

HELPING OTHERS HANDLE STRESS

by Kenneth Williams, Ph.D.

“May the Lord show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains... You know very well in how many ways he helped me in Ephesus.” 2 Timothy 1:16,18

This paper assumes a prior knowledge of Stress: Curse or Blessing? in the Sharpening Your Interpersonal Skills Workbook.

One of the best ways to minister to others is to help them deal with stress. We all handle stress better when we're in relationships with others. Paul was a great man of God, yet he saw this need in his life. See 2 Timothy 1:16, 4:9 and 4:21. Even strong people need others! Here are a few ideas for helping others manage their stress.

Recognize Stress Symptoms in Others

1. The first step is to recognize your own symptoms. The better you understand your own stress reactions, the better you'll understand others' reactions. Keep an ongoing list of your responses to major stress to remind you of how others may react also.
2. Study the different kinds of internal and external stress reactions. Review them from time to time in order to be sensitive to observing them in others when they occur. Ask others what kinds of reactions they have when they aren't coping with stress. Learn to watch for stress reactions in others.

Deal with Your Negative Reactions to Others

How do you respond to people who are weak, anxious, ill, hostile, or depressed? Understand that there are vast differences in reactions to stress situations and in coping abilities, and accept these differences. Avoid judging and comparing. If you have a strong negative reaction to the person's behavior, you will be hindered in helping him*.

Steps in Helping Others

1. Recognize that stress is the issue; the symptoms are not the issue. Remember that the cause may be far removed from the symptoms you observe, e.g., kicking the cat, yelling at the children, chronic illness, hostility, poor work performance.
2. Help the person recognize what is happening. Following are a few steps you can use to do this:
 - a. Get to the subject. Here are two approaches to getting to the subject:

Listen for subtle (maybe even unconscious) or not so subtle calls for help, and respond to them. Remember and employ your listening skills to draw him out.

If you don't recognize calls for help and you believe intervention is best, invite the person to talk about it. It's better to make your opening statements tentative and general. For example, "You seem to be struggling lately. Do you want to talk about it?" "It seems like you're having a rough time. Wonder if I can help?"

These kinds of statements allow the person to be as specific as he wants, and to ask you for further help if he wants it.

- b. Once on the subject, concentrate on zeroing in on his stress, without getting off the subject. See Philippians 2:4. Use your best skills in drawing him out. Avoid premature advice or judgments. See Proverbs 18:2,13. It can be very helpful to have him list all the stressors he's experiencing now.
- c. Get on a heart-to-heart level if possible. Seek to genuinely feel with the person (Romans 12:15). Give comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3,4). Communicate your acceptance (Romans 15:1,6). Try to help him know that his feelings and struggles are normal. Share some of your own stresses as appropriate, but avoid turning the focus to yourself.

Remember that there is great value in this step alone, for him to be able to talk out the situation and his reactions, and to know that you care. This opens the way for resolving the issues.

3. Then begin to help him recognize and resolve the stress if he wants help. See the steps outlined in *Stress: Curse or Blessing? An alternative would be to use just the Worksheet for Handling Stress at the end of that handout.* Seek to get a commitment to action. Check up later to see if he is following through.
4. Recognize that he may resist help from you. You need wisdom to know what to do with resistance. It's best not to force your help on him. Some options are as follows:
 - a. Point out resistance if it isn't clearly verbalized by the person. Bring it to the surface and talk about it.
 - b. Try to keep moving ahead, but at a slower pace. Share some of your own struggles as you talk, to keep the discussion from focusing too intensely on him.
 - c. Ask him if he wants help from you, or if he will get help from someone else.
 - d. Back off. Change the subject or just say that you won't pursue the issue further unless he brings it up.
5. Your prayers may make the difference. You not only bring in God's help, but the knowledge that you stand behind him in prayer may be a great source of strength and encouragement.

6. A group situation may be very effective for helping people deal with stress. See *Stress: Curse or Blessing? Guide for Discussion Leaders* for ideas on leading a group for handling stress.