

Stress



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Kings 17:2–4, 15, 16; 19:1, 2; Mark 6:31–34; Gal. 6:2; John 15:13.*

Memory Text: “ ‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest’ ” (*Matthew 11:28, NIV*).

Stress touches everyone. Demands at work, family crises, guilt, uncertainty about the future, dissatisfaction with the past—these all are hard enough. All this, along with the general events of life, can put enough pressure on people that it affects their physical and mental health. Researchers Thomas H. Holmes and Richard H. Rahe developed the social readjustment rating scale, which lists life events with corresponding stress values for each: the death of spouse—100; personal injury or illness—53; change in residence—20; etc. A person accumulating 200 or more points at any given time runs a 50 percent chance of becoming ill; someone accruing 300 or more will reach a point of crisis. Moderate amounts of stress are necessary to increase performance, but beyond a point, stress becomes a health hazard.

Jesus shows by precept and example that seeking God at a quiet time and place is the best remedy for life's stresses (*Mark 6:31*). If we will allow Him, the Lord will help us deal with the pressures that are such an inevitable part of life here.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 15.*

Exciting Life Events

How did God provide for Elijah’s survival during the long drought in Israel? *1 Kings 17:2–6, 15, 16.*

In the midst of a long famine, Elijah must have felt very close to the Lord, who took such personal care of him. First, he had the opportunity to witness ravens come twice a day to feed him. Talk about a miracle! Then he saw endless rations of bread coming from a little oil and meal—enough food to feed three persons for two years. How much more evidence of God’s providential care would anyone need?

Ellen G. White applied the lessons of this story to God’s faithful people in the last days: “I saw that our bread and water will be sure at that time, and that we shall not lack or suffer hunger; for God is able to spread a table for us in the wilderness. If necessary He would send ravens to feed us, as He did to feed Elijah.”—*Early Writings*, p. 56.

What were some of the other things that happened to Elijah, and what lessons can we draw from them for ourselves? *1 Kings 17:17–22; 18:23–39, 45.*

God used Elijah to resurrect the widow’s son. What a test of faith, and what a vindication of God’s power over life and death! Next, the test at Mount Carmel was an irrefutable and spectacular demonstration of God’s power. Finally, heavy rain after a three-year drought was another manifestation of God’s involvement in human affairs. Elijah’s life was full of direct and divine intervention. It’s hard to imagine how anyone, after all that, could not fully trust in the Lord; yet, not long after all that, Elijah was swept up in the symptoms of stress and discouragement (see tomorrow’s lesson).

Thus, there’s an important lesson here. Regardless of the miracles in our lives, we always will face obstacles. No one, not even a prophet like Elijah, is immune to the troubles that life brings.

Are success and achievement bringing you stress? A long series of exhilarating events (even positive ones) may add much weight to your load. At the same time, why must we be careful not to be too self-satisfied during good times?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Matthew 11:28*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Outline both good and bad stressors and describe methods of handling these stressors as part of a balanced lifestyle.

Feel: Foster God-centered approaches to dealing with stressful circumstances.

Do: Practice a healthy lifestyle that includes service-centered activities that can help relieve stress.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Ups and Downs of Stress

A Stress can come from exciting, as well as troubling, circumstances and has both positive and negative effects on us. What kinds of situations result in stress that actually can be helpful? What kinds of situations result in damaging stress?

B What can we learn from how Jesus managed stress in His life?

II. Feel: God-Centered Stress Management

A What negative emotions add stress to our lives?

B Secular behavior management specialists offer many useful ideas for handling stress. What is different about a Christian attitude and approach toward stress management?

C How does a relationship with God reduce stress levels that we might otherwise experience?

III. Do: Balance and Service

A What daily lifestyle activities can help us live a balanced life and strengthen our resilience to damaging stress?

B How can an orientation toward the needs of others help us not to stress?

C How can we implement Christ's methods of stress management in our daily lives this week?

► **Summary:** Christ was service-oriented, but He also recognized that rest and time apart in communion with His Father were important for a balanced lifestyle and healthy stress management.

Bitter Life Events

Read 1 Kings 18:40. Whether or not Elijah took part himself in the killing of hundreds of people, he was clearly in charge of the operation, and that must have been an emotionally devastating experience. This act was permitted by God as the only way to eradicate the idolatry, which included the sacrifice of children (*Jer. 19:5*). Nevertheless, it surely must have taken an emotional toll on the prophet.

On top of the stress of that ordeal, what else did Elijah face? *1 Kings 19:1, 2.*

From the beginning of Ahab's reign, the wicked queen had been adamant that her husband should "serve Baal and worship him" (*1 Kings 16:31, NIV*). As a result, all of Israel had fallen into idolatrous practices. Jezebel was instrumental in restoring the worship of Ashtoreth, one of the vilest and most degrading forms of Canaanite idolatry. Now, with the death of all the priests, Jezebel felt impatient and enraged.

How did Elijah react to the message brought from Jezebel? *1 Kings 19:3, 4.*

How could this man of God, after having witnessed a series of wonderful miracles, be in such a state of despair? How did he reach the point of asking God to take his life? After all, look at the miracles he had seen and even had been involved in!

"Satan has taken advantage of the weakness of humanity. And he will still work in the same way. Whenever one is encompassed with clouds, perplexed by circumstances, or afflicted by poverty or distress, Satan is at hand to tempt and annoy. He attacks our weak points of character. He seeks to shake our confidence in God, who suffers such a condition of things to exist."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 120.

How often have you done the same thing: forgotten the incredible way the Lord has worked for you in the past? Why is it so important, especially during times of despair and stress, to cling to the memories of how God has worked in your life in the past? Why do we so easily forget what the Lord has done for us? How can praise and worship help you through difficult times?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: A healthy, balanced lifestyle, one that is prayer and service oriented, can make us more resilient to the wear and tear of stress.

Just for Teachers: The following activity not only introduces and explores de-stressors, but its potential for humor can help draw the class together.

Opening Activity: Ask each class member to pantomime what they like to do to wind down after a stressful day. Take a little time to enjoy the responses, and discuss the joy of playing and laughing together as a de-stressor. List these suggestions on a chalkboard and note differences between personality types and gender: some people like to be alone, some appreciate company and talk in order to de-stress. Some like to exercise, and some like to sleep or work on a hobby.

Consider This: Some ways of dealing with stress may be damaging; for example, it has been jokingly pointed out that STRESSED spelled backwards is DESSERTS. However, if we eat as a way of dealing with stress, we may become overweight, which is associated with numerous other health concerns. What are other problem methods of dealing with stress?

We all face stress. Some stress may stem from exciting and fun events, and some may be the result of high demands, too much change, or trauma. Too much stress, from any source, is wearing on our vital forces. However, God has provided many ways of helping us cope with the wear and tear of life.

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. The Stress of an Exciting Life (*Review 1 Kings 17, 18 with your class.*)

The events of Elijah's life are a study in contrasts. The prophet appears abruptly from a secluded life in the mountains of Gilead and stands before Ahab as a valiant warrior for God, declaring God's judgment on idolatrous Israel. He disappears just as quickly from the court of the wicked

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God's Therapy

Read 1 Kings 19:5–9. What were the simple remedies provided for Elijah during this stressful time in his life? What can we take from this for ourselves? How are our physical actions impacting, either for good or for bad, our mental attitude?

Sleep. Eat. Sleep again. Eat again. And then engage in intense physical exercise—forty days and forty nights; from Mount Carmel to Mount Horeb. How interesting that proper sleep, exercise, and a healthy diet often are prescribed to combat psychological stress.

A common treatment for mood disorders is called activity scheduling. It consists of developing a rigid timetable that contains pleasant and purposeful activities that will force a depressed person to organize, anticipate, and carry out events. Such a regimen helps the person fill time positively and avoid self-pity. Physical exercise often is included in the activities, because it helps produce endorphins, morphine-like natural chemicals that enhance mood and temporarily relieve depression.

With heavenly guidance Elijah was led into the steps that would restore his normal mental health. As with Elijah, we need to be open to divine leading. As soon as Elijah sat down under the broom tree, he prayed. Yes, it was the wrong kind of prayer (asking God to take his life), but at least it was a prayer, a desire for God to take charge.

Over time Elijah overcame his terrible discouragement, and God still was able to use him (*see 1 Kings 19:15, 16; 2 Kings 2:7–11*). Before being taken up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah was given the great privilege of anointing his successor and of witnessing the separation of the waters of the Jordan River, thus permitting him and Elisha to cross the river on dry ground.

Finally, Elijah was taken to heaven, without ever having to die himself. Kind of an ironic “end” for a man who, not too much earlier, was asking God to take his life!

What are we missing out on if we pray only in times of discouragement and despair? Contrast the benefits of a life of constant prayer as opposed to prayer only in emergency situations. How can you learn to live more consistently in an attitude of constant prayer?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

king to take up residence beside a quiet stream in the wilderness, where God feeds him twice a day by sending ravens. When the stream dries up, Elijah visits a widow in a foreign land and stays with her and her son. All three of them eat from a miraculous daily provision of oil and flour until God calls Elijah to face Ahab again.

Consider This: There is much to be said about the benefits of living a quiet life in the country. Which other great workers of God rose to public service from simple, rural backgrounds? (See *1 Samuel 16*, *Genesis 37*, *Luke 1:80*.) What are the benefits of living close to nature as opposed to living with the frenetic pace of city life?

God's prophets were known by the coarse camel's hair garments they wore (*Zech. 13:4*). John the Baptist wore such a robe and also came from the desert, calling for repentance as Elijah had (*2 Kings 1:8*, *Mark 1:6*). There is something about the simple austerity of a life spent in communion with God, in natural surroundings, that can help to make the things of God crystal clear and gives power and clarity to the communication that God imparts to the heart. Elijah and John the Baptist and other prophets of God were fearless in delivering these messages to God's people.

■ *Though the king was in active pursuit to kill him, Elijah survived during the three years of famine on the daily providence of God. What effect did these special circumstances have on Elijah's and the widow's faith? Why did God honor this foreign woman in such a way? (Luke 4:2–26).*

II. The Stresses of Life's Trials (Review *1 Kings 19* with your class.)

From a quiet, private life, Elijah becomes a major public figure. For the past three years, he has been in seclusion, hiding from Ahab. Now he calls all Israel to the top of Mount Carmel and stages a dramatic showdown between God and Baal. God responds by sending fire from heaven and then a dramatic storm. The day closes with Elijah tucking up his robe and running down the mountain before Ahab's chariot in a torrential downpour, in the dark. This is pretty heady stuff for a country prophet from Gilead.

Unfortunately, Elijah was not done running. In less than 24 hours, Elijah went from the peak of the Mount Carmel experience to running for his life from an enraged queen who was bent on vengeance. He fell into a depression so deep that he prayed for death. Instead of scolding him for his lack of faith, however, God fed Elijah through special

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Jesus' Method to Manage Stress

With the blossoming of cell phones in the mid-1990s, a veteran Adventist minister said, "I will never have one! As I visit churches and listen to people's problems, I get weary and distressed. But when I return to my car, I find refuge. If I had a cell phone, I wouldn't find rest even in my car." Every follower of Christ needs a quiet hiding place to find calm, to pray, and to listen to God through His Written Word.

Read Mark 6:31. What lesson can we take from this for ourselves? How often do you do this for yourself, or do you always have an excuse?

Speaking of Jesus, Ellen G. White wrote: "His hours of happiness were found when alone with nature and with God. Whenever it was His privilege, He turned aside from the scene of His labor, to go into the fields, to meditate in the green valleys, to hold communion with God on the mountainside or amid the trees of the forest. The early morning often found Him in some secluded place, meditating, searching the Scriptures, or in prayer. From these quiet hours He would return to His home to take up His duties again, and to give an example of patient toil."—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 90.

What other sanctuary did Jesus have? *Matt. 21:17, Mark 11:11.*

People may be a source either of distress or of peace. Jesus found peace with friends who brought comfort and affection to His life. This He found at the house of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. "His heart was knit by a strong bond of affection to the family at Bethany. . . . Often, when weary, thirsting for human fellowship, He had been glad to escape to this peaceful household. . . . Our Saviour appreciated a quiet home and interested listeners. He longed for human tenderness, courtesy, and affection."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 524.

How can you apply Jesus' stress management method to your life? What advice would you give to a city dweller who needs to travel for hours to find nature? Or to someone who lives in an extended family with a large number of people under the same roof? To whom would you go, among your family/friends, if you found yourself disoriented and in need of emotional support?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

circumstances yet again. He gave Elijah rest and then sustained him as he traveled deep into the Sinai desert.

Consider This: What is evident from Elijah’s story about God’s care for our physical needs during times of stress? How can this reminder reduce stress in our lives? (*See Matthew 6:25–34.*)

Though God hadn’t sent him there, He graciously met Elijah on the mountain where Moses met with God many years before. There, God renewed his faith with a reminder that God’s work most often is done through the quiet work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. As God revealed Himself to his prophet in a still, small voice, “The high-strung, impetuous prophet became meek and submissive, ready to listen to the voice of the Lord. ‘In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength’ (Isa. 30:15).”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, p. 825.

Fire from heaven and dramatic showdowns on the tops of mountains could do little to change sin-hardened hearts. That was done by the quiet work of the Spirit of God. It took the quiet surroundings of the wilderness and a time apart, communing with God with no other distractions, for Elijah to hear the Spirit’s quiet voice reminding him of this important lesson.

In times of stress, it is important to keep our priorities straight and spend time seeking and communing with God. That’s when He can remind us that it’s His work that is important, a work that is usually done in a quiet, unhurried way, in our hearts. Our main work is to cooperate with Him so we can then find “rest for [our] souls” (*Matt. 11:28–30, NIV*).

Consider This: How can success create stress? What other public figures have succumbed to temptations related to the power of leadership and achievement? (*See 1 Samuel 18 and 2 Samuel 11.*)

III. Jesus and Stress (*Review Mark 6:31 with your class.*)

On the surface, one might question why, out of 33 years of Jesus’ life on earth, would He spend only three-and-a-half years doing public ministry? One would think that during such a short time of service, Jesus would be pressed to get as much done as He could. However, even during the time He was pushed to meet public demands for His time, He spent many hours in private communion with His Father (*Luke 5:16, 6:12, 11:1; Mark 1:35*).

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Bringing Relief to Others

What are the specific features about Jesus' behavior that Peter used to describe his Master? *Acts 10:38*.

Jesus' style was fundamentally selfless. He utilized all His energy to serve others, to bring them relief through His kind words and healing power. Jesus never used His divine powers to benefit Himself. This must have made such an impression on Peter that his description of the Savior was of someone who “ ‘went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil’ ” (*vs. 38, NIV*).

In the majority of cases, the pressure brought about by work, relationships, money, and so forth, is self-centered. Focusing on others (rather than on oneself) is a good way to remove personal pressure. People who engage in voluntary work, community projects, etc., report greater feelings of well-being and satisfaction than people who do not.

Read Galatians 6:2, Philippians 2:4, and John 15:13. What message is in there for us?

John D. Rockefeller (1839–1937) provided an example of how to survive stress by moving the focus from oneself to others. By 1879 his company, Standard Oil, handled about 90 percent of the refining in the United States. By the age of 50, he was the richest man alive. But in 1891, he had a nervous breakdown and was near death. However, he recovered from his illness in just a few months.

How?

Apart from a simple diet, rest, and exercise, he decided to give away his fortune and spent the remaining 40 years of his life as a philanthropist. Early in the twentieth century, his personal fortune peaked at nearly \$900 million. At the time of his death, his estate was valued at \$26 million. His donations did a lot of good in the world. And as for himself, he extended his life by nearly another fifty years, living in contentment to the age of 97.

What has been your own experience with the blessings that come from serving others? Why not make a concentrated and prayerful effort to do more?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Consider This: If Christ, with His perfect understanding of His Father and His ministry, considered private time in prayer, study, and meditation as essential, how much more should we take time to rest, regroup, and reconnect with our heavenly Father?

▶ **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: Take time to remind your class of the infinite value of keeping the Sabbath.

Life Application: Keeping the Sabbath is an important de-stressor. Dan Buettner, who has partnered with scientists to study longevity in four countries, studied Loma Linda, California, Seventh-day Adventists and concluded in an interview reported in *Adventure* magazine:

“Look at what they do on Saturday—they stop everything; they focus on their god; they cut the stress out of what they need to do; they all go to luncheons with really good friends, and then they’re off on the nature walk. And the payoff is six extra years of life for an Adventist female and nearly ten extra years for an Adventist male.”—Josh Dean, “Dan Buettner’s Search for the Fountain of Youth,” *The Longevity Expedition, Adventure* (June/July 2009):11.

Thought Questions:

What other kinds of activities do we do on Sabbath that have the added benefit of helping us cope with life stresses? How might we deepen our appreciation of the delights that Sabbath offers?

▶ **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: Suggest the following activities to your class as ways to put into practice what it has learned about stress.

Activities:

- 1 A regular exercise program can be a great stress reliever, but it is best if you like what you are doing. Exercise in fresh air and sunshine in a natural environment are even greater pluses. What might you do this week to start an exercise program or improve a program you already have going?
- 2 Adequate sleep, a regular balanced diet, and plenty of water can help make us more resilient in stressful situations. What more can you do to build up your defenses against the normal stresses of life?
- 3 How might you combine a favorite hobby with a service to others and gain the added benefit of relaxation in the bargain?

Further Study: “Utterly wearied, he [Elijah] sat down to rest under a juniper tree. And sitting there, he requested for himself that he might die. . . . A fugitive, far from the dwelling places of men, his spirits crushed by bitter disappointment, he desired never again to look upon the face of man. . . . Into the experience of all there come times of keen disappointment and utter discouragement—days when sorrow is the portion, and it is hard to believe that God is still the kind benefactor of His earthborn children; days when troubles harass the soul, till death seems preferable to life. It is then that many lose their hold on God and are brought into the slavery of doubt, the bondage of unbelief. Could we at such times discern with spiritual insight the meaning of God’s providences we should see angels seeking to save us from ourselves, striving to plant our feet upon a foundation more firm than the everlasting hills, and new faith, new life, would spring into being.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 162.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Have you ever had times during which you clearly saw the hand of God working in your life, and your faith was strong, only to sink low right after and find yourself filled with doubts about God and His leading in your life? What have you learned from that kind of experience that could help others who might be facing the same thing?
- ❷ What is it about helping others that makes us feel better? Why is that so often the case? At the same time, why is it so hard to give of ourselves to others? How can we learn to be more willing to die to self in order to serve the needs of those around us better?
- ❸ Take a good look at your own health habits. What are you eating and drinking? What kind of exercise program are you on? How much leisure time do you have? What changes can you make that could help you feel better emotionally, as well as physically? Though in some cases, people have very serious psychological needs that must be professionally addressed, many times a change in lifestyle habits can make a big difference in how we feel.
- ❹ How much “spare” time do you have? What do you do with that time? How could you better utilize that time to enhance your relationship with God?