

From
**Chronically
Stressed**
to
Fully Blessed

A Faith-Filled Functional
Medicine Approach to
Breaking Free from
Stress and Overwhelm

GRETCHEN REIS, MD

From Chronically Stressed to Fully Blessed
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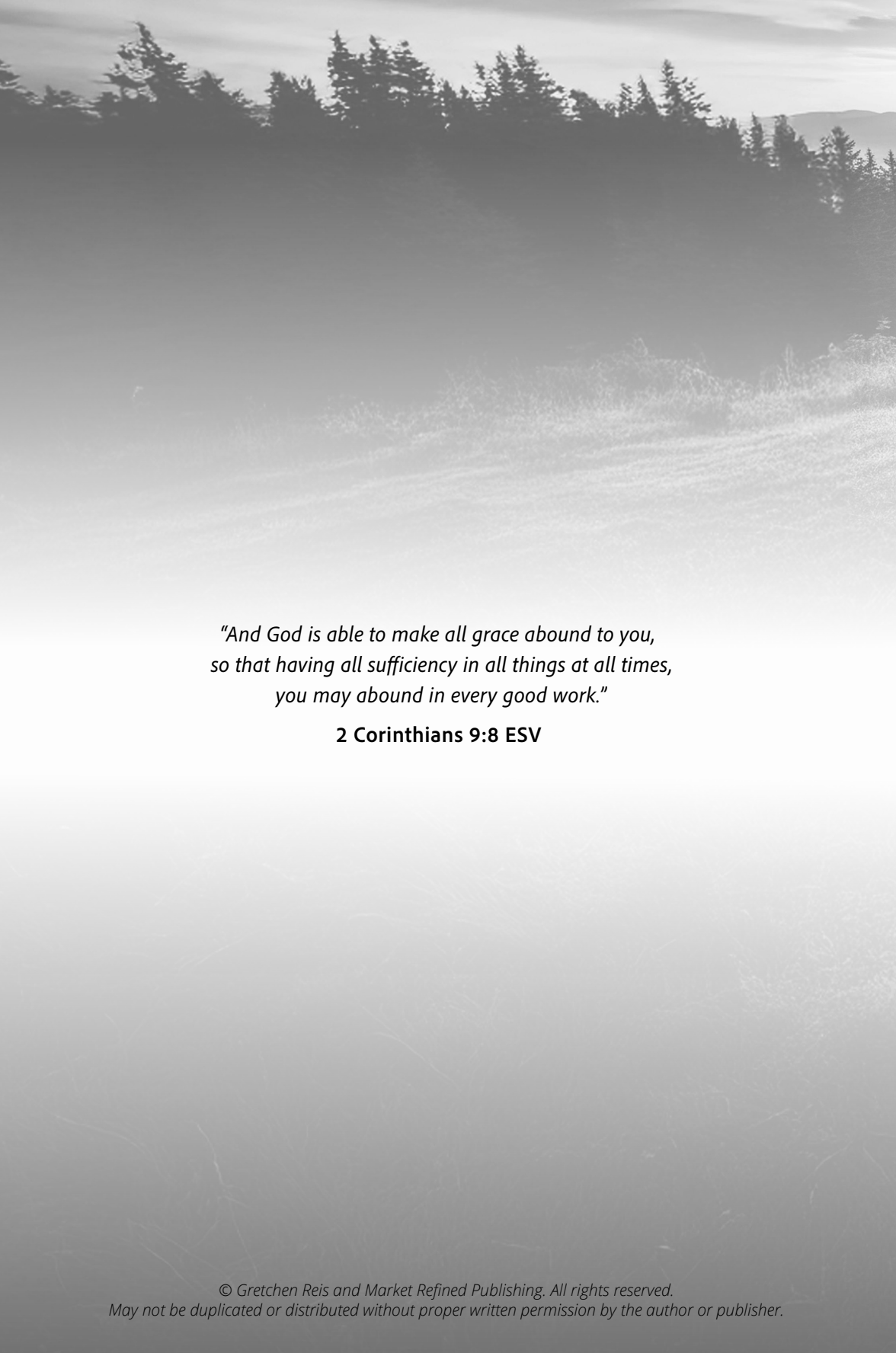
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*"And God is able to make all grace abound to you,
so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times,
you may abound in every good work."*

2 Corinthians 9:8 ESV



This book is dedicated to my dear friend and colleague, Nikki.
We have both weathered many storms in our family life and in
our careers, but we constantly remind each other that
"I may be in the storm, but the storm is not in me . . . Jesus is."

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Introduction:

Change Your Perspective

Stress is inescapable, and everyone experiences it to some degree. There are seasons of high stress, and there are seasons of rest and ease. That's just life. In recent years, though, the world seems to be under more stress, as manifestations of evil become ever more apparent. We see it in crime on the streets, power hungry leaders, economic hardship, and spiritual persecution. The power of darkness is more out in the open, and this reflects itself in our lives in a myriad of ways.

I want to start off by challenging you to reconsider how you view stress. It's not black and white like good versus evil. Stress is a powerful force that can draw us closer to God and His purpose for our lives. It can adjust our attitudes. It can help us focus on what's *important*, not just what's *urgent*. It is not just something bad that threatens to consume your life and your emotions. It is an incredible opportunity for growth! Yes, it hurts, it's hard, and we hate it. But I want you to keep an open mind to the possibilities that lie within the discomfort.

These possibilities start to be seen by digging in to understand stress. Here we will talk about why and how we experience stress, and then we will look at how harmful it is to the human body. Stress can affect your mental health, your physical health, and your spiritual health. Beyond all that, it affects everyone around you. We will also look at all the ways we can resist the negative effects of stress, and then we will consider some of the positive changes we can see when stress is handled appropriately. You might learn to embrace stress as your perspective changes. Well, you can at least embrace the opportunity it presents! With training, you can see it as an opportunity and respond in a constructive, positive way. You will reap the reward of growth and blessing on the other side if you persevere. It's called overcoming!

No Magic Pill for Stress

You know the old saying about the more you learn, the more you realize how much you don't know? That definitely applies to medicine. The more I have learned over the past twenty-five years in practice, the more I realize how much I still don't understand or know how to fix in patients. Some medical conditions are unexplained and difficult to treat, and all we can do is to try to reduce symptoms. We don't have a cure for everything, which is very frustrating. Cancer, heart disease, dementia, and many other chronic diseases simply don't have easy cures. We try our best and have come a long way with treatment, but all too often, the disease wins out.

Stress is like that, too. There is no magic pill to make it go away. Sometimes you manage it and reduce the effect it has on you. I have experienced a lot of stress in my life. I'll share some of it as we go, but with all I've been through, I feel like I should have some answers by now, some wise insight, or a sure-fire way of coping with stress. But I don't. Even though I have walked through a lot of hard times, I sometimes feel like I'm right back where I started. Frustrated, disappointed, and tired. This is not a book with all the answers or a magic cure. We each walk through our own valleys and "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). Our journey is unique to God's purpose in our lives. I hope to give you tools to understand what is happening with your emotions and your body. Once you realize what is happening and appreciate how serious it is, you can start to proactively manage it in a positive way.

Response to Stress

When we are stressed, we usually spin down into a hole of negative emotions and feel sorry for ourselves. We withdraw from other people and are not as giving or loving. Some people live in a constant state of self-pity, oblivious to what other people are going through. It's hard for God to use us to bless others when we are in this state. Most of us stay in this hole of negative emotions until the stress subsides, then we get back to normal. We are often not even aware of how we have treated others.

But it doesn't need to be this way. The Serenity Prayer tells us, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; Courage to change the things I can; And wisdom to know the difference."¹

You can choose to be passive and wallow in your stress, or you can be active in managing it. How? You can learn to ask yourself: "What can I change, and what can't I change?" There is tremendous power in accepting the things you cannot change and changing your response to those things.

When a stressful situation comes into your life, it usually doesn't seem fair. I often don't understand why I am suffering. But that's when you need faith: trusting that He is using it for good. Paul tells us, "All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28). The challenge is to allow God to move through you, and then purposefully choose your responses.

There is a lot you can do to reduce the effect stress has on your body and your mind. I want to show you how powerful these tools can be. God does not want you sick from your stress! He wants to use the stress to form you into a better person. Diamonds are made under tremendous pressure. My challenge to you starts right now: start thinking about stress as a positive process that is making you more like God. Although it is painful, it can be good for you. It shapes your character and your faith. It is what God uses to make you more useful to him. Isn't that what the Christian life is about?

Selye and Sapolsky

What exactly is stress? Stress is defined as "a specific response by the body to a stimulus, as fear or pain, that disturbs or interferes with the normal physiological equilibrium of an organism."² The word "stress" causes an immediate negative emotional reaction in most people. We simply assume stress is bad, but there are many stresses that are good. Spring training makes a football team ready when the season opens. A deadline for the project at work makes you productive and efficient. A tight budget causes you to cook at home instead of eating out. A final exam pushes you to study and learn the material. These stressors force

us to behave in a mature, responsible way instead of just doing what our flesh wants. But other stressors can be hard on us emotionally. Because we don't see the reason for them, there is no goal or sense of accomplishment. When a loved one dies, your roof needs to be replaced, or you are let go at work, it can be hard to see the good. If we see the reason, we will work hard to achieve the goal. But when something just seems like there is no good at all in it, it can be very hard to cope with. This type of stress is what we need to look at. If we can find ways to cope and find some good in it, life becomes much easier.

Dr. Hans Selye was an endocrinologist who started studying the stress response in the 1930s. He wrote a groundbreaking book, *The Stress of Life*, in 1956.³ In it, he describes three phases of the stress response: alarm, adaptation, and exhaustion. His work explained a great deal about the physiological changes that occur with acute or ongoing stress.

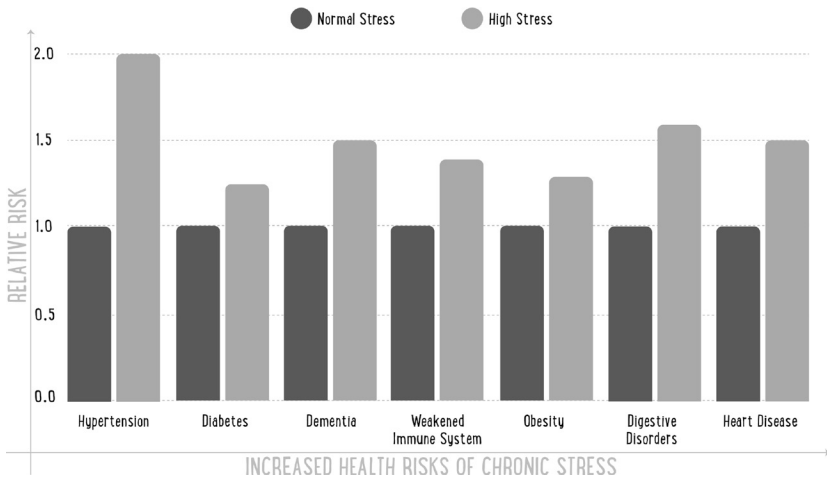
Robert Sapolsky is a neuroendocrinology expert who wrote another great book on stress, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*. This book explains that in general, when animals experience stress, it is quick to occur and then quick to resolve.⁴ The zebra being chased by a lion either escapes and then goes to munch on grass somewhere else, or it is killed and the game is over. Short-term stress serves a real purpose: to keep you alive. After the stress, an animal goes right back to a calm state, in some ways forgetting what just happened. But when humans suffer ongoing, chronic stress, the constantly-elevated stress hormones eventually wear down the entire body and disease results. Zebras don't get ulcers, gray hair, high blood pressure, or dementia. People do.

Stress is a Slow Killer

In my thirty-plus years as a physician, I can absolutely attest to the fact that stress is a factor in many, if not most, chronic diseases and in virtually all mental health conditions. Stress contributes to cancer, heart disease, arthritis, and even dementia. If you include poor lifestyle choices made because of being stressed, the list is virtually endless. My husband, Bill, is a life and nutrition coach. He believes that if someone gets their diet and lifestyle habits

optimized and learns how to manage stress, they can avoid many diseases. Many times, I have been unable to help patients because they refused to deal with their stress and their unhealthy lifestyle choices. Prescriptions can't fix their choices . . . they only are a temporary help. I challenge my patients every day to put me out of business. But alas, stress becomes a seemingly insurmountable challenge and people get stuck in destructive habits.

While you are probably thinking you understand you are stressed, what you don't know is all the damage that's happening to your body. This is a silent epidemic, wreaking havoc in your body, and you have no idea how destructive it is. We want to think it's just a mental or emotional effect, but it's way beyond that . . . stress can lead to permanent damage to your gastrointestinal system, your brain, and the rest of your body. It can even cause cancer and heart disease, which can kill you.



hypertension – 2x	obesity – 1.3 x
diabetes – 1.25x	digestive disorders – 1.6x
dementia – 1.5x	heart disease – 1.5x
weakened immune system – 1.4x	

That's the depressing news. For now, it's probably good that it scares you a bit. My hope is that you will take stress seriously and do something about it. While we have no control over what happens to us, we have total control over our reaction to it!

Good News About Stress

We all intuitively know when a situation isn't working well and isn't what it could be. The good news for Christians is that this proves our spirit is longing for Heaven! We know deep down we were designed to live in peace with loving relationships and to have our needs met. Adam and Eve experienced that in the garden before they messed it up. But living in a fallen world means that things often are annoying, frustrating, or maddening because they just aren't right. Our longing for stress resolution is really the longing our spirit has to be with God and to be fully immersed in His peace. When we get to Heaven, all will be right, and our stress will be gone. In the meantime, live in God's grace to be strong and do all you can. This book is to educate you and inspire you to do the best you can. This promise is ours: "Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (Ephesians 6:13).

Your job is to do what you can do. God's job is to do all the rest . . . that's His grace at work. Evangelist Jerry Savelle loved to talk about playing checkers with God. While playing, it sometimes is clearly our turn. God is waiting for us to make a move. He sits patiently, waiting for us to obey what He would have us do. After you do your part, it's His turn. We wait patiently in faith for Him to move. We need to know Him well enough that we know whose turn it is in any situation.

God is the one that can heal a broken marriage or straighten out a troubled teen. He can give you a new job or a raise. If you've done all you know God wants you to do, let God take His turn. What we do is so small compared to what God does! Be like John the Baptist when he said, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). His works are much greater than anything we can do. God's work is perfect and powerful.

Imperfect Can Be Perfect

Remember the goal is not to be stress-free, but to be used by God for good. When we are depressed, frantic, or in a brain fog, we are self-centered on our own problems and are not looking for ways we can bring hope and joy to others. God allows hardships and trials as a means to an end. We can choose to get depressed and angry at the situation, or we can choose to embrace the challenge and view it as an opportunity for the power of God to move. Here's a key concept that you know but may often forget: you can't change much of anything that is happening to you, but you have full control over how you react. Now that is empowering.

We can embrace imperfection, because it is perfect from God's perspective. Say what? It is God's will (perfect) to be in a state of imperfection. Take a minute to think about that. Paul said, "For I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content" (Philippians 4:11). Life is just not ever going to be perfect. You may have moments lying on a sunny beach on vacation that feel close to perfect. But sooner or later, the rain comes or you go home and back to work. If you're relying on the absence of stress to be happy and usable by God, you'll be disappointed much of the time, and God won't be able to use you. How sad is the thought that God had plans to use you, but you were so self-centered that He passed you by and couldn't use you? What a waste.

There is so much freedom in letting go. Many of us, especially women, like to be in control. We like our homes beautiful and clean, we manage complicated family schedules, and we just keep going all day long. But of course, most of us struggle to keep our homes free of clutter, and the dishes sometimes sit on the counter too long. We just can't do everything all the time. We often beat ourselves up with critical self-talk. Imagine a CEO who thinks they can do everything without an assistant. They try to take all their calls, schedule meetings, type and print reports, arrange travel, and implement projects all on their own. Then when they are stressed and make a mistake on something, they berate themselves. Sound ridiculous? It sure is, because a good assistant can make the CEO's life so much smoother and effective. You trying to do everything without any time for yourself and without God is just as stressful and ineffective.

For those of you who are now saying “but there is just so much I have to do in my day!”—I get it. I really do! But when you actually take time to assess your time management and your goals, you may find some wasted time (social media, TV) or activities that maybe aren’t so crucial that you can eliminate. It’s okay to not get *everything* done in a day. The task will be there tomorrow. When you let go of needing to be in control and you accept imperfection, peace flows in and God can fill your life. The adage to “let go and let God” is true. When there is a hole in our life, let God fill it by letting go. Remember that God’s still in control . . . we don’t have to be!

Let’s dive in, and first, figure out why we are so stressed.



CHAPTER 1

Ubiquity of Stress

Why are we so stressed? Compared to the lives our grandparents and great-grandparents had, we have it easy. We have machines that wash and dry our clothes, a dishwasher that cleans a kitchen's worth of dirty dishes, and we have clean, hot running water to bathe in all the time. We have an abundance of food and comfortable beds. We drive and fly everywhere in very little time. We have so much more than people who lived only one hundred years ago. We should be relaxed and enjoying all the free time we have from not having to work as hard. But it doesn't seem to work that way.

Consider the advances we have made with technology. If you're my age or older, you remember corded phones hanging in the kitchen and busy signals. You remember looking things up in the library or in your *Encyclopedia Britannica*. You used classified ads and the yellow pages to find resources. Now we can look something up on our phones or even ask the smart speaker in the house, and you instantly have your answer. We bank online, order food online, and take pictures and send them to others instantly.

You would think our grandparents and great-grandparents would have been miserable because of how hard life was. But they weren't—that's

just how life was. They knew hard work, disease, and death were a part of life. I would argue that people were more content with life than many of us now, because they did not expect their lives to be perfect. They appreciated the good things in life so much more than we often do.

Happiness and contentment are highly subjective, and one of the themes of this book is learning that you have a lot of control over both. You don't need to be a passive victim of stressful circumstances. You can choose your reaction. My grandmother had a son who was deaf and died when he was only five years old. She then lost her husband to cancer when he was only in his forties. She chose to walk in strength and moved through her grief, living a good life all the rest of her days.

Contentment and satisfaction are things we want to achieve. When we are stressed, we feel discontent and are not satisfied. I would argue that there is a big difference between contentment and satisfaction. One way to describe contentment is to experience ease of mind. This is the state of calm, peace, and not worrying. I liken it to being totally okay with where you are right now. Maybe not forever, but in this moment, you're okay.

Satisfaction is a state of fulfillment, though, which is a longer-term result. When a project is completed, you are satisfied. However, during the process, you can be content with your progress without being fully satisfied. One of the secrets of stress management is to be content with your current position, even if you aren't satisfied with the results yet.

Why are we so highly stressed, dissatisfied, and discontent? We should have so much extra time now! Why aren't we relaxed with a lot of extra time on our hands? There are a lot of opinions on this, and a lot of reasons that are unique to each person. The answer usually lies in the fact that we choose to be stressed, because we refuse to relax. We fill our time with more stuff and more activities, increasing our stressors. More is not always good and there is much truth in saying, "Less is best."

Schedules

If you have a child that plays sports, you know exactly what it's like for huge chunks of your weekly schedule to be filled with practices and games. For parents, that added responsibility seems to fill up our days as soon as the sports season begins. If you get a break between basketball season and track season, you may savor that time knowing that when practices begin again, you'll go back to spending a lot of time in the car or at the field. Add in driving your kids to and from school, and you may feel like you live in your car!

For women, our modern era hasn't always worked out so well. Although having a little house on the prairie in the 1800s sure wasn't easy, the wife never had to go work a job for eight hours and then come home, cook, do laundry, and help with homework. She had time during the day to maintain her household. The modern woman has so many career opportunities available that simply weren't an option decades ago. We have been liberated, right? But with all the advances of modern life, why aren't we happy? With the rapid pace of our society, we have sped up, too.

Men also have busier schedules. Work may extend beyond the typical workday, and some men are stay-at-home dads which can be much more work than some office jobs. Some homeschool their kids. Add on workouts at the gym, the occasional social get-together, and kids' activities, and men's schedules are just as busy as women's.

It's not just the adults that are busy. Kids nowadays are also busier. When I was growing up in the 1970s, most of us kids in the neighborhood did a little homework after school, then ran around and played the rest of the day. It was a long time ago, but I rarely had homework to do after dinner. We got exercise and were learning social skills just roaming the neighborhood as a group. I don't remember any of my friends being involved in any activities other than scouting in elementary school. We didn't have a lot of sports teams and formal activities when I grew up.

Often these activities create so much stress in parents and kids that they cause fatigue, anxiety, and depression. If you believe that your child must have a list of accomplishments a mile long to get into college, it's

not true! Some of the most elite schools that require detailed resumes to get into are ones that promote values that are opposite the Christian worldview. You really don't want to send your child there. You can get a good education at a community or state college, and here's a shocking thought: not everyone needs to go to college! Don't sign your son up for basketball when he's ten years old just because you think he needs it to go to an Ivy League school. Only do it if he truly enjoys basketball.

Ask yourself this: When was the last time you had four hours with nothing scheduled? What did you do with your time? Did you catch up on chores or errands, or did you just sit and do nothing? If I asked you to sit and do nothing for four hours, what would your reaction be? Mine would be, "You're kidding, right? I can't just sit and do nothing!" This is probably why so many of us turn on the TV when we have nothing to do. While that isn't inherently bad, if you watch too much TV, you may not be relaxing in a good way. Tuning out the world works for a short time, but it's much better to truly relax and cultivate relationships. This moves you forward and increases your stress resilience.

When you think about boredom, do you think of it as something bad? I challenge you to cultivate boredom. It is so good for us to have blocks of time with no responsibilities. I love to take time on a summer evening to sit out on my back deck and read a book. I may take my dog for an extra walk on Saturdays in the fall, and then I'll spend some time watching football with my family. I think we all enjoy just sitting in a comfortable chair on the beach and doing nothing.

When I was young, I kept a diary. I have obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) tendencies, which pushed me to make an entry every day. I laugh now when I remember how often I wrote, "Today was a nothing day." (I just couldn't leave a page blank!) Don't you just love a delicious Sunday afternoon and evening when you have nowhere to go and nothing to do? This time is a gift from God, and we need to seek it out and thoroughly enjoy it. Avoid over scheduling yourself and adding to your stress. The Psalms remind us, "This is the day that the Lord has made; We will rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24). It's more than

okay to fully enjoy times of relaxation. They create joy, which is exactly what God wants for us!

Beware the trap of being too busy. You just might be making yourself miserable and sick.

Change in Family Structure

Another reason why many people are so stressed is the increase in single-parent homes. Most sociologists and historians will tell you that societies that embrace the traditional family structure are more successful and thrive. There are many reasons for this, but, overall, research data indicates the biblical view of family and marriage is the healthiest model.

Studies have linked single parent homes with higher rates of stress and depression. Socioeconomic factors also correlate with depression, so being a single parent without sufficient economic resources is even more stressful on the family.⁵ Children raised without a mother and father have higher rates of depression, anxiety, poor school performance and substance use.⁶ Children whose parents have divorced have reduced school performance, more mental health issues, more learning disabilities, and more sickness.⁷

In our modern world, people get divorced at an alarming rate. The divorce rate before World War II was under two per one thousand people. It then increased to a high of around five per one thousand people in the 1980s.⁸ It has decreased somewhat since then, thankfully. But it is still true that about half of all marriages in the US will end in divorce or separation. Divorce is one of those life-changing stressors that leaves an impact for a long time afterward.

Babies born to unwed mothers have skyrocketed in the past twenty years. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation (Kids Count Data Center), data from 2019 shows that 64 percent of black children are being raised by a single parent.⁹ Marriage has decreased so much that a majority of black women are raising their children alone. Rates of single parenting in Native American and Hispanic culture are also much higher than in Caucasians. There are many contributing factors to these statistics, but suffice it to say,

a significant portion of the younger generation are growing up without both a mother and a father present in the home.

We generally think of women as being single parents, but single men also struggle to raise children. Years ago, one of my cousins had two beautiful young daughters, and his wife just simply walked out one day and left, never to be seen again. This was a long time ago, and the girls have turned out to be amazing women and mothers themselves, but we all were in complete shock. This kind of abandonment brings grief and stress. Death of a parent is also devastating to families.

No matter which parent leaves and why, it's enormously stressful. When you work full time and then come home and take care of children, your day is going to be long and intense. You don't have a partner to share the workload with. This takes a toll and is a major contributor to stress.

Another family stress is dysfunction. I cannot tell you how many times I've seen a patient who tearfully tells me all about their crazy family members and the strife they cause. Some of the worst stories are the ones about siblings who fight after the parent dies. They argue about the estate and get lawyers, creating so much emotional pain all around. The other situation is the mother who guilties her children into doing things. One of my favorite television shows used to be *Everybody Loves Raymond*. The mother in this show was played brilliantly by Doris Roberts. She was an expert in manipulating everyone in her family by using guilt. It was a funny take on a common behavior that isn't so funny in real life.

If you have family members who manipulate others with their emotional reactions and behavior, stress is inevitable. You can't change that person's behavior, and it's very difficult to change who your family is. This issue, especially if codependency is involved, requires thorough analysis and a careful change in your responses. Find a good counselor to walk with you through this. You simply cannot make other people happy, and you aren't responsible for their emotions. Take the high ground, but do not allow yourself to get pulled down. Walk above the fray as much as possible.

Less Community

Stress is also increased dramatically when you are in social isolation from others. We are designed to need, support, and live life with others. That's how God wants it to be. God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him" (Genesis 2:18). This applies not just to men and how much they need women (*I can hear you laughing*) but also for us women. We need each other!

Marriage is a covenant we make to each other and provides stability in our faith, our family, and our community. If you are having relationship issues in your marriage, this will be a great source of stress, and I encourage you to seek godly counseling. You will need someone to help you define the issues and help you both work toward healing. Having a loving partner can either make or break you in your journey. Don't let the enemy rob you of the joy of having someone on your side who loves you and supports you.

We also need community connection with other family members, neighbors, friends and other church members. Modern society has made community connection much more difficult than it used to be. I remember running all over the neighborhood growing up and we knew our neighbors. We would walk around the block and see who else was out so we could say hi or even chat.

Today we often live in subdivisions behind closed and air-conditioned doors and don't meet our neighbors like we should. Even if you live in the city with a front porch, people just aren't out as much to connect like they have been in previous generations. People walk down the street with their eyes glued to their phone. Folks run or walk their dog with headphones on. We run on the treadmill at the gym with earbuds. We have gone from Mayberry on *The Andy Griffith Show* to walking around like robots.

Wherever you live, make an effort to connect with others in a community. This may be your physical neighborhood, your church or synagogue, a networking group, a pickleball group or a hobby you participate in. Our church has worked very hard the past few years to build up home groups we call *life groups*. I like this name because community is life. When we get together and share our struggles and frustrations, our successes and

our dreams, we are drawn together in God's love and strengthened. Just knowing I have a friend praying for my problem gives me strength. Counselors will tell you how therapeutic talking about your problem can be. Then if you add compassionate friends who will come by your side and walk through the problem with you, you will be strong and capable of emerging on the other side so much better for it. Cultivate community around you. Your health needs it!

Less Exercise

We all know that exercise is good for us, but many of us just don't do it enough. It clearly is good for your brain health, heart health, weight, and your energy. But did you know that exercise is one of the best stress busters there is?

I like to say that if more people knew how powerful hormone balance, nutrition, and regular exercise are, we would slash rates of chronic disease and people would be so much happier. Pharmaceutical sales would drop, and some specialists would be out of a job. That wouldn't be so good for the medical industrial complex. But it would be miraculous for all those healthy people!

I'm sure you have used all the same excuses I have about exercise: I don't have time. It's too far to go to the gym. It's too hot or too cold outside. I can't afford it. I don't like to work out alone. I don't like taking classes. I hate weights. I hate cardio. My dog ate my homework. (*Well, maybe not that one!*) Now certainly there are situations that are true reasons and not just excuses. In my case, I love to run, but I have a special needs son at home that has seizures and has limited ability to care for his own needs. When I'm at home with him, even though he is a young adult, I can't go running. If he had a seizure unattended, it could be very bad. But I can't use that as an excuse to never run. I have to be creative and simply can't run as often as I would like, but I don't give up.

If you're like me, you like to get your steps in. I remember getting a fitness watch years ago and tracking my steps, trying to get that 10,000 steps in every day. I wasn't always successful, but I did start parking a little farther back at the grocery store and I took the stairs more often. Sedentary

jobs, especially working from home on a computer, are a big reason why we don't get as much exercise as our ancestors did. You absolutely need to get up from your desk frequently and walk around a little bit. Even better, go outside for five to ten minutes. Moving around in sunshine and fresh air can greatly reduce your stress!

One of the biggest benefits from exercise that you may not be aware of is that it reduces the impact that stress has on our bodies. In addition to building muscle and feeling a mental boost in energy and mood, exercise also acts as a buffer to the things that cortisol and inflammation can do. We'll go into the details in a later chapter, but exercise prevents the damage that stress can do to your body.

Many of us don't have as much time to exercise as we would like. You might also believe that you have to work out five days a week, so you may feel like lesser amounts of exercise are not worth it. That is not true! Even being a weekend warrior, with physical activity on Saturday and Sunday, will help your health more than being sedentary. Get outside and work around the house on weekends. Just doing some yard work or gardening will give you exercise, as well as sunshine and fresh air. Consider taking up a hobby. It could be refinishing old furniture, building model train sets, or disc golf. Pretty much anything that isn't sitting around will work and can be fun!

You may also feel like you need to work out strenuously for it to count. Some of my patients are over-exercisers. They do boot-camp-style workouts, flipping tires and doing strenuous exercises for an hour or more every day. Some women do this, mistakenly believing they will lose weight the more they work out. But it usually doesn't work. High intensity exercise will raise cortisol which can create physical issues and prevent weight loss. Sometimes the muscle you gain, along with the stress of the high intensity workout, makes you gain weight. The right balance with your exercise routine is important. The best exercise for stress relief consists of mild to moderate exertion, and it does not have to be for a long time. I encourage my patients to start with getting outside for a fifteen-minute walk. This one goal is more than enough to make your brain and moods more resistant to stress.

Long Days

When we lived in a rural county in Ohio, my drive to work was only seven minutes. I could leave the house at 8:45 a.m. and still see my first patient at nine. I loved it! When we moved to Charlotte, my drive to work was about forty-five minutes. That took a while to adjust to. Over the next few years with the rapid growth in the area, my commute home turned into an hour or more. The length of my workday started contributing to my stress load. I had no time in the morning for myself, and I didn't get home until far later than I liked. It was not fun.

When we had the opportunity to relocate my office, we found the perfect location much closer to where we live. My drive is now around thirty minutes, so I have a little more time in the morning and evening. While most of you probably can't easily change where you live or work, if you have a long commute, please realize that it may be affecting you. If you commonly stop at a store or two on your way home from work—reducing your time with your family in the evening—consider what you can put off until another time or delegate to someone else. Getting home a little earlier and sharing dinner with your family is much better for your emotional stress than crossing off a few items on your to do list.

Make a purposeful decision about how you will use the time of your commute. You can grumble about traffic, slow drivers, construction or the weather, making yourself miserable. But you don't have to! Once again, you can't change your circumstance, but you can change your reaction to it. Use that time to listen to relaxing music or listen to a podcast or even preaching. Try to avoid listening to work-related topics, though. Leave work at work and fill your brain with something that is relaxing, motivating or inspirational. Make it your time to talk to God and focus on what God wants you to do and be. Then when you get to work in the morning or back home in the evening, you are calm and focused for the next part of your day.

Less Relaxing in the Evening

Most of us need to learn to slow down. We also need to learn to leave work at work and be home when at home. The line between work and home has become very blurred in the era of email and cell phones. Now that so many jobs have shifted to virtual work from home, it's even worse than ever. Many employees feel the need to monitor and respond to emails and texts in the evening. I admit I am old school, but I just don't understand this! I think it's important to work hard when you're working and stop for a break when you're not. When you mix in work tasks with your evening with your family, your efforts on either front are diluted. You will be distracted and not fully engaged. Then you will also feel like you are working all day long, and that contributes to stress. For years I was in a solo primary care practice, and I was on call for emergencies twenty-four seven. Patients called when they had an emergency, so it was truly necessary, but it was intense.

I have never understood why bosses feel the need to email or call employees after the workday ends. If it's not an emergency, it can wait until the next day. If you have a boss like that, I urge you to have a discussion with him or her. The next thing you can do is simply to not check your email in the evening. Or here's a wild and crazy idea: take your email off your phone. It's amazing how effective that is! It's just too easy to check your email or social media on your phone while you are watching television with your family. *Don't do it!* When you take all that stuff off your phone, your phone is much less distracting.

My husband has been telling me for over twenty years that I need to learn to relax. It's hard when the number of things to do is overwhelming and you feel like you have so little time, but relaxing is still important. When I hear my patients say they work all day and then take children to activities and go through a drive through, getting home at eight or nine at night, I get tired just imagining that schedule every day. Most of us run out of energy if we don't pace ourselves and learn to say no. Our bodies are designed to work during daylight and rest after dark. We can work longer days more easily in summer, but in winter,

we are hardwired to relax in the evening. Some societies still basically go to bed as soon as it's dark, even in winter. While you shouldn't stop everything and go to bed at six in January, I do believe you need some time of relaxation in the evening. I know someone who works three jobs to provide for her family and works seven days a week. She has three children and just doesn't get enough time with them. This is not good for her or them. We need to slow down!

I will confess, I wanted to write this book for several years before I finally did. I just kept saying, "I don't have time to write!" My husband is my best cheerleader but also challenges me regularly. He repeatedly provoked me back to writing when I let it slide for a while. He also makes me realize that I am not prioritizing my time correctly. I can be too focused on keeping the house tidy, doing dishes, taking care of the dog and the trash and all the other stuff that keeps most of us busy through the evening. He reminds me that I don't have to get all those things done. And I quickly realized taking time to write was a matter of properly prioritizing my time.

My husband and I have taught Dave Ramsey's course Financial Peace several times. If you haven't taken it, you really need to. Whether you are struggling financially or are wealthy, you will benefit from this course. The entire foundation of the course is taking control of your money. You tell your money where it's going by using a budget for everything. Most people don't use a budget, and their money just flies out of their account throughout the month and runs out before the month runs out. When you stick to a budget, you won't run out of money. You are in control. If you budget \$100 for clothing and spend it, that's it for the month—the next weekend, you don't go to the mall. You are in now control of your money.

The same concept applies to our time. I am famous (*infamous*) for not leaving work on time. Anyone who has worked in a doctor's office knows that closing time is not leaving time. Messages and paperwork pile up during the day and often keep doctors and staff there until way past closing time. Because if you don't do it that day, the work accumulates. Back in the old days of paper charts, there was often a stack of charts

about two feet high on my desk at 5:30 p.m., all with messages on them. We had to address all of them before leaving for the day, so it was virtually impossible to get out “on time.” Nowadays the messages are all electronic, so it’s a bit easier to address them bit by bit throughout the day, but you still never know how much work there is to do after the last patient leaves.

Well, I have been more convicted of this recently. If I tell my husband I’ll leave the office by 5:30, I need to take control of my time and make it happen. Rarely is someone on the phone with a medical emergency at 5:29. My new objective is to set a realistic time to leave the office and then *do it*. The messages or busywork can wait one more day! There is a show on Fox News called “The Five.” The last segment in their one-hour show is called “One More Thing.” Each host has thirty seconds to talk about a lighthearted story. This segment is sometimes funny or heartwarming, so it is popular. Interestingly, the producers will absolutely cut them off when time runs out, so even they have limits.

Don’t let *one-more-thing-ism* afflict you at work. We all have it sometimes. *One more call. One more email. One more stack of papers to file. One more document to edit and print.* One more suddenly turns into fifteen more, and boom! You’re late. Don’t allow *one-more-thing-ism* to afflict you in the evening around the house, either. Just say no.

I am, admittedly, a work in progress. Compulsive tendencies try to get me all the time. I sometimes believe the delusion that, if my to-do list is all checked off and my office and home are neat as a pin, then I will finally be able to relax, but not until all that is done. That is a lie. Let the tasks go and embrace imperfection. Take back control of your time, investing in what really matters. Time on the couch watching a home renovation show with your spouse. Playing a card game with your kids. Calling a friend or a relative. We need to manage our time and guard it from all the things that try to steal our time. They can wait.

Less Nothing Time

We need time to just do absolutely nothing productive! I have always been energized by doing things and crossing things off my list. My sister used to call me a workaholic growing up, because I didn't stop working. I realize now that finishing a task gives my brain a little hit of dopamine, which can be energizing and addicting. What was seemingly good for me when I was younger now causes me stress. Life is more complicated now, and I need more rest to stay healthy.

I have patients who have told me they can't sit and watch a movie—they are too restless. They can force themselves to watch a thirty-minute show with their spouse but even that is very difficult. If this is you, you can work on being more comfortable at rest.

I have worked hard to balance my activity with rest. Like I mentioned in the previous section, I try not to do any work in the evening. My resolution this year has been to not check my work email in the evenings. On weekends, I try to blend chores with fun. My husband usually goes out to breakfast Saturdays with his men's group from church. I try to get all my stuff done in the morning, and then we can relax the rest of the day. That way, if we watch football all afternoon and then a movie at night, I don't feel guilty, and I truly can relax knowing I already got something done in the morning.

There has been a lot of research done on mindfulness, yoga, and meditation. These are methods of pushing out extra thoughts and simply being in the moment with your environment. Think about it: when was the last time you sat in a chair and did nothing for ten minutes? Consider the times you sat on the beach, watching the waves, and truly saw and appreciated the majesty of God's creation. Or the times you sat around a campfire with family or friends, just thinking about life. Mindfulness requires stillness.

Prayer is a form of mindfulness and is essential for a passion-filled Christian life. If you think you're too busy to pray, then you flat out are too busy! You need to slow down and intentionally carve out time in your

day for your mind to settle down and for all your worries to subside. We live our lives and our schedules like a snow globe constantly in motion. When we sit and get still, all the noise settles down, and we can see much more clearly.

We cannot truly know God unless *and until* we are still. The Psalmist writes, “Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth” (Psalm 46:10 KJV). The only way to truly know Him and hear His voice is to slow down and listen. Being still is hard for me, but I’m a lot better than I used to be. This section is misnamed, as “Nothing Time” is not nothing. It is a very powerful tool that God commands us to do, and He uses it to heal our anxious minds. “Nothing time” has the power to make everything possible!

ACEs (Increase Susceptibility to Stress)

We all vary in our response to stress. It fascinates me to see some of my patients literally losing sleep worrying about virtually nothing. Lisa has three children who cause her endless anxiety. One has an MBA and works in finance, one is in college, and one is still in high school. All of them are doing well, but she still worries about them all the time! She told me she calls her grown children every day, and if she doesn’t talk to them, she gets anxious. Contrast that with Kristin, who lost her daughter to a drug overdose a few years ago. She is bright, cheerful, and always lifts my spirits, especially when I am having a bad day.

What is the difference? Attitude. We will talk more about that later, but your mindset will direct your thoughts. Why is it so hard for some of us to have a good attitude? There are many reasons, but a big one is adverse childhood experiences, or ACE. Any significant stress you go through early in life reshapes your brain to increase your emotional reactivity. Your amygdala, the emotional center of your brain, becomes supercharged. This is one of the things that happens in post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. Small events create a large emotional reaction, often way out of proportion. And this can make you physically sick in addition to psychologically sick.

A study published in 1998 looked at whether stress as a child predicted diseases later in life.¹⁰ It looked for stressors such as abuse (physical, emotional or sexual) or a parent with substance abuse or mental illness. The results were startling. People who had experienced four or more types of ACE were significantly more likely than those without ACE to have heart disease, cancer, chronic chronic lung disease, or liver disease, as well as psychological conditions like alcoholism, drug abuse, or suicide attempts. Childhood stress damages your brain. In medicine, we often see a connection between childhood abuse and depression and anxiety as an adult. Brain neurons have been rewired from the way they are supposed to be. Another well-known paper underscores the importance of a healthy childhood to adult health:

“Advances in neuroscience, molecular biology, and genomics have converged on three compelling conclusions:

1. Early experiences are built into our bodies;
2. Significant adversity can produce physiologic disruptions or biological memories that undermine the development of the body’s stress response systems and affect the developing brain, cardiovascular system, immune system, and metabolic regulatory controls;
3. These physiologic disruptions can persist far into adulthood and lead to lifelong impairments in both physical and mental health.”¹¹

There are several childhood stressors that impact adult mental and physical health. Certainly, abuse in the household is one of the more problematic ones, in addition to parental mental illness and addiction. However, other common stressors include extreme poverty, community crime, loss of a loved one, frequent relocations, life threatening injuries or diseases, exposure to pornography, peer rejection, and experiencing a natural disaster.

This is a concept that cannot be overemphasized. Stress as a child causes actual brain dysfunction. Mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, or addiction have a very real physical basis. If you had a terrible childhood, does that mean you’re stuck? No! We are making real progress in deciphering the brain changes that contribute to mental illness. However, intentional

changes in thoughts and behavior are equally important, as any therapist will tell you.

In recent years, we have learned a lot about the tremendous ability of the brain to remodel and heal. You can change your attitude and your thoughts, which will change your brain. We can also use nutritional changes with supplements to heal the brain. It might take a little time and effort, but with God, all things are possible!

More Toxins

We live in a world filled with toxins. One of my colleagues jokes that we are fish and the world is our tank, but no one is cleaning the tank. You usually can't see or smell toxins, but they are there. They are in the air we breathe, both indoors and outdoors. It is widely accepted in the medical field that our water and food supply has been contaminated with toxins. Phthalates, parabens, pesticides, volatile organic compounds, and many more permeate our environment. Our natural environment has changed, and we are suffering for it. These are no longer just intermittent, mild exposures—we are constantly exposed. Those of us who work in integrative medicine see every day what damage toxins can do. We see toxins cause headaches, fatigue, digestive symptoms, thyroid issues, and hormone imbalances.

If you aren't so sure about this crazy "toxin" theory, research what different toxins do. They affect a lot of different things in your body. They can affect the mitochondria in your cells, which are the main "engine" of the cell. This can cause fatigue and muscle soreness. Toxins also can cause gastrointestinal inflammation and a change in the bacteria of your gut, called Dysbiosis.

The result is digestive symptoms and nutrient deficiencies, since you can't absorb nutrients across your intestinal wall as well. You suffer from widespread inflammation, which not only causes aches and pains but also affects brain function. Other toxins directly affect the nervous system, which can cause headaches, numbness, tingling or balance issues.

The more your body is exposed to toxins, the harder it is for your brain to respond to stress. While we have detoxification systems that our cells

use to neutralize and eliminate toxins, we are genetically unique. Several genes have common variations that affect the ability to detoxify. If you have a lot of these variations, your body will have a much harder time with the detoxification process.

Some people are genetically susceptible to mold toxins because of the way their immune cells recognize and remove mold toxins. They develop a form of chronic fatigue called Chronic Inflammatory Response Syndrome (CIRS), which is sometimes just called “mold illness” by medical professionals. This can cause different symptoms in different bodies, but most people have severe fatigue, achiness, brain fog and mood changes. We call it a “brain on fire” because the brain has high inflammation and it just doesn’t work well. This can also happen after Lyme disease and COVID-19. Inflammation in the brain is not good and affects how you react to stress.

Toxin exposure can fool the best of us. Years ago, we lived in a wonderful home out in the woods in the country. Our back deck looked out on a creek, a small bluff, and the woods. It was just beautiful, but it was built over a natural spring. We started having water issues in that house—first in the crawl space and the basement, then in the bathroom, and then in the garage. We fixed the issues as we found them (or so we thought) but were totally unaware that some mold was still there and was making us sick.

I was tired, but assumed that was because I was raising four children, one with severe autism who usually didn’t sleep through the night. I also was working in my solo practice, trying to make enough money to pay the bills. *Talk about high stress!* The other thing that I didn’t realize at the time was that I always felt so much better at work. My office was in a small building that we had gutted and renovated, so there was no mold. I would get a lot of energy and my brain would feel just great at work. But then at night, I would crash and get depressed. At church, I used to get so discouraged wondering what was wrong with me. I felt like such a failure for not feeling the joy everyone else was enjoying. Clearly, I was the problem, if everyone else was clapping and shouting for joy in a spirit-filled service, right? Guilt made the depression even worse, but I just didn’t know what was wrong.

Now I realize it was being in an environment filled with mold toxins! Back then, I thought I was just weak or simply not good enough. Mold toxins are debilitating to your brain. I had very little stress resilience then. I would snap at my kids or burst into tears when something wasn't working right, and I was deeply depressed much of the time when I was at home. Irritability and depression may be a sign of brain inflammation from mold or other toxins.

If you think you may have mold illness, you can learn more at surviving-mold.com or iseai.org. Most physicians know nothing about mold illness, so you'll have to look carefully for a provider that has had functional training in it. Similarly, if you think you may have chronic Lyme Disease, regular tests done by regular doctors are often falsely negative. Check out ilads.org for resources for testing and treatment.

Other common sources of toxins are exposure to vehicle exhaust, paints or stains, nail or hair salons, frequent use of scented home or beauty products, drinking unfiltered or water bottled in plastics, eating out frequently, use of pesticides in your home, use of herbicides in your landscaping, mercury amalgams in your teeth, or any other chemical occupational exposure. There are also a lot of toxins in our food supply. Glyphosate is in most grains, arsenic contaminates rice, and canned goods can have BPA from the cans leach into the food. I wrote about this in my book *Dare to Detox*. Water and air often have contaminants in them as well. Any of these toxins may be affecting your ability to handle stress.

While we simply cannot eliminate all toxins, we can test for some of them and then work on reducing our exposure. Work with a functional medicine provider to detoxify. If this is affecting you and you don't address it, you will probably continue to feel stressed and won't get the victory you are entitled to.

More Medications

All the reasons we have looked at contribute to stress today. But sometimes we don't realize how bad it is for others, because so many are on medication for anxiety or depression. I go into more detail in Chapter 2,

but when I was in primary care, probably about a third of my patients were on medication for anxiety, depression, or sleep. While medications may help, most of the time they are not getting to the root of the problem. They bandage a non-healing wound. Now don't get me wrong, I've written hundreds and probably thousands of prescriptions for these meds, and they were warranted. But now that I practice integrative medicine, I have time with my patients to look for the real underlying reason for their mood changes. I love being able to help people wean off medication. Keep in mind, too, that being on an antidepressant sometimes feeds stress, because you know the underlying issue is still there.

When I first became a Christian and then went to medical school, the prevailing attitudes about mental health issues were very different in the church world. I remember many preachers teaching that you don't need antidepressants; *you just need Jesus!* The clear message was that medication was for spiritual weaklings and we all just needed to pray more, pray harder, and believe God more strongly (and maybe throw in a three-day fast if you're really desperate) and God will heal you! If you did take antidepressants, you obviously weren't as spiritually strong as you should be. This harsh judgmental attitude drove many people out of church.

We have come a long way in the past several decades. It is much more common and socially acceptable to take medication for anxiety or depression. Thankfully, it's been a long time since I've heard a preacher shaming someone for taking them. But we need to understand that medication isn't supposed to be a permanent fix. As a Christian physician, I see clearly how antidepressants should point us toward a larger view that looks for other strategies we can incorporate to heal.

Antidepressants typically do calm down emotional reactivity. Instead of getting anxious, frustrated, or depressed when something goes wrong, you are better able to handle stress. That is often a welcome benefit when you are under high stress. However, they often blunt emotions a lot, numbing the pain. To some degree, we need to feel pain to move forward and fix what is causing the pain. Too often, medication allows you to ignore conflict or behaviors and the need to make effective changes.

Antidepressants also blunt the good emotions. Even though you don't feel the lows as much, the medication blunts the highs as well, so you feel flat overall. You lose the ability to experience fullness of joy that Paul tells us about: "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13). Antidepressants can prevent you from experiencing the abundance of hope, joy, and peace that God intends for us.

These medications can also cause side effects such as sleep issues, weight gain or sexual difficulties. When you study how many of them work, it becomes clear that they may not be good for your brain long-term. We really don't know how they work, beyond the theory that they keep serotonin (the neurotransmitter that gives you calm well-being) in the synapse (nerve connection space) longer. While this theory hasn't been proven, the concern I have is that whatever they are doing to the neurons is also affecting their function in a way that isn't natural. We know that sometimes it is difficult to wean off these medications, so there can be long-lasting effects.

If you are on antidepressants, continue them as directed by your doctor. If it helps your stress resilience, then it probably is worthwhile for now. I do not recommend changing your medication when you are going through something highly stressful. The right time to do so is when your stress is down and you are feeling good emotionally. But optimal health is when your brain is healthy enough to not need medication.

When you and your doctor feel it is a good time to stop your medication, get your body and brain as toxin-free as possible. I have helped countless people clean up their bodies and diets and get the right nutrients into their system, which enabled them to wean off their psychiatric medications. God designed our body and our brains to work in a way that requires a lot of nutrients: proteins, healthy fats, fiber, antioxidants, vitamins, minerals. If you eat white bread, commercial meat, unhealthy fats, and sugar all day long, it should be less of a surprise when your brain doesn't work quite right. We'll get into nutrition a little later, because it is crucial to improving your ability to manage stress. But if you're drinking a soda or sweet tea right now, throw it out and get a glass of filtered water with lemon. Your brain will thank you.

More Crime, Conflict and Corruption

Crime has skyrocketed in recent years. We have come a long way from the idyllic town of Mayberry! Major cities across the US are now run by politicians who, for political reasons, are soft on crime. They have reduced bail requirements, they don't prosecute crimes, and they even let criminals out of jail. This has been growing for some time, but the riots in 2020 brought it out in the open. Senseless violence under the guise of protest caused widespread destruction in many cities.

Chicago has the sad distinction of being one of the most unsafe cities in the nation. The murder rate in the city is completely unacceptable in a developed nation. Yet criminals run the streets, and the police seem to be wholly unable to restrain them. Homelessness has taken over many cities. In particular, Los Angeles and San Francisco are overrun with homeless people on the sidewalks. It's shocking that hard-working Americans have to step over needles and walk around individuals living on the sidewalks right in front of their businesses. Entire sections of cities have been filled with homeless encampments and are now no longer pleasant places to live and raise a family. Sadly, real solutions seem to evade these city leaders.

Even worse, we as citizens have been awakened to a seditious amount of corruption within the media, the government, the banking industry, politicians, and many major corporations. This adds to our stress, as we see clearly that there are indeed many evil people in this world, and their only goal is power and control. We are expendable in their minds, and their decisions affect our daily lives in very difficult and painful ways.

We are warned that, in the last days, "Evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived" (2 Tim 3:13 KJV). There has been evil in this world for millennia, but it's more pervasive now, and we are exposed to so much more of it. With technology and instant news reporting, we see reports of evil constantly. We can see stories of evil from across the world on social media on our phones. Images and stories of corruption and violence can easily fill our minds if we let them in. Most of us have had to teach our children how to limit media and exposure to certain things. When I was young, that meant not seeing an R-rated movie

until I was well into high school. Now it's a Herculean task monitoring our children's cell phones and social media. It is just so easy for them to see things that are not good for their development or their souls. We must discipline ourselves, too. Turn off your cell phone and unplug from social media and all the negativity on the news occasionally. If all you put in your heart is bad news, how can you possibly expect to feel peace and joy? Stop adding to your stress with what you watch on television or online. Look to Jesus, the One who gives us hope, no matter what is going on around us.

More Acceptable So We Recognize It Less

We can see stress is so common that we don't appreciate how much of a problem it is. We simply accept it as normal. I am completely guilty of this. As an overachiever, I think my brain has been programmed to push through adversity, no matter how tough the situation, and to just deal with discomfort. I studied for hours in high school and got straight A's. I worked hard in college to get the grades I needed to go to medical school. Then in med school, wow! You had to study every night until late at night just to keep up with the new material that had been presented that day. Clinical rotations were worse: working thirty-six-hour shifts as a student wasn't much fun. Then residency was even harder: thirty-six-hour shifts every three days as an intern for a whole year. Sleep was a rare treat, and you just had no choice but to push on and do what had to be done.

But if you had asked any of us if we were stressed, we would just laugh. Of course we were stressed! But what choice did we have? Many of us would answer the question the same: We bear heavy loads but just accept it as a normal part of life. Many of us just don't realize the magnitude of our stress. When we are blinded to our stress and our reactions, we move through life on autopilot. We react according to our emotions and just try to get through. This causes poor brain health and worsening coping skills. Before we realize it, we are in a deep pit, and we don't even look up to see the trees and the sky above our head. We run around in circles, knowing we aren't living a joy-filled victorious life, but not sure why or what to do. We must first do a lot of honest self-evaluation to really assess how we are doing.

For example, having an infant is just stressful because of the demands. It is what it is. But if you have a sixteen-year-old with ADHD who won't do his homework, and you feel like you must nag him and sit with him every night to get his homework done, realize that you are choosing to make your evenings stressful. There are other ways to deal with problem behavior that don't emotionally drain you, especially with a teenager.

My husband and I are raising a child with autism. Anyone who has a child with special needs, whether physical or developmental, knows all too well how challenging it can be. I remember, when our son Daniel was young and never slept through the night, thinking that it would have been amazing to have a "normal" baby who only disrupted our sleep until around six months old. That would have been nothing compared to all the years we spent with him waking up at night. Add to that behavioral and school challenges, and any special needs parent becomes a superhero of sorts. We do it because we love our child, but often we also underestimate how stressed we are.

I have a friend whose middle schooler frequently forgot her lunch or schoolwork and would then call to ask her mom bring it to her. One year, she decided to tell her daughter on the first day of school, "I will bring something to you once and only once as an act of grace. Anything forgotten after that will have consequences, and you are responsible for those." It only took until the second week of school for her to hit that wall. When she forgot something, she was astounded her mom held firm, despite her insistence about how she would get points marked off. It was hard for mom, but guess what? It worked beautifully! It only took a few times for her daughter to realize that she and she alone had to be responsible.

What are you doing for your kids that they should do? Laundry, dishes, or cleaning? My kids started doing their own laundry at age five. I had enough to do, and they were quite capable of washing and drying their clothes. They learned to help with meal prep in the kitchen, they always helped with dishes, and they had to pick up their things every night. I'm not saying they were great at their chores or that they always had a good attitude, but I sure wasn't going to do all the work after being in my office for ten

hours. I learned early on that I needed to come home and relax if I was going to be any good to anyone else the next day.

Another situation that required adjustment was when my dad's heart failure was getting worse the last few years of his life. He and his doctors had a lot of trouble keeping fluid out of his lungs while keeping his kidneys working. His anxiety got worse the last few years, essentially because he knew he was dying, and he was not ready for that. He would call me and ask me a lot of detailed questions about his lab values and medications. This created high stress for me, because I wasn't his doctor and couldn't answer most of his questions.

I couldn't change what was happening to him. I tried my best to answer his questions, but I realized one day that he really didn't want to know why his creatinine level went up. He was just anxious about dying and focused on the details of his medical condition as a coping mechanism. Like a child hearing thunder in the middle of the night, he wanted to be told it was all going to be okay. I started deflecting his questions from the specifics into reassuring generalities, and it seemed to help his high anxiety come down. We couldn't change his condition, but we both could change our thoughts and our speech. We started to talk about dying and faith, and that was so much more needful than me answering medical questions.

I changed my approach with Dad to try to not enable his anxiety, but to bring him peace. He was anxious and dying slowly, and my mom was taking care of him around the clock, so that situation wasn't changeable. But I had to take special time to care for myself spiritually and mentally before and after interacting with Mom or Dad. *You can change how you react.* We all grieved when Dad passed away, but we chose to celebrate a life well-lived.

Stress can shape you, grow you, and help you become who you are supposed to be. It's all in your reaction to it. When you are honest with yourself, you will see how you can handle stress better. Sometimes you need to say no to further commitments. Sometimes it's going to bed earlier with a good book. Sometimes it's choosing to overlook a hurtful comment. Sometimes it's fully forgiving someone of deep hurt.

Your first step in overcoming is recognizing truly what your stress is. The second is realizing how you are reacting to it. You will not overcome and grow into what God has planned for you until you are honest with yourself and God.

About the Author



Gretchen Reis, MD, specializes in bioidentical hormone therapy and anti-aging medicine. She is passionate about combining nutrition, healthy lifestyle habits, bioidentical hormones, and nutritional supplements to help her patients achieve optimal health.

She graduated from Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas, and then completed a residency in Family Medicine in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

She practiced in Family Medicine in Pennsylvania for a number of years before moving to Ohio, where she had a rural solo family medicine practice for 10 years.

Fascinated with a natural approach to medicine, she transitioned to Integrative Medicine with an emphasis on bioidentical hormone therapy. She started her anti-aging practice in Charlotte, North Carolina in 2013.

She and her staff at Integrity Wellness MD offer bioidentical hormone therapy, functional medicine, and weight loss programs. She is a member of the North Carolina Integrative Medical Society and the American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine.

She and her husband live just across the border in South Carolina with the youngest of their four adopted children.