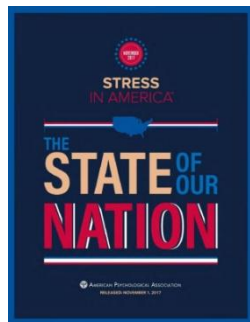


5 Approaches to Dealing with Stress

No one invites stress, but we all encounter it. And it seems these days, more and more people have recurring appointments with stress.

The American Psychological Association releases an annual "Stress in America" survey. Last year's survey reveals the majority of Americans experience stress over the following:

- The future of our nation - 63%
- Money - 62%
- Work - 61%
- The current political environment - 57%
- Violence and crime - 51%



What causes your stress level to rise?

More importantly, what do you do to alleviate the stress? The same survey pointed to five ways people managed their stress. I think these five are great tools—if handled correctly. Let's not just approach these as coping mechanisms; let's look at them from a biblical perspective.

1. Spend time with friends and family. Of those surveyed, 57 percent found these connections to be helpful, but what better place to be with family and friends than in the context of a community of believers? We experience the presence of Christ as we lean on each other.

"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another ..." (Heb. 19:24-25).

We're not in this alone. Christ is with us, and He has surrounded us with other believers, others who know and trust that God is greater than anything we face.

2. Listen to music. When stress comes knocking, 47 percent of people turn to music. I assume this is because of the relaxing nature of most music, but let's take that to a deeper level.

"... speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord" (Eph. 5:19).

Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs draw me closer to Christ. The words in these songs remind me who is in charge of my life.

3. Exercise. Forty-six percent of people use exercise as a way to relieve stress. Stress negatively impacts our health, but

through exercise we can counteract the effects of stress. Physical activity kicks in the production of endorphins, those transmitters in the brain that make us feel good. Focusing on our exercise routine takes our focus off whatever stresses us and can put us in a better mood.

4. Meditation. Only 12 percent of people use meditation as a stress-reducer. This is a valuable discipline, but let me be clear on what meditation is—and what it isn't. Biblical meditation has nothing to do with the concept prevalent in eastern religions. As the Bible describes meditation, it is not the emptying of your mind; it is the filling of your mind.

- *"Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful" (Josh. 1:8).*
- *"... whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers" (Ps. 1:2-3).*
- *"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Phil. 4:8).*

We meditate on the Word of God. We fill our minds with the things of God. As we do that, we focus on the One who is greater than anything that causes stress.

5. Pray. Sadly only 29 percent of those surveyed turned to prayer when feelings of stress knocked on their door. Prayer should be our first stop.

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7).

That's what Nehemiah did. When Nehemiah got word that the city he loved—Jerusalem—was in a sad state of disrepair, he cried. He grieved. He was torn up about it, but he turned his anxious concerns into prayer. Nehemiah 1:5-11 captures his prayer. He channeled his concerns into a prayer to "Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments" (Neh. 1:5).

Need a stress reducer in your life? Start with prayer. Look to God. Talk to Him. Turn over your anxious thoughts to "the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love."

God can handle it.