

A black and white photograph of a person sitting on a wet, reflective floor against a large, textured concrete wall. The person is wearing a dark jacket, jeans, and a knit beanie, and is looking down with their hands resting on their knees. The word "STRESS" is overlaid in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters on the left side of the image. Below it, the subtitle "Helpful ways to cope." is written in a smaller, white, italicized sans-serif font. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

STRESS

Helpful ways to cope.

By Alison Lublink & Tammy Whitney



Part 1: Acknowledge the Problem

Read: Psalm 37:5, 2 Corinthians 4:7-9

Ponder: All of us deal with stress. All of us. For some, that can be all-consuming, and for others, not as much. But either way, when we think of the question: "What is causing me stress right now?" we can all come up with an answer. In fact, ponder that question right now. Maybe a never-ending list of things has come to mind. Maybe one or two really serious things are standing out. Of course, what is causing stress changes as time goes on. There might be themes, but our stress goes through ebbs and flows.

One of the first things that we need to do to begin handling stress is to acknowledge the problem. Acknowledge what specifically it is that is causing stress right now in this moment. It's not enough to just say "I'm stressed." We need to name it and define it in order to help us manage it.

In Kenya, Joan was diagnosed with cancer and started receiving chemo. Little did the doctors know that she was also pregnant. 9 months later she gave birth to a baby girl that had cerebral palsy and was visually impaired. This became the worst fear of Joan, as she realized she had stage 3 cancer and a daughter that depended on her for everything. All of this understandably caused an incredible amount of stress. Thankfully, Joan was able to walk through these stressful and traumatic times alongside the staff at *BethanyKids*, an organization focused on children's health.

In times like these, when we have no control over our circumstances, it's important to commit our ways to the Lord. Trust him. God has all-surpassing power. No matter how pressed, crushed, or perplexed we are, we can rest in God's promises. Our confidence is in His faithfulness. He is already aware of our stress, so let's take the first step of laying our burdens at His feet.

Discuss:

1. If you are comfortable, admit to someone what it is that is causing you stress right now. If you're not comfortable with that, then write it down somewhere safe. Why is this particular circumstance causing stress?
2. How do you feel that this stress is affecting you? Have you been angrier? Have you engaged in mind-numbing activities to help forget it? Consider what this stress is doing to you.

3. Will it change this circumstance if you stress about it? If not, then what could you do to help reduce the stress surrounding this circumstance?
4. What can you do *right now* to help ease this stress?

Pray: God, I feel burdened with stress. It eats away at me from the inside out and it makes me feel so unhappy. Please help me to give over [name your stressful circumstance] to you. I don't want to hold onto it alone anymore. I need your help to heal from this stress.

Do: Take some time for yourself this week where you can truly enjoy a moment alone with God. Make your favourite beverage, put on some comforting music, sit with a view that makes you happy - and simply *be* in the moment with God. It can be one minute or an hour; whatever you have time for. But take the moment to rest in God and know that pausing your stress for that moment will not cause the world to come crashing down around you.



Part 2: Prioritize Your Physical Health

Read: Romans 8:6, Luke 21:34

Ponder: When I get overly stressed, I sometimes forget to do the things which can help me deal with my stress in a healthy way. I have a tendency to hunker down with snacks and mindless screen time. Once in a while enjoying that combination of things isn't a bad thing, but when that becomes my go-to method of dealing with stress, things can quickly become a downward spiral.

God created humans with a body, mind, and spirit that all function together as we move through the world. One cannot exist without the others. If one part of our being is stressed, the other parts will feel it and also

the reverse is true. Paul even used our bodies as an analogy for the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12:26 explaining "if one part suffers every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."

There is a tendency as Christians to focus heavily on our minds and spirits. We can forget that our body is an equally important part of the package and how we take care of our physical bodies impacts our minds and spirits.

Joab oversees the Assistive Technology Team for BethanyKids in Kenya. Like all of us, he deals with stress. But Joab has developed some healthy coping strategies in his approach to dealing with it. He shares that the first step is acknowledging that stress is present and is a normal part of our human experience. When you are able to mentally step back from what you are experiencing and realize that stress is a part of being human, you can give yourself some grace. Once he has acknowledged the stress he identifies the source of stress and the correlating emotions. When you know what you are dealing with, then you can take the appropriate steps to deal with it.

Joab uses physical exercise such as football or walks after work to help him work through the stress in his life. Exercise keeps him physically healthy and that helps keep him mentally and emotionally healthy as well. Joab is very intentional about dealing with stress in his life and is aware of how exercise and taking care of his body are vital to his whole being.

Our bodies are the places that we live in and from. They are the containers of our mind and spirit and how we interact with God, the world, and others. We take care of our bodies by being mindful of what we put into them and making sure that we get enough rest and exercise. Luke 21:34 gives us this warning: "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap."

God has created humans with body, mind, and spirit. Our physical bodies are equally important as our minds and spirits to live into the fullness and wholeness for which we were created. When we honor our bodies, we honor the One who created them.

Discuss:

1. Joab says the first step in finding support is to acknowledge that you are stressed and to remember that stress is a part of the human experience. This was our topic in the first part of this devotional guide. Are there areas of stress in your life that you still need to acknowledge? What are they? Are you able to show yourself grace dealing with your stress? Why or why not?
2. Do you think Jesus experienced stress?
3. What are some of the physical, mental, and spiritual consequences of not handling stress in a healthy way?
4. What are some physical activities that you can do to help manage stress in your life?

Pray: God, today I come to you with gratitude for the way that you have created us. You have created humans with a mind, body, and soul to interact with you and the world around us. What a wonderful gift that we have to experience the fullness of our humanity through our physical bodies with all of the challenges and joys that come with it. As we nourish and move our bodies, remind us that by taking care of our physical bodies we are honoring what You have created.

Do: This week pay attention to the things that are causing you stress. Once you have identified your source of stress, are there things you can do to nourish your physical health that will help manage stress better? Try drinking more water, eating healthy meals, and adding walks or other physical exercise to your daily routine.



Part 3: Amp Up Your Prayer Life

Read: Psalm 16, Romans 12:12

Ponder: When you're feeling stressed, what is the first thing that you do? Do you listen to particular music? Sit quietly? Take deep breaths? Drink a cup of tea? Do you pray? When we are feeling extreme stress, something that can slip by the wayside is our prayer life. Our stress becomes all-consuming and we find ways to numb our stress rather than address it. As Christians, one way that we can begin to take hold of our stress is to first pause and communicate with our Creator.

In Uganda, Nakyanzi gave birth to her first baby, who had gastroschisis (when the intestines extend to the outside of the abdomen). This was traumatizing to Nakyanzi because she had never seen this condition before. She gave birth in the presence of a village birth attendant who had also never seen such a condition.

This worried the entire family. They became judgmental of Nakyanzi and her baby, which stressed her so much since she expected them to be supportive. Nakyanzi and her child were referred to the hospital where *BethanyKids* is located, and the child was immediately attended to. However, the journey was a tough one as the baby was premature and the child was on oxygen most of the time. This caused stress for Nakyanzi even more. She used to pray only on Sundays but was encouraged by the *BethanyKids* Chaplain to pray every day throughout this challenging season. She overcame the stress and the baby survived. Nakyanzi is now at home with her baby whom she says is a miracle.

Just because we bring our prayers to God in times of stress doesn't mean that everything will automatically be fixed, like waving a magic wand over a problem. But the peace and refuge we can find in our relationship and communication with God can be a balm for our weary souls as we process the stressful situations in our lives. And so as Paul suggested in our reading from Romans 12, we rejoice in hope, remain patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer.

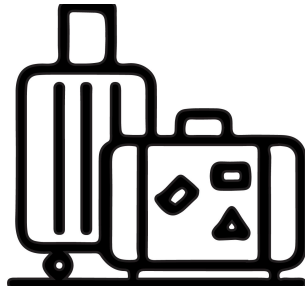
Discuss:

1. What is your initial reaction when you are feeling stressed? What do you do to try and reduce your stress?
2. Have you ever tried praying daily throughout a stressful situation? Why or why not? If you have, do you feel it was helpful? Why or why not?

3. Do you think that this statement is true or false: "worry reveals a lack of faith." Discuss.
4. Is there a part of you that *likes* being stressed? Do you feel like you're "thriving" if you have something to stress about? Really consider that for a moment. What would it look like to lay down that idol of stress in prayer with God this week?

Pray: God, help me to remember that you are my refuge in times of trouble. I can always come to you to unload my burdens, share my feelings and express my worries. Help me not to be burdened by my stress, or to idolize it as some sort of messed up success; but instead let me hand it over to your capable hands.

Do: Commit to pray daily this week about something that is causing you stress. Set an alarm, leave yourself a sticky note - whatever will help you remember to prioritize this time. Check in with yourself at the end of the week and see how you feel about your stress.



Part 4: Baggage Check

Read: Psalm 42:11, Job 11:13-20

Ponder: “I can do it myself!” is a familiar phrase for anyone who has spent more than a couple of hours with a toddler. Toddlers are learning about the world around them and are at the stage of development where they are starting to learn how to be independent of their caregivers. Taking first steps, learning to use a spoon, getting dressed, all of those things require a certain amount of stubborn determination. But I think that if we are really honest with ourselves most of us don't really outgrow this stage - it just starts to look a little different.

When we grow up and we begin to take on more responsibilities and we have preferences for the way things should be done; or we begin to feel that our ability to handle things ourselves is a reflection of our

independence or self worth; or we don't want to burden anyone else... Do you see how all of this can add up? How soon can we find ourselves overwhelmed?

Saidat, a nurse from Uganda working with *BethanyKids*, shares her experience as a nurse in charge of the pediatric surgery unit. After planning out her very full day that included going to the hospital stores for supplies, completing necessary monthly paperwork, and making changes to the nurses' duty roster for the rest of the month, she was called into an emergency meeting with administration with only 3 hours notice.

As you can imagine, Saidat became overwhelmed with all that needed to be done. She knew that to accomplish all on her own she would have to work late. But rather than just saying “I can do it myself!”, Saidat asked Gift, another nurse on duty to go pick up the needed supplies while she worked on the paperwork. Saidat was able to complete all the work that needed to be done and leave on time because she asked for help.

Asking for help when we feel overburdened and overwhelmed with our responsibilities frees up mental and emotional space as well as time. When our hands and arms are full holding all of the things, there's no room left for us to reach out to God. And ultimately when we are feeling burdened by the stress and baggage that we carry, God is our source of peace, strength and hope. Psalm 42:1 says “Why are you cast

down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God." Our stubborn independence and cries of "I can do it myself!" can keep us from holding onto what we need the most. In those moments of overwhelm, and maybe even before you get to that point, look around and see if God has presented you a Gift to help relieve the burden and look to Him as your source of peace, strength and hope.

Discuss:

1. Why do you think so many of us find it so hard to ask for help?
2. What are some of the things that you are holding onto that can be released into the care of others? Why are you holding onto them?
3. When you notice someone struggling with the stress of being overwhelmed what do you do?
4. Think over the times in your life when you have struggled to carry all of your baggage. As you reflect, share who the helpers were around you at that time. Looking back, can you see where God was present in those moments?

Pray: God, open my eyes to the unnecessary things that I stubbornly hold onto and reveal to me the helpers who can share the load. Today I am reminded that You are my hope, my peace, my salvation. You are walking with me as I make my way through this life, ready to help bear my burdens when I turn to you. Thank you for being there and walking with me. Thank

you that I do not have to handle life on my own. Today I lift my soul in thanks and praise to You my God.

Do: Make a list of the things that are overwhelming you. Are there things that you can ask for help with, that perhaps you have been holding onto saying "I can do it myself"? Who are your helpers? As you go through your list, write the name of the helper next to the item. Be sure to include God in your list of helpers.



Part 5: Focus on Giving Thanks

Read: Romans 5:3-5, James 2:1-4

Ponder: Being thankful when you're stressed might not exactly come naturally. I know for me it can be particularly hard to have a positive perspective when I am feeling burdened with stress. My mind becomes singularly focused on the bad/negative situation. It can even seem flippant for me to suggest that you should just be thankful in the midst of your struggles. We don't want to diminish your stress and your personal challenges; though we do want to add a side of mindful thankfulness where we can. So if you're feeling like you're not ready to be thankful yet, pause in this devotional series and come back to this part in a few days or weeks.

If you're ready to proceed, then be sure to have read the scripture passages that go with today's devotional. You'll notice a theme to find joy in suffering. This isn't easy. These passages make it sound poetic and wonderful and magical. And of course, when we can

truly embrace that feeling, it is. But at first, it can be hard to be thankful when we're stressed. However, it's important for our relationship with God to acknowledge that there is good in our lives even when we're feeling this way. We can have joy in those things, even if they are few and far between.

In Kenya, Joyce has been dealing with extreme stress as a mother of two children. Her son, Justin, was just 5 years old when he started to experience health problems. After numerous surgeries in different hospitals he still is not 100% well. Joyce's husband has left her; her family ignores her; and she is constantly struggling with finances as a small kiosk employee who can't work due to needing to be near her son at the hospital. Despite this, the BethanyKids staff say that she is "ever joyful." Even though she does not have much, and deals with unrelenting stress from all sides, she is positive. She has great faith in God and trusts that through all these obstacles, hope will prevail.

So whatever you are facing right now in the way of stress, try to consider the joy you *do* have. You don't have to forget about your stress to be thankful; they can work together.

Discuss:

1. Do you think it's possible to be stressed *and* thankful? Why or why not?
2. Are you a glass half full or half empty kind of person? How does this feed into the way that you handle your stress?

3. What do you think when you read today's scripture passages? What hope do you receive from them, if any?
4. How can you find thankfulness in your daily life as a regular rhythm so that when stressors happen, you are still balanced with thankfulness?

Pray: O God of Hope, Joy and Peace. Calm my heart from this stress that overwhelms me. Guide my mind to the hope and joy that I *do* have in my life; help me to see them; feel them; know them. May these reminders from you give me the peace to help still this stress.

Do: Verbalize or write down three things that you are thankful for each day this week. Even if they are the same three things each time, make it a priority to acknowledge them.



Part 6: Seek Out Community

Read: 1 Thessalonians 5:13, Galatians 6:2

Ponder: After Brenda had her baby, called Believe, she noticed that something was very wrong with her little girl. Believe was born with no anal opening and was passing stool through her vagina. Not only were Brenda and her husband worried for their new baby but they were also afraid to tell anyone because they did not know how their community would respond to this physical abnormality.

Feeling alone and frightened, Brenda took her baby to the hospital near her in Uganda. As she stood in line carrying the heavy load of concern for her baby and fear of what the doctors may think, another mother and baby caught her attention. The baby this mother was holding had a colostomy bag (a plastic bag that collects fecal matter from the digestive tract through an opening in the abdominal wall). When Brenda

inquired about why the baby had to have a colostomy, the mother shared that her baby had the exact same condition as Believe. At that moment Brenda knew she and her baby girl were not alone! As they continued chatting, another mother came over and shared her child's experience with the same condition. This pair of women gave Brenda the beautiful gift of community in a time of great need. Their stories and shared experience gave Brenda the confidence she needed to share with the doctors her child's condition and get Believe the treatment she needed.

In the last year, everyone across the globe has collectively experienced a once in a lifetime pandemic (at least we hope so!). While we have all experienced the COVID-19 pandemic in different ways, one of the themes we see across the globe is our need for community. As communities have faced lockdowns and stay at home orders, and we have been encouraged to social distance and wear masks to cover our faces, we have all struggled with physical separation.

Through all of this, a new appreciation for community has grown. We have seen neighbors checking in on each other, musicians sharing their gift of music with their neighbors by playing their instruments on balconies, and gifts of food and supplies dropped on a porch to help those who are sick. All of these actions and so many others helped us to realize that while we may have been physically separated we were all very much in this thing together. We were not alone. In this

one cataclysmic event the entire globe was united in our experience.

Brenda's experience with women at the hospital and our collective experience over the last year dealing with a global pandemic shows us how much we need each other. Galatians 6:2 says "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ".

Community is where we fulfill this command. Community is the place where we discover that we are not alone. We were made to live in community with each other and with God. We are made for relationship and connection. We are the image bearers of a Triune God. The Father, The Son, and Holy Spirit exist in Divine Communion with each other. May we live out this fullness of the image of God in us.

Discuss:

1. How have you found community in the last year? Were there any people or places that surprised you?
2. Reflect on a time when you *have* benefited from community and a time when you *would have* benefitted from community. How have those experiences influenced your thinking about the importance of community?
3. Are there ways to expand your community? Discuss ideas for reaching out and connecting.

4. Share some examples from the Scriptures of people who lived in community. What can you learn from their example?

Pray: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we look to You as we are reminded that You have created humanity in Your very image and that You live in community. Humans are made for connection to You and to others. Help me to look around with fresh eyes and an open heart to see new opportunities to expand our community and to reach out to others who may be feeling alone. Thank you for the gift of connection to You and to others.

Do: As you move through the week ahead, take moments to pause and ask God to open your eyes to the people around you. Ask Him to show you the people who need connection. As these new opportunities are revealed to you, put some of the ideas for reaching out and connecting you discussed earlier into practice.



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Written by Alison Lublink and Tammy Whitney.



Alison Lublink is a teacher who loves to travel and who has spent the past 8 years teaching in the Middle East. She now pastors Reunion Kingston and helps BethanyKids with their communications.



Tammy Whitney is a Spirit seeking, people loving, creative who lives in Peoria, Illinois with her husband and two amazing children. For the past 15 years she has served as a pastor in the Salvation Army.