

WHEN STRESS TOOK OVER MY LIFE

No one willingly makes decisions to increase his stress to an unbearable degree. It usually happens slowly, or is thrust upon a person quickly, and one day the reality of what has taken place becomes clear. For me, it was a mixture of decisions made out of necessity and overconfidence in my ability to “multitask” that led to stress taking control of my life. I discovered stress has a way of sneaking into one’s life with the stealth of a thief before launching an attempt at a total takeover. No one who ignores the signs or has poor boundaries is completely safe, and let no one kid you, if stress takes over your life there is a price to be paid. It may be a little different for everyone, but the price of allowing stress to rule one’s life is amazingly predictable.

The following is the price I paid:

- **My health suffered.** There is something about being strapped to a stretcher and being forced to stare at the ceiling of an ambulance that makes a man question his approach to life.
- **My mood suffered.** Stressed people are grumpy people. Some have been grumpy for so long it feels normal.
- **I forgot how to have fun.** I often ask stressed out people, “When’s the last time you had fun?” The look I get in response says it all. They usually stare at me with a blank expression that turns to confusion.
- **I missed good times with friends and family.** Many days I felt so badly and my mind was so preoccupied that I missed out on times of enjoying others in my life that I love. I was there with them—but then again, I wasn’t.
- **I worried more.** When we are stressed it always feels like we are forgetting something, needs to do something, or something is about to go wrong.
- **It was actually more difficult to have good boundaries.** When one has had all he can take, it would stand to reason it would be easier for him to say, “Enough is enough!” I found fatigue had eroded my better judgment and setting new boundaries or maintaining them seemed like a more difficult task than allowing someone to put more on me.

Other symptoms of a stress take over are as follows:

Stress Warning Signs and Symptoms

Cognitive Symptoms

- Memory problems
- Inability to concentrate
- Poor judgment
- Seeing only the negative
- Anxious or racing thoughts
- Constant worrying

Physical Symptoms

- Aches and pains
- Diarrhea or constipation
- Nausea, dizziness

Emotional Symptoms

- Moodiness
- Irritability or short temper
- Agitation, inability to relax
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Sense of loneliness and isolation
- Depression or general unhappiness

Behavioral Symptoms

- Eating more or less
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Isolating yourself from others

Stress Warning Signs and Symptoms

- Chest pain, rapid heartbeat
- Loss of sex drive
- Frequent colds
- Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities
- Using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax
- Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing)

The Bottom Line

The bottom line for me was that I had to take my life back. My plan was simple:

- **I stopped making additional commitments** where I had a choice.
- **I delegated everything I could.** “Everything” really did not actually have to be done by me.
- **I set realistic expectations for myself.**
- **I started saying “No”** to people who had been taking advantage of my willingness to help them.
- **I found the off button on my phone** every night at the same time.
- **I started exercising anytime I could**, even if it were just walking around the mall at lunch. Gradually, I built exercise time into my schedule. My health and sleep started to improve right away.
- **I started taking time to have fun.** Enjoying the people I love is a medicine all its own.
- **I accepted the fact that no matter how hard I worked, someone would always want me to work harder.** Consequently, some people would never be pleased and that was their problem—not mine—unless I let it become my problem.
- **I learned it is okay to disappoint some people.** Some people will always expect more, more, more, and when we are all used up, they will move on to the next person and use them up.

I took more steps, made more changes, and still go off course from time-to-time, yet I feel like a different person than I did when stress ruled my life. I almost feel as if I have come back to life. Nevertheless, I know “stress” is probably waiting around the corner and I must remain vigilant or else suffer another take-over.

For more about how to develop your plan to take back your life from the clutches of stress, call me at: (256) 882-7881 or email me at: mb@alabamacounselingandconsulting.com, or take time to read these great articles:

http://www.helpguide.org/mental/stress_signs.htm

http://www.helpguide.org/mental/stress_management_relief_coping.htm