

A photograph of a person's hand reaching up towards a sunset sky. The hand is in the foreground, reaching upwards, and the background is a bright, golden sunset with clouds. The overall mood is one of hope and reaching for something higher.

two major causes of stress:

LOSS AND UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Carroll Juliano, S.H.C.J.

Loughlan Sofield, S.T.

Dr. Thomas Holmes and Dr. Richard Rahe at the University of Washington Medical School created a stress scale, (The Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale) assigning a certain number to each life event. Holmes and Rahe hypothesized that if the cumulative number of the various life events experienced within a period of time reached a certain threshold, the chances of the individual being diagnosed with a serious illness was extremely high. The life experiences that earned the highest numbers were related to loss: the death of spouse, divorce, marital separation, death of a close family member, etc. This test, with the opportunity to talk with a therapist online, is available online (<http://www.findingstone.com/services/tests/stresstest.htm>).

During a recent parish mission we encountered a number of people who spoke about personal and family tragedies and losses. There seemed to be an inordinate number of people who had cancer or who lost a spouse to cancer. Based on Holmes and Rahe's research, the experiences of these parishioners should have produced extremely high levels of stress. However, this was not the case. Although these individuals had undergone very painful and traumatic experiences, there was a surprising absence of stress in their lives.

Our first reaction was surprise. Upon further reflection, we recalled an article by James J. Gill, S.J., M.D., published in *HUMAN DEVELOPMENT* in 1980. Father Gill distinguished between stressors and stress. Each of the tragedies and losses encountered by these individuals were stressors, i.e., incidents that had the potential to produce stress. Stressors, however, do not automatically result in stress. The result depends upon the response of the individual. As Joseph Campbell, the mythologist, has stated, "Mystics and madmen swim in the same water. One drowns and the other is

reborn.” Campbell’s insight helps shed light on what we were observing in these faith-filled parishioners. It was the depth of their faith that prevented the stressor from evolving into stress. No one has to be a victim of her or his life experiences. Stressors do not have to inevitably result in stress. Ultimately, each of us has control over whether we drown or are reborn. One of the best defenses against stress is a strong faith life.

We interviewed forty-two women and men for our book *The Collaborative Leader*. These individuals, by the way they lived their values in the workplace, gave witness to the essence of Christianity. We called them “Wisdom People.” One question raised during the interviews was, “Where do you experience stress?” Almost to a person they had difficulty identifying stress in their lives. These Wisdom People were individuals who held very strong Christian values and consciously attempted to live these values everyday in their lives. We are convinced that the absence of stress was a direct result of their strong faith. When pushed to pursue the question about stress further, those who were employers were able to identify only two areas of stress: when they had to fire someone, or when economics prevented them from being more generous to their employees.

We have worked in over two hundred dioceses on six continents. Much of our ministry has been in working with lay, ordained and professed church leaders. Based on our experiences, we have identified two major areas that are potential stressors: loss and unrealistic expectations.

LOSS

We observe rampant losses in the personal lives of many of the people we encounter. In addition, church leaders increasingly face the varied and profound losses experienced by many in their dioceses and parishes.

Parishes and schools are being closed. Parishes that have always had a pastor, “their priest,” find that they must now often share that priest with one or more parishes. The economic situation is causing the elimination of valuable, committed church workers. The losses experienced have not only been the tangible ones such as these, but also the more ethereal ones, for example, the loss of a dream. Many of the more traditional members of congregations are still grieving the loss of a church that was the foundation of their lives. They have been unable to cope with the many changes ushered in by the Second Vatican Council. More recently, the sexual abuse scandal has left Catholics grieving the trust that they always believed they could have in their priests and religious.

All losses are stressors. One of the dynamics that makes loss especially painful and that exerts such power in the lives of people is the fact that grieving is never completed. Whenever there is an experience of a loss in the present, it resurrects the unfinished grieving from the losses of the past.

There are a number of concrete steps that can reduce the amount of stress generated by loss. Here are a few.

1 *Take time to embrace the loss.* Allow yourself to experience the conflicting emotions that are rampant during loss. Failure to take this first step will dramatically increase the stress.

2 *Accept all the myriad feelings that accompany the experience of loss.* The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that emotions are neither positive nor negative, and they are certainly not sinful. Jesus was a man of many emotions and Jesus was incapable of sinning. One of the major emotions experienced at times of loss is anger. For some Christians it is very difficult to accept certain emotions, such as anger. The formation of the past, which sometimes labeled anger as bad

and sinful, makes it very difficult to accept feelings of anger.

3 *Talk about the feelings.* This is often the most difficult step. Talking about feelings and emotions resurrects that unfinished business of the past. While there may be a desire to talk about the feelings, there is often a corresponding fear. Feelings are often verbalized indirectly through symbols of loss. This explains the phenomenon observed in parishes when the removal of an altar railing or statue results in powerful reactions by parishioners.

4 *Consciously enter into the grieving process.* The more losses that have been repressed in the past, the greater the amount of grieving that must be addressed in the present. Sometimes religion has tended to overly spiritualize the loss and avoid the grieving. The amount of grieving that is required differs from person to person and is influenced by how loss has been embraced in the past.

5 *Ritualize the loss.* The church is rich in ritual. Some families, communities and cultures have developed powerful rituals to deal with loss. Consult some of the spiritual literature which offers a variety of suggestions for ritualizing loss. For example, some ethnic communities have a mass 30 days after the death, and again on the one year anniversary of the death.

6 *Allow new people into your life and embrace the new experiences of life.* Christians claim to be death-and-resurrection people. The challenge is to rise above the dying and grieving and to adopt the new life that is being offered by the Lord.

By following these steps you assume control over the losses and prevent them from causing undue stress. You can help to transform the losses into opportunities for growth and transformation.

UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

One of the most powerful causes of stress that we have observed among church leaders is the internalization of unrealistic expectations. The number of expectations currently thrust onto church leaders appears to be increasing disproportionately. This is occurring at the same time that the number of full-time ministers, especially priests and religious, seems to be decreasing. Remember that these external expectations that have their genesis in others are merely stressors. They become stress when these expectations are internalized and become the criteria by which one monitors his or her expectations. The expectations of others do not produce stress. Each person is free to accept or reject these external expectations. The inherent problem can be found in the characteristics that are common to many church ministers.

The Future of Religious Life in the United States Study discovered that the most caring members of religious congregations scored above ninety percent on a scale of "niceness." Even though this characteristic sounds positive, it is not. These are people whose niceness serves as a deterrent to dealing with some of the more problematic realities of life, like anger and conflict. Nice people are primary candidates for stress because their needs result in an internalizing of the expectations of others thus producing stress.

Research on priests revealed similar characteristics among priests. Priests differed from other men in two ways. One, they die younger than men in general. This was attributed to the fact that men who live alone die younger, and many priests, even when they live with others, tend to live an isolated life. The second way in which priests differed from other men is that they are more "tender-minded." Tender-minded individuals are more gentle, loving and compassionate, but they also have a greater need to be accepted and loved. These excessive needs for acceptance and love are what can result in stress. These priests have a tendency to try to live up to the expectations of others. They have difficulty in saying no and

setting limits. This inability to set realistic limits often results in burnout. We have observed an extremely high level of burnout among many priests, and burnout can result in tired, depressed individuals. We offer some recommendations for avoiding the stress of unrealistic expectations.

1 *It is imperative to have people in your life who know and care for you and to whom you have given permission to confront and challenge you when they see you assuming unrealistic expectations.* They are people whom you trust and with whom you share honestly and openly. These listening friends, though, must realize that when they offer you honest feedback, it will not always be graciously received. Frequently when people are experiencing burnout, they respond with hostility even to those who are their closest friends and allies.

2 *Allow others to see your pain, hurt and vulnerability.* We have encountered many leaders in ministry who find it difficult to let others see their humanness. Those who are unable or unwilling to share their vulnerability live extremely lonely lives. There is some dynamic in their personality that interferes with their ability to disclose their brokenness. Those individuals who are able to share their humanity, however, usually find compassionate responses from the people they encounter in their ministry.

3 *Be as compassionate, loving and gentle with yourself as you are with those to whom you minister.* Most ministers, by their very nature, seem to incorporate these qualities. People who are compassionate, loving and gentle are attracted to ministry. The problem is that while ministers tend to extend these qualities to others, they are often not very compassionate, loving, gentle, tender and forgiving toward themselves. Again, it may have been something in the formation of the past that militates against applying these Christian attitudes toward oneself.

4 *Be like Jesus.* In an article in *Sisters Today* George Wilson described the number of times that Jesus said no and

set limits. When we are unable to say no and set realistic limits we are not being Christ-like.

CONCLUSION

Stress is inevitable. It is part of the human condition. However, we have much more control over stress than we sometimes acknowledge. If we wish to reduce the amount of stress in our lives we must take personal responsibility and not allow the many stressors to destroy us. When we allow stress to dominate our lives, we become sad, tired, depressed individuals and our spirituality suffers. Ronald Rolheiser has said, "The opposite of being spiritual is to have lost all zest for living."

RECOMMENDED READING

Sofield, L, and D. Kuhn. *The Collaborative Leader: Listening to the Wisdom of God's People*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1995.

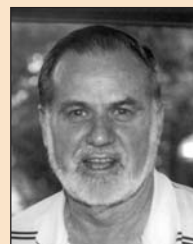
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Sister Carroll Juliano, S.H.C.J., is currently serving on the leadership team of the American Province of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus.



Brother Loughlan Sofield, S.T., is senior editor of *Human Development Magazine*. He has conducted workshops on psychology and ministry in North and South America, Europe, Australia, Africa, Asia, and India.