

## A Key for Living Well with Multiple Stressors

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I originally wrote this in the fall of 2008 when we had been living with a number of stressors in our communities: hurricane alerts and news of the storm-related suffering in Haiti and Texas, reports of other dangers of climate change and environmental pollution, the impacts of ongoing wars, and scary economic events involving basics like food, fuel, housing, and the banking and credit system. In these last three years we have continued to be impacted by many of those challenges. We also continue to experience in our parish and immediate families the stressors of major illnesses and deaths, separations and divorces, addictions, job losses and changes, the pressures of pop and peer cultures on our children, and other troubling life transitions.

For many of us these stressors accumulate on top of a load of unresolved traumas and suffering from earlier in our lives. Different people have different carrying capacities: some seem able to manage a huge reservoir of built-up stress, others are overwhelmed with only a few stressors. Everyone may at times, with a big enough load, experience a kind of "spill-over" into symptoms of anxiety or depression or excessive anger.

***Extending compassion to ourselves and to each other, following the model of Jesus, is one of the most valuable keys to living well with multiple stressors.***

**There are also some specific practices we can cultivate which will help to prevent or lessen stress-overload:**

### **I) Prayer/meditation:**

- a) If you have a regular prayer discipline, continue it or get back to it as soon as possible.
- b) If you don't have a regular rhythm of prayer, experiment with this one:
  - 1) Start each morning with your version of this prayer:  
"Loving God, thank you for this new day, help me live One Day at a Time, drawing upon your strength, love, and peace. Help me to follow your guidance in all I think and do today."
  - 2) One to two times a day take a prayer break: for 10-20 minutes sit in a quiet place, close your eyes, and follow your breathing.

As you breathe out, breathe out all anxiety, worries, fatigue, etc into God's care; as you breathe in, breathe in whatever you need from God (peace, strength, love, light, calm, patience, wisdom, etc.).

Or simply breathe deeply and slowly and let go. *Be Here Now*. When distractions come (and they will) gently let them go into God's care, and breathe in God's love.

Frequently throughout the day practice that mindful breathing for a few moments at a time.

- 3) Before sleep, breathe out all the struggles and worries of the day into God's care; breathe in the gifts of the day with gratitude.
- 4) For more prayer and relaxation practices: Key for Living -- September 2010: "Moving from Stress to Relaxation", [http://www.stpaulstpete.com/keys\\_for\\_living.html](http://www.stpaulstpete.com/keys_for_living.html)
- 5) When you are ready for a regular practice of contemplative prayer, explore Centering Prayer: <http://www.centeringprayertampabay.com/>

## II) Dealing with reports of pain and suffering:

- a) Limit exposure to news reports, especially to visual images. Choose a source of news which includes a faith response, such as [www.sojo.net](http://www.sojo.net).
- b) When you are taking in news reports (e.g. of natural disasters, environmental destruction, war, economic recession, homelessness, etc), pray for all who are involved, seeing them surrounded by God's light and love. If God nudges you to take a specific action (e.g. making a donation, offering other concrete help, participating in a prayer vigil or Partners with Haiti event, or working in a community garden or at Pinellas Hope), take that action, then "let go and let God".
- c) Intentionally seek out news/stories/personal encounters which help you to cultivate "an attitude of gratitude". Remember that our faith assures us that while half of life is suffering and dying, the other half of life is resurrection and new life. For some resources: <http://www.gratefulness.org/>

## III) Exercise and Nature:

- a) If you have a regular exercise program get back to it as soon as possible.
- b) If you don't have a regular program, start with walking 10 minutes a day and doing some gentle stretching (yoga or Classical Stretch on PBS-TV or just simple movement). Build up a bit more each day. For guidance see The Harvard School of Public Health's web-site <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/staying-active/> "A 30-minute brisk walk on five days of the week is all most people need. And getting any amount of exercise is better than none."
- c) Get out into the sun for 10-15 minutes a day (if you normally are inside for work or school) to help lift your mood. Reconnecting with God's Creation is restorative. Re-create outdoors regularly (walk, garden, bike, or just sit and breathe!). Growing some of your own food enhances fitness, nutrition and sun exposure at the same time! If getting outdoors regularly is difficult, take time to be with pets and plants.

#### **IV) Nutrition:**

- a) If you usually have a healthy plan of nutrition, get back to it today.
- b) If you don't have a healthy plan of nutrition, start by cutting back on sugar, salt, meat, and fats. Add vegetables, fruits, beans and whole grains, preferably organic, and a multi-vitamin/mineral supplement. Drink lots of water (not bottled; carry your travel mug and thermos with you). Limit intake of alcoholic beverages. For specific guidance see The Harvard School of Public Health web-site: <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/index.html>

#### **V) Rest:**

- a) Get back to your regular sleep schedule as soon as possible; in the meantime when sleeping through the night is difficult because of stress overload, naps of 30-45 minutes can sometimes be helpful.
- b) As soon as you are able, cultivate a regular sleep schedule. Check into web-sites which offer guidance for good sleep hygiene. The University of Maryland Medical Center offers help at [http://www.umm.edu/sleep/sleep\\_hyg.htm](http://www.umm.edu/sleep/sleep_hyg.htm)

#### **VI) Social connections:**

- a) Reach out to connect/re-connect with family, friends, church groups. Make time to hang out together, play, pray, and relax even if only for short periods of time.
- b) Volunteering to assist others has also been found to help lift folks out of depression and anxiety. (Makes sense, since we were created to give and receive love!!)

#### **VII) Schedules:**

Make your To Do lists realistic; take it One Day at A Time, scheduling only the truly essentials until stress levels decrease some. Celebrate the little accomplishments of each day.

#### **VIII) Professional help:**

If you find it difficult to develop the practices listed above, consider seeking some professional help. It may be wise to schedule an appointment with your physician for a physical exam. You might also read the Counseling Ministry home page (<http://www.stpaulstpete.com/counseling.html> ) and consider calling me to discuss how Christian counseling/psychotherapy might be helpful to you.

### **Additional Reflections, as of September 2011**

Because of the many stressors we live with daily (individual, family, neighborhood, environmental, economic), most of us live much of the time in a state of fight/flight/freeze. Depending on our individual make-up, we may experience our reactivity primarily as anger, or as anxiety, or as depression.

We need to practice moving from “first consciousness” to “second consciousness” (as Terry Real calls it in Relational Life Therapy) in order to develop a lifestyle of peaceful presence. As we learn to consent to God's presence and action, moment by moment, here and now, we are empowered to live the 2 great commandments of loving God and loving our neighbor as our self.

### **3 different ways of describing “first consciousness”:**

- a) reactivity from the reptilian brain (brain stem) and mammalian brain (limbic system), which generate fight-flight-freeze responses when sensing threat and which tend to "high-jack" the thinking brain (cortex, especially middle pre-frontal cortex); "flipping your lid".
- b) partial aspects of your whole self, like the child part, the critical parent part, a part that tightens your shoulders, or raises your voice.
- c) your "false-self system", reactivity triggered by your early programming to cling excessively to desires for survival/security, esteem/affection, and power/control. (terms from Centering Prayer teaching).

### **3 corresponding ways of describing "second consciousness":**

- a) accessing your whole brain, especially middle pre-frontal cortex, which helps to integrate the whole brain-body-relational system; helps us to pause to reflect on options for response; helps us calm our fear reaction; helps us access empathy, insight and intuition; and enhances our consciousness of connection and our desire to seek the higher social good, to love others as our self (from Dan Siegel, M.D.'s work on interpersonal neurobiology; see his hand-model of the brain: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DD-lfP1FBFk>).
- b) "Self-in-Presence" (a term from Ann Weiser Cornell's Inner Relationship Focusing), your larger Self, which can offer compassionate witnessing and listening to your inner parts. From this Presence, especially in awareness of God's Presence, you will be able to offer compassionate witnessing and listening to other people.
- c) your heart, your “God Positioning System” (term from Cynthia Bourgeault in *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*), which "keeps the outer part of you aligned with that deeper center: your yearning for God and God's for you", yearning to live in love.

### **A Beginning Practice:**

**1) Practice body scan to identify body signals of early escalation.** Where are you experiencing inner bracing or tension? (e.g. stomach tightening, shoulders lifting, voice tone rising). Describe in writing those body signals. Then write your commitment to use calming strategies, whenever you notice any of those signals, before saying or doing anything.

**2) Practice basic breath prayer, as a first step toward calming.**

- “Stop, Breathe, Remember Love” or
- Breathe the tension out to God, breathe in God's peace. or
- Breathe God's compassion into the tension. or
- Trinity breath prayer, Breathe in on 3 counts (silently praying "Father" or "Creator"), hold for 3 counts ("Son" or "Redeemer"), and breathe out on 3 counts ("Holy Spirit" or "Sustainer").

