‘Talk things through with my partner’.
- ‘I like pushing a trolley round the supermarket’
- ‘I use willpower’
- ‘Managing an eccentric car is absorbing’.
- ‘Talk to a tree’
- ‘Playing with my children’
- ‘Going to the gym’
- ‘Doing the housework’
- ‘Collect newspaper clippings’
- ‘Play netball’
- ‘Make sure work is not my number one priority’
- ‘I go for a pint on the way home.... go home and have another... then another... finally I unwind.’

Perhaps you have used some of these strategies yourself and I am sure there are many others which you might add to the list. You might like to try and spot those which you think are effective and those which are counter-productive.

There are broadly three types of approach to managing pressures:

- Direct action e.g. thinking the problem through or improving your skills.
- Secondary coping strategies e.g. taking part in leisure activities; participating in rewarding activities.
- Maladaptive coping strategies e.g. behaviour that has potentially negative consequences such as heavy drinking; smoking; shouting at friends and family.

There is however, a great deal of research which has been developed over many years and provides good guidance to effective coping strategies.

Here are some examples:

- Take time to relax
- Talk through your problems
- Be realistic in your goals
- Get away for a while
- Learn to accept what you can't change
- Look after your body
- Plan your tasks so that you can handle them
- Deal with your anger
- Get things into perspective
- Analyse yourself
- Analyse your situation
- Recognise your limitations
- Pamper yourself and relax

(From: Kyriacou 1980)

(From: Masidlover 1981)

## IS IT EASIER FOR CHRISTIANS TO DEAL WITH WORKPLACE PRESSURES AND STRESS?

### ***Advice from the Scriptures***

Jesus was not immune from the pressures of his day and the potential that they had for causing stress and anxiety in his life and the same goes for Christians! We can however, learn from the things He said and did and of course as Christians our faith in Jesus gives us an additional and all-important resource to draw upon.

There are many biblical texts which are helpful in this respect. Here are two of my favourites:

***'Peace I leave with you; it is my own peace that I give to you. I do not give it as the world does. Do not be worried and afraid.'* - John 14:27**

***'Don't worry about anything, but in all your prayers ask God for what you need, always asking him with a thankful heart. And God's peace, which is far beyond human understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in union with Christ Jesus.'* - Philippians 4:6-7**

The verses from John remind us of the wonderful gift of Jesus' peace and His reassurance that with His peace in our lives, we do not need to be afraid of anything. Paul in his own inimitable way reinforces this and reminds us of the importance that prayer can have in our lives. It is a lesson that we can learn from Jesus, for whenever He was under pressure, the first thing that He did was to pray.

Other potential Christian approaches to coping with pressures can be found in the verses below:

***'Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!'* - Philippians 4:4**

***John 15: 'I am the real vine (v1) Remain united to me and I will remain united to you (v 4). I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.'* (v 11)**

***'Jesus knew that they were about to come and seize him in order to make him king by force; so he went off again to the hills by himself.'* - John 6:15**

- **Rejoice** – Praise can lift our spirits away from our day to day problems. There is great strength to be gained by rejoicing as a group of Christians.
- **United to you** – Jesus never leaves us. He shares in our highs and our lows. He has been there and had these experiences himself.
- **Your joy may be complete** – Without the love of Jesus there will always be something missing from people’s lives, but Christians can know this joy!
- **By Himself** – Jesus always knew the importance, particularly at times of great pressure of being quiet and alone in the presence of God

## ***Mary - the other side of the coin***

We have already looked at Martha’s response to Jesus’ arrival at her house. Her busyness and approach to her unexpected surprise arrival sharply contrasts with Mary’s response.

***‘Martha had a sister named Mary, who sat down at the feet of the Lord and listened.’ - Luke 10:39***

The differing responses of Martha and Mary reflect two distinct approaches to coping with pressure and reveal a marked contrast between their two personalities. Are you a Martha or a Mary or maybe a bit of both at different times? How would you respond to a ‘Mary’ response from a work colleague? Would you be understanding of their approach to dealing with pressure, or would you be impatient and expect a ‘Martha’ response?

## **Christian Responsibility to others**

This booklet has so far considered different approaches to managing our own personal stress, but as Christians, we are called to look beyond ourselves and to reach out in a supportive manner to the situations of others. Within the workplace context, this means our colleagues. Paul on many occasions reminds us of this:

***‘Show a gentle attitude towards everyone’- Philippians 4:5***

Beverley Shepherd, a Christian workplace consultant says this:

### **‘Christians are called to be channels of care in the workplace’ (2010)**

Being a Christian in any situation involves being concerned for others, not just ourselves. As Christians we have a duty of care for others and as we demonstrate that care, we do so in the name of Jesus and therefore are witnesses to the Good News. This can have a significant impact in assisting colleagues to manage their stress levels. In one organisation where large scale redundancies have recently been implemented, members of the workplace Christian group were able to provide significant care and support to their colleagues.

Holding others up in prayer and providing practical support to others is actually also good for us. Lifting the anxieties of others to God in prayer can be significant in enhancing the well-being of all involved.

## ***Leadership roles***

Workplace managers have a key role in supporting and assisting staff in dealing with workplace pressures. We perhaps do not give sufficient recognition to the leadership skills which Jesus demonstrated and the support that he gave to his disciples.

- Jesus was a supportive team leader
- He was compassionate but had high expectations
- He had clarity of mission
- He had clear aims and objectives
- He led by example
- He spent time educating and training his disciples
- His disciples were able to function without Jesus
- His mission was accomplished.
- 'All the believers continued together in close fellowship' (Acts 2:44)
- He had effective personal coping mechanisms e.g. friendship; prayer; shared meals

## A WAY FORWARD

### ***Practical Steps***

It may seem obvious, but if you want to reduce your stress and increase motivation, then you need to do something about it. You can do this both on a personal and team basis.

- You need to take time as a team and as an individual to address how pressures are affecting you.
- Managers need to avoid the language of stress, such as ‘They are just not cut out for the job’
- Staff also need to avoid expressions such as ‘It’s all management’s fault’.
- Take time at work to consider carefully what pressures are facing you in the workplace.
- What are the pressures that you have to deal with outside of work?
- What steps can you take to manage/cope with these pressures as an individual, as a manager, as a team e.g. job rotation; joint agenda setting for team meetings; allocation of individual responsibilities for the whole team?
- What motivates you at work or home?
- How can you increase motivation in both areas?

### **MANAGING PRESSURE/STRESS IS POSSIBLE**

But it needs personal action and personal action needs support:

- o **From managers and workplace leaders**
- o **From colleagues**
- o **From family and friends**

### ***For Christians***

Christians have to face up to the pressures and stresses and strains of daily life like everyone else. We are not spared from these burdens. If we have any doubts about this we might care to look at some of the daunting situations that the disciples had to face and the challenges that Jesus put to them.

***‘Are you really ready to die for me?’ John 13:38***

Just as Jesus did, sometimes you have to take the pressures head on. But we need to do it with support! Jesus promises both love and support.

***‘Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads and I will give you rest.’ - Matthew 11:28***

Jesus offers support through faith in Him – that’s a great encouragement for those who choose to follow Him, but He does not promise an easy ride. We can however be confident that we can manage life’s pressures with support, from work colleagues, managers, family, other Christians, faith in God and the power of the Holy Spirit.



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