

Leach

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September 2007 Newsletter:

How Stressed Are You? Try a Stress Diary!

Dear Patients & Friends:

I'm going to admit up front that this newsletter is probably more for the ladies than the gents reading along. When we're under stress how many of us men are in to: a) talking? Or b) writing? Ok, stop laughing.

Anyway, on the outside chance that you guys won't laugh at me too much I'm going to admit something here, I actually enjoy writing. So when I studied about how a Stress Diary could help with coping, I not only tried it, I've kept it up now for over two years. For those inclined to write, a stress diary can be an effective tool, even if you're a guy!

Remember that in our August 2007 newsletter we discussed reframing, and the power of positive thinking in fighting stress and disease. Also keep in mind or refer back to prior newsletters in December 2006, and July 2007, where we discussed how a shortened lifespan, early disability, asthma, arthritis, cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and obesity are associated with depressive disorders and poor coping skills. So we can be sure that learning how to cope with stress is something we must all master if we want a long and healthy life.

It turns out that a stress diary can be an effective tool to help us cope with stress. What is a stress diary? Simply put, a stress diary, also referred to as journaling, journal writing, creative writing, and similar to poetry therapy, is a way we can write down our deepest thoughts about what bothers and excites us, what is bad and what is good about our lives, so that we can understand better who we are, and how and why we think the way we do. Scientists refer to this as a process of improving "self awareness."

To begin a stress diary, perhaps the most important first step is to make a list of the problems that cause you the most grief, or cause you to be upset. Also, the personal problems we have on a daily basis may be worsened by major life stresses, so we should note these as well.

What Stress- Major life stresses include the following, from Holmes and Rahe's (1967) landmark work, "The Social Readjustment Rating Scale." In the work when the unit of measure they termed "Life Changing Units" totaled 150-199, a mild life crisis was present, while a 200-299 score suggested a moderate life crisis, while 300 or more points suggested a major life crisis.

Rank	Life Event	Life Changing Units
1	Death of a spouse	100
2	Divorce	73
3	Marital separation	65
4	Jail term	63
5	Death of close family member	63
6	Personal injury or illness	53
7	Marriage	50
8	Fired at work	47
9	Marital reconciliation	45
10	Retirement	45

How do I respond to stress? After you identify what hurts your feelings and makes you feel bad, you can begin to think about what emotions you feel when these stressors are encountered. Most commonly stress emotions include anger and fear. However, impatience, jealousy, frustration, sadness, grief, guilt and worry are other words we use to describe our anger and fear, so think about these as well.

Why do I respond to stress the way I do? The next step is to spend some time—and for some of us, a LOT of time—thinking about why we respond to stress the way we do. One child of an abusive alcoholic parent himself becomes an alcoholic. The other becomes the president of a corporation. Why? In a traffic jam one driver lays down on the horn and makes animated gestures at another driver inappropriately blocking the intersection, while another puts on praise music and uses the extra time to worship God. I am not saying we all need to learn to be pacifists and never be angry. However, it is important for all of us to learn to use anger effectively when necessary, for example for preservation of life and limb or to protect our personal boundaries, and not merely because we don't know other ways to communicate. Looking at how we were raised, what culture we live in, who we socialize with, and other similar observations can help understand why we respond to stress the way we do, so that we can change our responses if we choose to do so.

How do I resolve my concerns and problems? According to experts like Brian Seaward, Ph.D., (Managing Stress, 5th ed. Massachusetts: Jones & Bartlett, 2006) the final step to effective journaling or maintaining a stress diary, is to decide how to resolve concerns and problems. It's almost like Niebuhr's Prayer for Serenity: "God, grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference...." It's not enough to merely write about our problems over and over again. We must be totally honest with ourselves and try to improve upon our circumstances whenever possible. Will job retraining or further education help us get a better job? Will counseling help our marriage or relationships? Do I already know in my heart what to do to improve my situation but am unwilling to take the necessary steps? By keeping your journal or diary private you can be honest with yourself over time. Tell family members to respect your privacy.

As we discussed last month, both psychological and Christian viewpoints share some common endpoints in terms of mental processes: we are to see possibilities even in the midst of our trials, and avoid feeling like we are a victim in need of blaming others for our circumstances, helpless to change our lives or direction. In one respect, journaling or keeping a stress diary can actually help us with the reframing necessary to master positive thinking, and prevent what the worry that scripture teaches, "...rotteth the bones."

Sincerely,

Dr. Robert A. Leach

For More Resources on this subject:

- For a Colorado State University website adaptation of the complete Life Change Units scale: <http://psy.psych.colostate.edu/courseweb/F2007/PY325/LifeChangeUnits.htm>
- For information on local regional mental health agencies in Mississippi: <http://www.msresource.com/mental/mh-mr.html>
- An excellent article and links for teachers about the stress diary from the Body and Mind section of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: http://www.cdc.gov/teachers/activities/stress_frazzled.pdf

To assess these links online, at: www.drleach.com click on Newsletters, September 2007

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