



Addressing stress at work: a group work approach

E3

Introduction

It often seems like a given for society today that life is stressful, and that the greatest source of stress is 'work'. As many of us are working long hours, facing insecurity and increased pressure to perform, the results can be devastating for individuals and families. The material presented here seeks to open up a discussion about the causes and consequences of stress and how we cope with them. What is offered is only a first step. It is designed to be used primarily in a group in which people feel confident to share their concerns together.

Guidance for group leaders

Group leaders must be *sensitive to issues of confidentiality*. They need to be aware that some group members may feel that suffering from stress is a sign of failure. Committed Christians are particularly prone to denying the burden of stress, feeling their 'faith' should see them through. Group members should be reassured that suffering from the effects of stress does not imply a lack of faith or any character weakness.

You may be asked to recommend sources of information to those who realise they need to seek help. A quick search of the internet will turn up hundreds of pages of 'advice'. Some of this is helpful, some is not. A couple of reliable places to start are:

www.hse.gov.uk/stress

www.nhs.uk/conditions/Stress

What is stress?

Wikipedia defines stress as follows:

"Stress is a biological term which refers to the consequences of the failure of a human or animal body to respond appropriately to emotional or physical threats to the organism, whether actual or imagined. It includes a state of alarm and adrenaline production, short-term resistance as a coping mechanism, and exhaustion. It refers to the inability of a human or animal body to respond. Common stress symptoms include irritability, muscular tension, inability to concentrate and a variety of physical reactions, such as headaches and accelerated heart rate."

[[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/stress_\(medicine\)](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/stress_(medicine)) (21 January 2009)]

An outline for group work

Biblical resources:

Matthew 11:28-30 and Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Study outline:

1. Read and consider the medical definition of stress given above.
 - What symptoms of stress do we recognise in our daily life?
Do we experience any other stress symptoms?
 - When do we experience these symptoms and what triggers them?
 - What strategies do we have for coping with the symptoms?

2. Read Matthew 11:28-30 and think about the implications of this passage.
Jesus promised his followers that he would 'give rest' to those with heavy burdens.
 - How might we find that sense of rest when we are experiencing stressful times?Jesus follows up his promise by suggesting that by seeking to learn from his example and take on the 'yoke' of discipleship, life will become easier. However for some Christians the demands put on them to take an active part in local church life, on top of work and family life, are the source of even more stress.
 - Is this what Jesus intended?
 - How can church leaders and fellow Christians help to ensure that does not happen?
3. Stress often results from feeling that we must juggle lots of different tasks and responsibilities. Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 and consider:
 - What are the conflicting demands that we try to balance and find a time for?
 - Re-read the passage but substitute 'a' in each of the verses 1-8 with 'there is ...'
To what extent is this change in emphasis helpful?
4. We often feel stressed because some aspects of our lives present immediate demands that must be fulfilled ('The boss wants me to work late...'), when we would rather be doing something else ('I want to be at home sharing a meal with the family...'). Resolving these dilemmas is usually presented as finding a 'work-life balance'. However, Jesus and the wise sage of Ecclesiastes point to something even more important than this. They are encouraging us to seek a rich, varied and, therefore, fulfilled life.

This kind of fulfilment will not be achieved by considering just one day, week or month at a time. It requires reflection over a much longer period. Sometimes fulfilment will be found at work. That is right and good. At other times we will find that time with the family, in study and learning, sport or at church will be what we need. The key is remembering that we need a variety of experiences to make life fulfilling, but not seek to undertake everything at the same time.

- What activities do we have to do? What things do we want to do? Are our answers to these questions ever the same?
- Is being too busy, the same as being stressed? Why?
- How might our faith, and being part of a Christian community, help us to discover the meaning of a rich and fulfilling life?

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