

# How to Avoid Burnout

By John Guzzetta

National Geographic did a 2008 special called *Stress: Portrait of a Killer*. It showed that the human stress response exists for a good reason—survival! It gives us the ability to handle sudden but brief life-and-death situations. Adrenaline floods our system. This hormone shuts down all non-essential functions such as digestion and reproduction. It increases attention, heart rate, and blood pressure. Once the crisis is over, the stress response subsides.

The modern world, however, has created a situation where many people are under constant and chronic stress. Adrenaline floods our system in response to non-life-threatening emotional and psychological stresses, and stays there for hours a day—as we fight traffic, breathlessly rush kids to multiple activities, face anxiety at work, cope with financial troubles at home, etc. Scientists have determined that humans have the same physical response to these stressors as a zebra running from a lion—but in our case, we never escape the lion! Over time, this physical reaction to stress has a damaging effect. Scientists have linked stress to chronic high blood pressure, heart arrhythmia, artery blockages, a compromised immune system which leads to sickness and bacterial ulcers, weight gain (as well as the location of the gain), altered brain chemistry, brain cell loss in the area of the brain responsible for memory, and even a six-fold acceleration in the fraying of the structure of DNA. It is scientifically proven—the stress response actually alters one's cells! Jesus shows us by God's word and by His own example that God did not intend for His children to live this way. Now, I must admit—I am also a victim to a chaotic lifestyle, largely brought on by my own choices. No one is making me hustle to meet a mortgage; no one is making me shuttle my kids to band; no one is making me stay up until midnight answering texts and emails. We all need to learn: how would God have us to handle stress?

**1.) God doesn't expect us to be stress free.** Relaxing all day in the garden will come in eternity. We must work to support families (2 Thess. 3:6–13, Eph. 4:28, Gen. 3:19). We must work conscientiously and diligently (Prov. 10:4–5, 12:11, 20:13, 21:5, 22:29). We must be especially mindful of the spiritual work that needs doing in His kingdom (John 9:4, Matt. 9:38). Paul didn't whine about injury compensation or limiting on-the-job stresses.

Are they servants of Christ? ... I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death ... on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers ... dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold an exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches (2 Cor. 11:23–29).

Paul was quite happy to expend his last breath, his last drop of energy, in the service of God!

**2.) Take breaks.** Jesus, too, was extremely busy. He packed a lifetime of ministry into three years. He was constantly overwhelmed by the crowds. Even though Jesus didn't have a cell phone, the crowds harangued him at all hours of the day and night.

But Jesus took breaks. He showed that man was not designed to go non-stop. He took time away to recharge His own batteries, and the batteries of His disciples. In Mark 6, for example, Jesus summoned the twelve apostles and sent them out in pairs into the surrounding territories, to heal the sick, cast out demons, and preach the gospel. After laboring diligently for many days in this effort, they returned home to Jesus exhausted.

The apostles gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught. And He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while." (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.) They went away in the boat to a secluded place by themselves (Mark 6:31–32).

Jesus knew that the apostles could not maintain their furious pace forever. Undoubtedly there were many who needed to be taught and healed during this time; the work did not go away! But He knew that to continue effectively for a long period of time, the apostles would need to take time out for a break and recover from the stresses of work in the kingdom. In fact, Jesus observed an almost daily period of rest, away from the hustle of people and the stress of His ministry.

When day came, Jesus left and went to a secluded place (Luke 4:42).

The news about Him was spreading even farther, and large crowds were gathering to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray (Luke 5:15–16).

At this time, He went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God (Luke 6:12).

Jesus got up and went away from there to the region of Tyre. And when He had entered a house, He wanted no one to know of it (Mark 7:24).

So, give your all in work, family, and church. But don't feel guilty to relax now and then. Schedule it! Read a book or the Bible. Watch a movie. Take a long bubble bath. Take a nap. Sit on the porch swing. Go shopping without the kids. Travel. Pursue a hobby. Assemble a puzzle. Do what you need to do to unwind.

It may even be good to declare a certain block of time each week as off-limits to intrusion. While the Sabbath is a part of the Old Covenant, and we are not obliged to observe it, Jesus points out that "The Sabbath was made for man" (Mark 2:27); that is, for the benefit of mankind. The Hebrew word *shabbath* means "to stop or cease." God said "six days you shall labor and do all your work" but required them cease on the seventh (Ex. 20:8–11). Remember, God doesn't need to rest (Isaiah 40:28), but He still rested from Creation to show us the way.

Maybe we could learn from this. If you don't take time to recreate, you will eventually break down. Your family would be served best by a well-rested, happy, energized parent, rather than by a frustrated, short-tempered, burned-out parent. The same goes for your employer and your church and your God.

**3.) Choose the good part.** Mary and Martha. Not everything that is urgent is important. Choose wisely. Eliminate some things that are not necessary for eternal life, and serve only to make us reach for the Xanax.

It is appropriate for me to insert here, that some of us take this too far, and we have started to work at our play, pursuing our hobbies or TV or video games to excess. This is abuse of leisure.

**4.) Pray.** Learn the difference between things you can control and things you cannot (Matt. 6:25–33). You'll notice that much of the time Jesus spent on the mountaintop was spent in prayer. Ask God to handle the things you cannot (1 Peter 5:7). Do the best you can today, but "do not worry about tomorrow" (Matt. 6:34).

I recently finished a book written by a lawyer who had a nervous breakdown and went and joined an Amish community. Our forefathers had to work hard for food and pray for rain, but when the Sun went down, and the snows came, they were able to unwind.