

4 STRESS AND RESILIENCE



PREPARATION

- Read Chapter 5 'Stress' in the book "God at Work"
- Watch the conversation starter: "Tackling Stress" at www.godatwork.org.uk/conversations
- Read the book "Resilience, live healthier and perform better" by Paul Donders

SESSION OBJECTIVE

- Learn to recognise stress
- Learn to recognise the effects of stress
- Learn to deal with stress
- Learn how a different way of thinking and living can help prevent stress

WELCOME

PRAYER

STATEMENT

In this hurried society, there should be more time to waste. We need time to lie fallow like we did in childhood, so we can recuperate and develop our creativity.

What are your thoughts on this statement? Do you recognise this in your own life?

Start a short discussion on this statement and ask two or three participants to briefly share their thoughts.

THE INTERACTIVE INTRODUCTION – PART 1

WHAT IS STRESS?

Share examples from your own life.

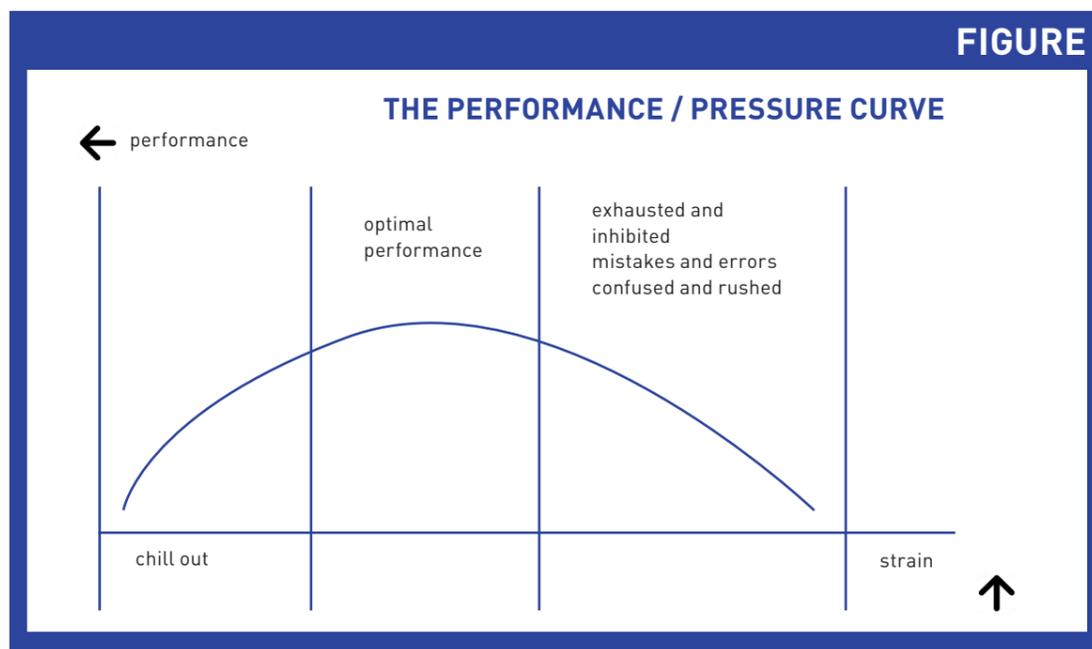
STRESS IN ALL SHAPES AND SIZES

Stress affects everyone. The mother who works weekend, night or day shifts knows what stress is. There are also relationships that cause stress, as a result of which some people bury themselves in their work. Many people are weighed down by stress. Stress has been called public enemy number one. More than one million people in our country suffer from symptoms of stress and their consequences. Before having a closer look at the effects of stress, it is good to remember that stress comes in all shapes and sizes.

There are certain types of stress that in themselves are good and that we need at certain times to be able to perform well.

- This type of stress is a positive form of pressure, needed at times to deliver and perform.

Deadlines can, for example. There are also certain professions that involve a lot of stress. Think of the work on the stock exchange or the organization of major events. Or the work of a manufacturer who keeps in touch daily with China to ensure that the clothes that are manufactured in China reach the Europe on time. This type of stress, or pressure, cannot be avoided in this type of work, and if you want to survive, you will need to find a way to deal with it.



However, stress can also be caused by imbalances in our lives. These imbalances arise when we try to do too much or when we are overwhelmed by work and worries. You try to combine your new role as a father with a busy job, the renovation of an old house, the grief of losing a loved one and the tasks involved in being a church group leader. And at the same time you might be feeling disappointed about a washed out holiday in France that you have just had.

- This type of stress is a negative form of pressure, generally caused by our lives being out of balance for long periods of time.

Stress is

‘The negative response to excessive pressure’ (Health & Safety Executive)

STRESS VERSUS PRESSURE

Stress is not necessarily the same as pressure. Many of us thrive under pressure but wilt under persistent stress.

Pressure comes from without, a challenge in the form of a project or a situation. It stimulates and makes the adrenaline flow so that we can accomplish more than first seems possible.

Stress comes from within; it is the pressure that we put on ourselves to meet unrealistic deadlines. This leads to frustration or even a sense of hopelessness at the enormity of the task.

While pressure motivates, stress drains and chokes us.

When we are faced with this type of stress, we will need to try to lessen the pressure by reducing the external work pressure or by dealing differently with it internally. In both cases, our faith can help. We will return to this point later. First, we look at the effects and symptoms of stress.

THE EFFECTS OF STRESS

Physical

In Europe, many are unable to work as a result of stress and too much tension. More than any other physical complaint, psychological problems have caused an increase in the number of people who now receive Incapacity Benefit and Income Support. Research has shown that stress at work puts the same strain on the heart as being 40 pounds overweight, and that prolonged bouts of tension have the same effect on blood pressure as ageing 30 years. Those who suffer from stress have trouble sleeping and often have sleepless nights worrying about their work.

Psychological

Stress produces a range of psychological side effects; most common is a lack of concentration over a sustained period of time. Others are beset by irrational fears or become aggressive towards their colleagues. When we are stressed, we often feel overwhelmed by our work, and feel guilty when we spend time doing things other than work.

Spiritual

Stress also affects our spiritual life. It destroys perspective, makes us self-absorbed and prevents us from seeing the wider perspective – spiritual short-sightedness. It strangles our relationships both with others and with God. In the 'Parable of the Sower', some seed grows fast, only to be choked by the thorns and weeds. Stress can feel like choking, especially within our relationships. It is interesting to see that a similar picture is described when the earth is cursed in Genesis 3 and humankind is forced to henceforth 'toil' the land. This spiritual aspect of stress affects us in the workplace, as well as in our private and family lives.

Economic

Stress causes economic damage beyond the costs of sick employees that cause premium increases. Employees who are stressed often perform poorly and below expectation. This leads to financial damage that is less measurable than healthcare costs and the like. The social costs (absenteeism, prolonged sick leave, medical consumerism) of psychological problems at work are extremely high in Europe.

POSSIBLE SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Share with the group any symptoms of stress that you have experienced.

Physical symptoms

- Headaches
- Stomach aches, stomach complaints, heartburn
- Shortness of breath or hyperventilation
- Sweaty and shaky hands
- Back complaints, neck and shoulder complaints
- Chronic fatigue, trouble getting up in the morning
- Heart palpitations

Changes in behaviour

- Increase of alcohol use
- Use of drugs
- Smoking more than usual
- Nail biting
- Excessive eating

- Poor appetite
- Lack or increase of sexual desire

Emotional changes

- More irritable
- Restlessness, lack of concentration
- Dreading work tasks, shifting and postponing appointments
- Less sociable, less communicative
- Angry, taking frustrations out on others
- Low-spirited, depressed

DENIAL OR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

When we are exposed to stress for too long this can lead to a burnout, from which most people only ever partly recover. And for this reason, it is important that we learn to deal with stress and prevent stress from leading to burnout. We can do this by:

- acknowledging the dangers in our own lives;
- not viewing stress as a sign of dedication and hard work.

Share examples of stressful situations that you have had to face in your own life.

EXERCISE 4.1

1. Do you recognise any of these stress signs?
2. Do you have any idea what is causing this stress? Your private life, work, family, relationships or something else?

Share together in the small groups after this introduction.

THE INTERACTIVE INTRODUCTION – PART 2

THREE WAYS TO DEAL WITH STRESS

1. Learn to deal with stress in everyday situations
2. Adopt a different way of thinking
3. Adopt a different lifestyle (will be discussed in the next session, in 'Life-Work Balance').

1. LEARN TO DEAL WITH STRESS IN EVERYDAY SITUATIONS

Share from your own life regarding each of these examples.

Practical tips from the Bible

Jesus was no stranger to stress. People had high expectations of Him and everyone tried to claim Him for themselves.

It is surprising to read how much stress Jesus experienced during His life and how He dealt with this. Think, for example, of the stressful encounter in His home town (Luke 4) where the people attempted to kill Him. Pick any day out of His life, say for example in Luke 8:22–56, and look at what happens: A storm on the lake, people possessed by evil spirits, people turning Him away, people waiting anxiously for Him with high expectations, then on the road again to raise a child from the dead. What a schedule! And what about the stress that He faced shortly before His death. There is a moment when mortal terror overcomes Him and it takes a visit from an angel to restore His strength (Luke 22:43–44).

These examples can give us strength: They show us that we are not alone, and that there is Someone arguing our case, and that this Someone has faced the same trials that we face. Because of this, Jesus is able to sympathise with us in these moments (Hebrews 2:17–18; 9:24).

Share from your own life regarding one or more of these points.

- Keep reading and praying (Psalms 1 and 119; Philippians 4:6–7; 2 Timothy 3:15–17)

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6–7)

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17)

This seems so logical, but it is the most important of all strategies. Worship should be our weapon of first resort, because it lifts us up to that higher, eternal perspective. When we are in the middle of a situation, we can easily lose perspective. Once we emerge above our circumstances we can suddenly see the full perspective of the situation that we find ourselves in.

Paul urges us to pray at all times (Philippians 4:6) and mentions the importance of knowing the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:15–17).

The original Greek word for 'petition' in Philippians 4:6–7 is related to 'making desires known'. It is as if Paul is saying here 'translate your worries into desires and bring these to God'. Desires give room and possibilities, but worries cripple us.

- Take an emotional break (John 6:15; Luke 4:30)

Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make Him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by Himself. (John 6:15)

Use your breaks well, by sending a non-work related email, encouraging people that you meet or deciding not to discuss work with your partner or friends, for example. Worshiping God together can be a wonderful way to take an emotional break during hectic periods. During His time here, Jesus often withdrew for a mini break.

- Take control of your thoughts (Philippians 4:8–9; Romans 12:2)

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:8–9)

When we find ourselves in stressful situations, it is important that we focus on what is good, noble, true, pure, etc. This helps to draw our thoughts away from the negative spiral into which we so easily fall when we are stressed. As Christians we are called to transform ourselves through our thinking.

- Search for joy (Philippians 4:4–7; 1 Thessalonians 5:16)

Rejoice always (1 Thessalonians 5:16)

More concretely this means taking time during a busy day to notice the birds, a mother or father hugging their child or a happy couple sitting across from you in the train. This determines our values, values that endure beyond the day-to-day stress.

Taking fun and joy seriously helps us rise above our situation. A healthy degree of humour also often helps to put things into perspective.

- Deal with stress in the opposite spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:15–24; Galatians 5:13–25; 1 Corinthians 4:11–13)

To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment. (1 Corinthians 4:11–13)

This is the spiritual equivalent of counting to 10. When colleagues trash our work, we should not snap back but instead commend them on their work. We read in 1 Corinthians 4:12–13 that Paul successfully ministered time and again in the opposite spirit.

- Fight fear (Psalm 34:5; Psalm 112:6–8; John 14:27; 1 John 4:17–19)

Surely the righteous will never be shaken; they will be remembered forever. They will have no fear of bad news; their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the Lord. Their hearts are secure, they will have no fear; in the end they will look in triumph on their foes. (Psalm 112:6–8)

In times of stress, it is easy to lose control of our lives. Fear will rise, as we read in Job 21:6:

When I think about this, I am terrified; trembling seizes my body.

But in Psalm 34:5 we read:

Those who look to Him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.

Whenever fear threatens to cripple us, we can take this fear to God, and He will give us peace through His Holy Spirit.

- Walk away from the stress
We need not always be crippled by the pressures at work. We can also confront this pressure, not by working harder, but by taking time out, so that we can break the hold that the pressure has on us.

For example, take a break during a meeting when tension and stress start to rise; ask for a time-out. Take breaks during days when deadlines are due. Remember that if you use your breaks well, you will be much more efficient and the pressure will subside.

When Jesus preached in Galilee, He was praised by those around Him. But when He went to Nazareth, the place where He grew up, and read from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue, the crowd turned against Him and tried to kill Him (Luke 4). There was enormous pressure and stress. But, we are told that He walked through the midst of the crowd and went on His way. We can do what Jesus did: We can learn not to always give in to the demands at our workplace, but at times to also make our own choices.

- Stay healthy
Get enough exercise, eat and rest well. Make sure that you have someone who motivates you or exercise together with a colleague or friend, especially at times when stress is high. 1 Corinthians 6:19 tells us that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit – and so need to be looked after.

2. THINKING DIFFERENTLY: FROM GOD'S PERSPECTIVE

Share from your own life regarding one or more of these examples

- Live in God's peace
Remember that you are a child of God, unique and loved, and that our Father in heaven was willing to sacrifice everything for you, even His son. Live with that thought and that love in mind.

He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:32)

- Keep your focus on God's perspective
Learn to think and to view things as God sees them. He has very different

priorities than we human beings. Know that God is the Lord and that He does not lose control. Relax and know that God needs nothing, but rather it is He who is the creator of everything and who has given us all that we have.

And He is not served by human hands, as if He needed anything. Rather, He Himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. (Acts 17:25)

- Rely on the promises that God has given us
Through their faith in God, the heroes of faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice and gained what was promised them (Hebrews 11:33–40). They can serve as examples to us.

- Be contented with the task that you have been given
Live with gratitude in your heart and put your God-given skills to use. If you reach for more than what you have been given, you will always be longing for the unattainable and this creates stress. Do not think that you have been put here to save the whole world, but rather focus on the task that you have been given. You can discover this task by discovering your gifts, character and competencies. Your calling will always be in line with these, but will also have its limits.

I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement. (Romans 12:3)

- Develop a mentality of gratitude and abundance
Develop a mentality of gratitude and abundance, rather than one of lack, which is an attitude that says there is never enough, that God is not enough or not interested in our problems. An attitude of gratitude and abundance, on the other hand, determines what we get each day, often without asking for it and gives a certainty that knowing God gives life substance – even if we may not always experience it in this way.

[A]nd your heavenly Father knows [what you need]. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. (Matthew 6:32–33)

- Look for space where you can develop this mentality
Pray, read the Bible and meet together with other Christians. Some people struggle to find the time to spend with God. For some this means reading from the Bible in the morning and chewing on this piece of text during the day, and they pray when they get a moment while walking, driving or taking a break. For many, their car is their quiet chapel.

Admiral Nelson studied and recorded the weather twice a day, all his life. Because of this, he knew three days before the battle of Trafalgar that a storm was about to break. And the storm came, and he won the battle, despite being vastly outnumbered. Reading the Bible daily may seem boring, but when stress creeps up on us unexpectedly, we can draw from what we gain from a daily routine of Bible reading.

- Lay the future in God's hands
Many people testify of God's powerful deeds in their lives in the past, but think that they are on their own when it comes to the future, and this grips them with fear.

Why do we bear witness to God's presence and deeds in our lives from the past, but do not count on His presence in our futures?

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. (Jeremiah 29:11)

- If you are lonely, open your heart
Share your experiences and dilemmas with wise people around you.

The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, turning a person from the snares of death. (Proverbs 13:14)

We see openness about our vulnerability as something to be ashamed about, but there is only one who benefits from your silence, your fear and your loneliness – and that is satan. Open your heart to a group of wise people who can help you.

