

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing, and perfect will."  
Romans 12:2

As we continue our discussion of the "Wholeness Wheel", it is important to note that although the wheel diagram depicts each area of well-being as a separate entity, that is not really true in real life. More and more research has shown that all areas of well-being are intertwined and affect and are affected by each other greatly. One example of this is stress. It is an important part of emotional health and affects and is affected by all areas of our well-being.

In his book, *The Jesus Prescription for a Happy Life*, Leonard Sweet summarizes what many of us all ready know. "We are a downright uptight people." A Louis Harris poll reports that 86% of Americans report chronic stress while 60% do nothing about it except carry it around. Another recent study found that 38% of Americans "always feel rushed".

Stress has almost become a badge of honor. Today's world has become so hectic and complicated that few of us can find the personal space and life pace necessary to attain a healthy mind, body, and spirit. Not that long ago, however, this was much easier within reach of many. As Phillip Chard, psychologist, notes, "Imagine a workday without e-mail, the Internet, multitasking, and "do it yesterday" expectations. Think of Christmas without malls, when presents were homemade, simple and less expensive. Visualize a Sunday when stores were closed, there was no TV, and people were content to read, play games, take long walks, nap, and engage in unhurried conversation." Not that this earlier time was perfect or didn't have its own problems. But, overall, it was easier to stay focused on one thing, manage time and tasks, spend time focusing on an inner life, and still have time to just "be". Our current culture makes stress management a top priority for maintaining our health and well-being.

Stress is defined as "the nonspecific response of the body to any stimulus, real or imagined." No matter what you are doing, you are under some amount of stress. If you didn't have some stress in your life, you'd be dead! Even while you sleep, your body must continue to function and react to change. Stress comes from two basic forces, the stress of physical activity and the stress of mental/emotional activity. All stress is not bad. Stress can be positive (a promotion, getting married) or negative (job loss, divorce). Acute stress comes on suddenly and lasts for a relatively short time while chronic stress is long-lasting. Chronic stress is far more damaging than acute stress. Chronic stress can wear you down physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. In fact, scientific research has proven chronic stress can make you physically sick. It not only makes people more vulnerable to catching illnesses but researchers found it can also impair their immune system's ability to respond to its own anti-inflammatory signals that are triggered by certain hormones. These findings "suggest a novel mechanism through which psychological stress could influence the onset and/or progression of conditions that involve excessive inflammation, like allergic, autoimmune, cardiovascular, infectious, and rheumatologic illnesses."

Stress can certainly affect our social well-being. Let's face it; stress can make us irritable, angry, and sometimes just plain "crazy"! It can cause us to lash out at anything or anyone that approaches us or seems to be causing or adding to our stress. High levels of stress can even immobilize us physically and mentally. As your stress level rises, you may find yourself distracted and less reliable behind the wheel of your car, sometimes unable to follow a conversation, searching for the right words, or losing concentration on important tasks. In other words, stress can even make you stupid! Needless to say, making decisions or taking important actions in a state of high stress is not recommended.

When we notice these stress reactions it is important to reduce the stress we're feeling to a manageable level as soon as possible. Many techniques can be effective for stress reduction: prayer, scripture, sleep, exercise, journal writing, service to others, hot baths, music, meditation, deep breathing, etc., etc... Each of us needs to find our own way to help us get back on an even keel. Trust in God can be a very effective stress reducer. No matter how we feel, God is in charge and will bring new life from any situation. This new life may not be our enthusiastic choice, but it is new life, nevertheless. Eventually, we are usually able to see what is provided is exactly what was required. Effective training in stress reduction can help us reduce the effect of stress and allow us to "stop the madness" through our own responses. Using some or all of the techniques listed above allows us to respond to God's power and love, and trust in his will and direction. During this Lenten season, I encourage you to make time in your life to discover your own way to reduce stress in your life – you'll be happier and healthier because of it!

Peace and Joy,  
Bonnie