

## The Benefits of Healthy Stress for Leaders

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Stress is a dirty word for many of us. We find ourselves overcommitted or in over our head and our stress levels seem overwhelming so we worry, loose sleep, are irritable, shut down, get depressed, make poor decisions, etc. The other extreme is boredom where we are under-stimulated, waste time, get too much sleep, are irritable, shut down, get depressed, and make poor decisions, etc.. Too much stress and not enough stress are two sides of the same unhealthy coin!

Healthy stress on the other hand can be very positive. The Mayo Clinic website states that, “Stress is a normal psychological and physical reaction to the demands of life. A small amount of stress can be good, motivating you to perform well.”

Another online source defines healthy stress as “eustress” and describes it as the,

“positively affect our activities, it is a type of short-term stress that increases our primary strength. Eustress is affecting us at times of creativity, physical activity or excitement and acts as a support for our motivation and inspiration. This positive stress helps individual in increased motivation and inspiration to finish certain project or creative thinking when completing a task.

As we have seen by now not all types of stress have negative effects, actually eustress is quite opposite and affects us in a good way. Vast number of negative feelings like pain, suffering, anger or anxiety are linked and associate with negative distress that is why stress usually has negative meaning. That is why positive effects of stress are commonly neglected and unnoticed though it helps us greatly in inspiration and motivation when completing our tasks.

Positive stress is also an excellent way of initiating the invention and problem solving process by providing more creative solutions. It helps us to overcome the problems when we need to adjust to the stressful changes in our life. Many solutions and finished tasks were achieved when person was positively stressed. Positive stress helps individuals to change their daily routine, respond to threatening situations, change of lifestyle, employment or moving to other residence. Actually the positive stress is something that is good, productive and effective when confronted with certain challenge. (My Stress Management website, “eustress – the positive side of stress”)

Here are some strategies that I have learned over the years to manage my “unhealthy” stress while maximizing my “eustress”:

1. **Spiritual disciplines** – establishing and maintaining a healthy lifestyle that includes prayer, Bible study, meditation (and other spiritual disciplines) is the

foundation for spiritual, mental, emotional, physical, and social health. Richard Foster calls the classical spiritual disciplines, “disciplines of grace” (p. 7-8, *The Celebration of Discipline*). They are access points to a life giving and changing relationship of intimacy with God.

2. **Sovereign perspective** – growing to trust that God is loving, long-suffering, and keeps his promises (his way and in his time) regardless of life’s circumstances. Bobby Clinton calls this a “sovereign mindset” and says, “leaders ought to see God’s hand in their circumstances as part of his plan to develop them” (p. 186, *The Making of a Leader*).
3. **People priority** – people are not the means to an end they are the end. Jesus came to serve, not be served (Matthew 20:28, Mark 10:45, John 13:1-17). During one of my times of personal reflection and evaluation I sensed God revealing to me “that the only thing I will take with me into eternity is the quality of my relationships!” People matter to God and they should matter to us.
4. **Healthy eating/exercise** – this become more and more important as you grow older, but habits tend to be developed while you are young (and they become more difficult to change as you grow older). I have a very high metabolism so did not think much about weight or exercise until I got into my fifties. Changing my eating habits and making time for regular exercise has been a challenge but I want to maximize my health as I age.
5. **Healthy margins** – packing your schedule too tight can lead to all sorts of conflicts and ineffectiveness. In our amped culture, we tend to think that harder work and longer hours is the key to effectiveness. Not so! Jesus was pressed by many needs, opportunities, and challenges but he allowed these potential “stressors” to focus him on “the father’s business” (Luke 2:49; John 5:19, 6:38). I have learned over the years to build margins in my daily schedule so that I am able to give people my full attention and pace myself so that I maximize my time for kingdom purposes.
6. **Regular evaluation/accountability** – doing the same thing over-and-over again expecting different results is the definition of insanity (Einstein). This pattern might not be insanity but it is certainly ineffective in terms of personal growth and effectiveness. I have learned over the years to build into my schedule regular (quarterly and year end) times of prayerful and honest evaluation of my character, competencies, and calling. I also have a small group of trusted folks who I meet with regularly for accountability. Regular evaluation and accountability can help us from making the same mistakes over-and-over again and may help us from making some really bad decisions.

**7. Intentionality/focus** – knowing your purpose in life and being intentional about working toward maximizing purpose can be a fulfilling and fruitful way to live and lead well. Bobby Clinton identifies four focal points of a healthy focused life: 1. Unique purpose, 2. Unique role, 3. Unique methodologies, and 4. Ultimate contributions (p. 219, *The Making of a Leader*). Discovering these focal points is a process over time that can be enhanced through life mapping (Time-Line), identifying life and leadership lessons, identifying your gift mix (spiritual gifts, natural abilities, and acquired skills), and working with a leadership development coach who has personally worked on discovering his/her focal points and become intentional about humbly fulfilling their God given destiny.