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STRESS MANAGEMENT

Chronic and unrelieved stress, when not recognized (which typically is the case), can have serious physical, emotional, and spiritual consequences. Such physical ailments as high blood pressure, ulcers, heart disease, some cancers and many other illnesses, are commonly regarded today as stress-related. Spiritually, the toll can include difficulties with prayer and the loss of confidence, motivation, joy, enthusiasm and peace.

Some may wonder whether taking more time to care for one's physical and emotional health might just be a new form of self-centred love. If it were done for selfish reasons, that would be so. But if we take time for our health so that we might extend our life for the Lord's service, or bring greater energy and enthusiasm to our service of others, or bring greater patience and joy to our work with people, or just to be easier to live with, then that time is well spent. There has to be time in our life for recreation, for culture, for expansion, for retreat and reflection.

What is stress? It is the non-specific response of the body to any demand made on it. Stress is unavoidable. It is of two kinds: (1) good healthy stress; (2) negative unhealthy distress.

Healthy stress is the stress of functioning well. It comes with a sense of achievement, triumph, winning, exhilaration. Distress is the stress of not functioning properly or of losing. It occurs when one senses a loss of feelings of security, competence and adequacy. Disappointment, helplessness and desperation can trigger distress. From here on, we will talk only about stress in the negative sense of distress.

Persons under stress are characterized by "too much" in their lives, even too much of a good thing. Typically, the person under great stress has too many deadlines, tries to do too many things at once, can be highly disturbed by delays and generally is characterized by an endless succession of "should, must, ought" and "have to" in life.

Persons who suffer extreme stress lose motivation in their work. They typically experience chronic fatigue, mild depression, boredom, and inner dissatisfaction with their occupation, with themselves, and with life in general. Outwardly, they often show signs of irritability and rigidity that were not characteristic of them before. Unlike those experiencing physical or nervous breakdown, those suffering "burn-out" generally work harder, not less. They tend to take on more duties but seem to accomplish less. The work they once did with joy has become a burden. Zeal and motivation have given way to compulsion. Because of this, they begin to feel guilty.

The matter becomes even more serious when such persons tend to distance themselves from those who might support them. They also tend to change jobs, careers, or even vocations. They break away from commitments.

General Environment

The world today is different from the one of even ten years ago. The Church, too, is significantly different. Every believer within the Church finds his or her life affected. Yesterday's stable world, which Catholics sometimes recall nostalgically, is now gone. Catholics seemed to have more answers then. They knew where they stood and what they stood for. Their leadership was strong, clear, distant, and male. There was a sense of being

unique and always right. Today, Catholic life seems muddled, more tentative, more confused. In many ways, questions have replaced answers; clear and simple commands have given way to process; sole authority has yielded to consultation and dialogue and rule by committee such as a parish council. Such environmental changes take their toll on the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of all the faithful, and in a distinct way, of parents.

The degree of stress experienced by an individual as a result of environmental factors varies considerably from person to person. It is thoroughly subjective and unpredictable. What becomes stressful for one is routine for another. The difference is found in the attitude or perception of the individual. An individual's own perception of the environment determines whether his or her environment actually causes stress or not.

Stress results from three factors in connection with our general environment: (1) the environment itself - the way things are; (2) my perception or evaluation of the environment - what I think about it; (3) the emotional and physiological arousal that results - what I feel about it.

The individual's interpretation of the environment plays an essential role in his or her experience of stress. So, what I think or believe is happening affects my stress response.

Events themselves are neutral, and become stressful only when we perceive or evaluate them in a negative way. For a stress response to occur, I must become aware of an environmental situation or demand that calls into question my ability to cope successfully and painlessly.

The expectation of trouble actually brings about the psychological and physiological response in the person. My belief that negative consequences will follow from events actually causes stress. We create stress for ourselves, by thinking and behaving in ways that lead to worry, tension and physical disease. We can diminish the affects of stress by dealing with it on three levels.

First, try to alter the environment to avoid or prevent situations that may lead to stress. In most cases, it is not possible to alter the general environment in which we live and work. The Serenity Prayer has great value here: "Lord, grant me the peace of mind to accept the things I cannot change; grant me the courage to change the things I can; and grant me the wisdom to tell the difference."

Second, try to reduce your painful and destructive emotional and physiological responses, through prayer and meditation, physical exercise, medical help, or other means.

Third, try to alter your way of viewing or evaluating disturbing circumstances. This is sometimes called "re-labeling." Accentuate the positive.

A constructive response, then, to the stress caused by events, situations and circumstances in the general environment involves the third level of re-labeling especially.

Generally, we cannot alter much the society in which we live. But we can alter our evaluation of that society or our relationship to it. We can come to realize more deeply God's ultimate providential influence over it.

The fact that this same modern world causes much less stress for some people than for others, who are also committed Christians and Catholics, indicates that another vision is possible.

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**Regional Assistants are requested to distribute this Monthly Message
to all local Assistants of our Order in the Regional Fraternity.**