

HEALING FOR THE CITY

Counseling in the Urban Setting

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Chapter I- Stress and Urban Life

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Stress and Urban Life

We live in a stress-filled world. In recent years we have begun to understand the tremendous costs of stress. These include rampant addictive behaviors, broken marriages, lowered job productivity, illness and soaring medical expenses, senseless violence, widespread depression, and emotional breakdown. People spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year on entertainment, recreation, biofeedback, therapists, drugs, vitamins, seminars, and books in their search for relief from stress.

Stress is not unique to city life but is magnified by it. City dwellers must wrestle with the special stressors of stimulus overload, constant change, crowding, noise, pollution, unpredictable transportation, cultural differences, homelessness, and drug infestation. Every day brings multiple demands into the urban dweller's life that require processing and adjustment. The sheer volume of information that greets a city dweller each day in the form of television, newspapers, magazines, leaflets, posters, and work materials creates stress. The need to be aware of and interact with large numbers of people, many of whom are different from oneself and some of whom are potentially threatening, brings significant stress to most city dwellers. People are often unaware that these realities are causing underlying stress in their lives.

At the same time, anonymity, isolation, and loneliness plague the lives of millions, bringing intense inner turmoil. Values that promote competitiveness and mistrust in the workplace, together with an almost desperate pursuit of wealth, comfort, luxury, and status, put many urban dwellers into a daily emotional drag race.

There is considerable agreement about some of the stress-related characteristics of big cities.¹ College students from a wide range of small, medium, and large places described big cities as being impersonal, as fostering feelings of confusion, and as being made up of people who are untrusting, while agreeing that the terms peaceful, safe, healthful, relaxed, close-knit, and sense of intimacy did not describe the big-city atmosphere. Cities are more complex and more stressful than small towns, but the degree of stress experienced by a given person depends on a number of factors.

Effective Christian counseling in the city must take stress into account. Not only does stress impact directly on well-being, but faulty attempts to cope with it may actually increase its negative effects. Christian counselors need to understand the nature and sources of stress for the individual city dweller, and learn ways to help him reduce and manage it. The result will be healthier people.

The Nature of Stress

What is stress? Dr. Hans Selye, the father of modern stress research and theory, has defined it as "the non-specific response of the body to any demand made."² Stress is the wear and tear caused by living life. We are constantly faced with demands on our body, mind, relationships, and spirit. These demands or stressors require responses, which place varying degrees of strain on our body and mind. We try to maintain a state of inner balance-what we are used to. Any stimulation, change, or perception of possible threat throws us out of balance.

Stress is essentially the strain put on our minds and bodies when we try to recover our previous state of balance. It is a natural part of life.

Everyone who is alive experiences some stress. Problems develop when our lives are filled with more stress than we can handle without physical, emotional, relational, or spiritual breakdowns. When stress levels are not properly managed and we experience prolonged, excessive stress, we begin to disintegrate. Physical, emotional, relational, or spiritual breakdown eventually occurs.

The primary stress response is to prepare ourselves for fight or flight. When we feel threatened, a message is sent to our brain, various hormones are released, and sugar and fats are poured into our blood to prepare our body to actively struggle with the stressor. Often the thing that threatens us is not physical, but psychological: Our psyches are much more likely to be threatened than our lives. In the city, however, both kinds of stressors will often be present. The thing to remember is that whatever the stressor is, our bodies respond to it with an "alarm" response.

Although there is both good stress (eustress) and bad stress (distress) which, when accumulated, can result in breakdown, we will focus in this chapter on distress. When we mention stress, we are talking about distress.

Stress is physical or psychological tension in response to any stimulus that is perceived as potentially threatening to one's physical or emotional well-being. The key words are "perceived" and "threatening." What may be perceived as threatening by one person may not have the same effect on another. Some people see the city itself as highly threatening and do everything possible to stay away from it. Others love the city and seem to thrive on its diversity and energy. Some see racial and cultural differences as threats, while others celebrate those differences. Some see city streets as filled with danger, while others enjoy the activity. Ultimately, a "threat" is anything seen as a challenge to one's biological or emotional survival. Anything that might result in death, damage, devastation, or devaluation is a threat. Anything that promises the real possibility of pain is stressful. This suggests that the same situation may or may not produce stress, depending on whether or not a person perceives it as threatening. Among the signs of stress are

- Constant fatigue;
- Increased irritability and quickness to anger;
- Frequent headaches or gastrointestinal problems;
- Trouble breathing;
- Feelings of being overwhelmed, pushed to the limit;
- Frequent mood swings;
- Lack of joy, flattening of emotions, depression;
- Racing thoughts;
- Difficulty concentrating, preoccupation;
- Insomnia or oversleeping;
- Muscle twitching, spasms, tightness;
- Spiritual flatness;
- Desire to run away;
- Increased mistrust;
- Paranoia.

Although these signs do not automatically indicate stress, the more of them that are present in a person's life, the greater the likelihood that the underlying problem is stress.

Sources Of Stress

Overload

The very energy, color, and excitement that gives urban life its sense of vibrancy and anticipation ("somethin's always happenin' ") also carries a price tag for many residents. Fast-paced city life often stretches people to their limits. The sheer volume of sights, sounds, people, information, and events that assault the urban dweller creates stress and requires creative attempts to cope. One's senses are bombarded daily with stimuli one must process and decide whether to heed or ignore. This experience is called stimulus overload.³

Stress researchers have found that as the number of life-event changes increases, physical and psychological disorders increase as well.⁴ While there has been much criticism of these findings (due to apparent flaws in design and methodology), health and well-being do seem to suffer in overload situations.

The degree to which something in the urban environment causes stress may reflect what one chooses to pay attention to when one's stimulus- processing capacity is overloaded.⁵ Perceived helplessness or loss of personal control also seems to be a key element in the experience of stress.⁶ For example, urban noise and crowding do not necessarily produce stress, depending upon adaptation and the degree of choice people feel they have over their environment. The complexity and novelty of the stimuli that need to be processed also seem to affect the amount of psychological and physical arousal produced.⁷ High levels of input per se are not necessarily stressful, and may even be pleasing, depending in part on adaptation. For example, most initial encounters with the city leave non-urban dwellers feeling overwhelmed, while experienced urban dwellers may actually seek out greater and more novel stimulations.

The problem with overload is that it taxes our emotional and biological ability to determine whether or not each thing that reaches our senses is possibly threatening. If something is judged potentially dangerous, our body, mind, and emotions have to adapt. Substantial amounts of emotional energy are spent dealing with the stressors. The need to evaluate and adjust are at the heart of stress. Without some way to limit the number of potential threats (and thus our need to respond to them), people begin to break down.

The amount of breakdown will vary with different people, due to differences in the way each person interprets life events. Urban life is, of course, not uniform. There are differing amounts and intensities of stress, depending on where and how one lives in the city. In a sense, there are almost as many "cities" within a city as there are individuals! In general, however, the number of potential stressors (overload) is greater in cities than in non-urban situations. The amount of energy needed to "keep things together" is greater; if the demands of urban life exceed our processing capacity, we begin to "fall apart" to some degree.

In addition to the number of stressors, there are five other major classes of stressors that contribute to the build-up of urban stress. These are (1) psychospiritual needs, (2) personality styles, (3) social-psychological factors, (4) environmental factors, and (5) bioecological factors.

Psychospiritual Needs

Every human being living since the Fall⁸ has struggled with deep inner needs for acceptance, belonging, equity, identity, security, significance, and transcendence. The interwoven dimensions of mind and spirit give rise to these psychospiritual or existential needs.

We each want to experience an inner sense of feeling okay (acceptance); of intimacy and attachment to one or more others (belonging); of physical, emotional, and spiritual safety (security); and of meaning and purpose for life that goes beyond the purely natural and connects with God (transcendence). Along with these experiences we also like to know that we matter and are valued (significance), and that life is fair (equity).

While urban life does not create these needs, it may deepen the deficits that we experience, depending upon the social-psychological and environmental experiences a person has. Experiences that reflect consistent caring, affirmation, and love help to meet our existential needs and provide us with a sense of shalom (well-being). Experiences that produce feelings of vulnerability, helplessness, invasion, and mistrust deepen our innate deficits and fill us with inner stress and pain.

Because human beings were not designed by God to experience the pain of psychospiritual deficits, we often compound our stress by trying to find relief from it. We search and scan; we stretch and strive and strain trying to find ways to meet our needs and alleviate stress. Attempts to meet the stress of existential deficits through lifestyles of affluence, appearance, achievement, or addiction will fail. Attempts to meet these needs through relational patterns based on power, manipulation, or emotional inequality will not work. Attempts to satisfy deficits of the soul through the diversions of entertainment, eating, and education will not do it. Perfectionism, workaholism, cynicism, and hedonism are coping attempts that only temporarily satisfy some of the deficits while deepening others.

Christian counselors must be able to help struggling people identify their key deficits (needs) and the way(s) they have tried to cope. They can then help them to find more constructive ways to live their lives and manage their stress. Perhaps the most powerful single source of inner healing comes when a hurting person is able to experience consistent, deep love. However, because we live in a fallen world that presents us with all kinds of opportunities to feel rejection, purposelessness, identity confusion, self-doubt, loneliness, anxiety, helplessness, victimization, and emptiness, we will never be completely free of psychospiritual stress. Because the city represents a greater concentration of psychologically and spiritually wounded (after-the-Fall) people, it also increases the likelihood that urban dwellers will experience pain and stress.

Personality Styles

In response to the stress of existential deficits (psychospiritual needs), each person begins to develop a characteristic coping pattern. This is based partly on observation of how "emotionally significant others" (especially parents) respond to stress, partly on rewards and punishments given by those important others, partly on what we're taught and told, and partly on our own trial and error.

Three personality styles that tend to intensify stress are:

- (1) perfectionism,
- (2) nonassertiveness, and
- (3) a type A personality orientation.

Perfectionism increases stress because it pushes people to strive to be something more than what they are. They are seldom satisfied with themselves and their efforts. Their focus is on what they need to become rather than on who they are. Perfectionism creates stress because it refuses to give permission for people to relax and be. The perfectionist's life is bound up in "shoulds" and "oughts." Extreme competitiveness in the urban marketplace encourages perfectionism and its equally stressful companion, workaholism. Both patterns are rooted in dysfunctional family-of-origin patterns. They are each unsatisfactory attempts to meet deep psychospiritual needs. Because they bring temporary rewards of feeling in control, of admiration, superiority, and power, perfectionism and workaholism tend to become entrenched lifestyles. In reality, however, they amplify stress.

Nonassertiveness is expressed in either passive or aggressive patterns of interaction. These patterns are marked by difficulty in expressing one's thoughts and feelings constructively, by blaming oneself or others, by hierarchical or power-oriented relational styles, and by difficulty with close relationships. Passive people build up tremendous inner stress. Denial and suppression of real thoughts and feelings, people-pleasing ("I can't say no, what will people think?"), and fatalism all lead to this inner stress. Aggressive people create major stress in the lives of those around them. They also experience it themselves because of the mistrust, defensiveness, and alienation that reflect their style. The sheer number of people in cities who are competitively vying for space, status, and possessions encourages the nonassertive extremes of aggressiveness and passivity.

Type-A personalities are typified by the hard-driving, aggressive, competitive, time-urgent stereotype of the quintessential New Yorker. Type As are highly motivated to achieve and tend to be involved in several different activities at one time. Earlier thinking that automatically connected stress and type A personality has been revised, but research still suggests that type A individuals have a higher probability of heart attacks, ulcers, and hypertension.

Social-Psychological Factors

Among the most stress-generating social-psychological factors frequently intensified in urban life are:

- (1) uncertainty,
- (2) isolation, and
- (3) dysfunctional family patterns.

Uncertainty is stress-producing because it requires us to focus energy and attention on survival. Mistrust, bred by experiences of betrayal or exploitation, feeds uncertainty, which makes our world unpredictable and keeps us in a constant state of "fight or flight." The word survival may refer to the maintenance of social status or to physical well-being. Crime may not only threaten physical survival and well-being, it also leaves its victims feeling vulnerable and helpless, uncertain about their ability to defend against painful invasion. A great part of the stress generated by drug-infested urban areas is due to the unpredictable and life-threatening behaviors and crimes of those who use drugs. Competition in the marketplace and unpredictable employers also often leave urban workers in a constant state of uncertainty and anxiety about the stability of their jobs and lives.

Isolation affects some urban dwellers more than others. Friendships seem to be harder to form in the city because of heightened mistrust, the need to select from a greater pool of possibilities, and role-focused relationships.⁹ Certain groups of people such as the widowed and the urban elderly appear to experience the greatest amount of loneliness.¹⁰ There is significantly less contact with neighbors, which produces loneliness, and increased casual or surface contact with people at work as community size increases, which also increases loneliness and isolation.¹¹

However, when quality of friendships is focused on in terms of available social support, urbanites appear to be slightly better off.¹² It appears that while it's harder to make friends in the large city, once friendships are formed, they are as satisfying as in other locales. While fewer family members tend to be mentioned, those who are tend to be seen as friends and not just as family. Friendships are usually more spatially spread out in larger communities and seem to require more energy and planning in order to establish and maintain them—adding at least some stress. Exceptions to spatial spreading can frequently be found in tightly knit ethnic and new-immigrant communities, and among those in lower-class neighborhoods. On the other hand, the very poorest urban dwellers tend to be among the most transitional and therefore isolated.

Dysfunctional family life includes out-of-wedlock births, broken marriages, blended families, single-parent families, alcoholism, domestic abuse, and assorted other addictions that mar the family life of millions of urban dwellers. Each of these dysfunctional patterns creates special stresses and strains on parents and children.

Single-parent families must cope with the stress of inadequate resources (approximately 60 percent of all single mothers live below the poverty level), as well as find the extra energy required to parent alone. Children in single-parent families are less likely to have their emotional needs sufficiently met, in general, due to the increased demands on the remaining parent and the pain released when a parent exits in cases of divorce. Blended families that witness a succession of "fathers" and half-siblings experience identity confusion and underlying anxiety about bonding and security. Even in more stable blended families, there are extraordinary relational strains as issues of rules, roles, rights, and responsibility have to be negotiated.

The dysfunctional dynamics of alcoholism tend to create deep insecurity, shame, and rage in "victimized" family members. Adult children of alcoholics typically have trouble forming and maintaining trusting, intimate relationships. Domestic abuse unleashes tremendous fear and turmoil. Addictions create chaotic climates of instability, mistrust, rejection, and anger due to the addict's exploitation of family members.

Environmental Factors

Although stress research has typically focused on the duration of stress and on major stress-producing events, more recent studies have been concerned with the impact of daily hassles.¹³ These recurrent, comparatively minor irritants may include commuting, work demands, nonresponsive bureaucracies, and the impersonal treatment of personal concerns, pollution, health care, and poverty.

Commuting between home and work creates stress in several ways. Unpredictable train breakdowns, street repairs, accidents, and freeway delays make it difficult for urban dwellers to plan their days with confidence. Attempts to avoid such delays lead many to leave home earlier and earlier in the morning and to return home later and later at night. The amount of energy needed to cope with the delays or the long hours drains a person's reserves of coping energy. The commute also lessens the time available for spiritual and emotional renewal, further decreasing the store of available energy and making individuals more susceptible to potential stressors. When the commuter finally makes it home, he often does not feel like relating to family members. He is often irritated, and pulls away from them. This ends up creating more stress because a number of our psychospiritual needs require interpersonal involvement for satisfaction. As we have already seen, the failure to constructively meet psychospiritual needs leads to a further build-up of inner stress.

Work demands are frequently daily hassles as well. When an urban dweller believes that affluence and achievement will satisfy his underlying psychospiritual needs, intense inner stress may be generated. For example, Sean is a very bright, unmarried investment counselor who makes over \$80,000 a year. But he nevertheless finds himself under immense self-generated pressure to produce more so that he can protect and enhance his status and security. At the other extreme, Joe is an unskilled laborer who is at the mercy of impersonal economic forces and the totalitarian demands of exploitative employers. In the middle are the millions of Marys and Jims, white collar workers, who are subjected to multiple, arbitrary work demands in highly competitive work environments.

Nonresponsive bureaucracies and impersonal treatment of personal concerns generate stress because they leave urban dwellers feeling insignificant and helpless. Even agencies that are supposed to help those in need frequently leave their clients feeling victimized and diminished. It is stressful when you do not know how you will be treated or whether your needs will receive careful consideration. The build-up of pain that results from being belittled and ignored often leads to apathy and fatalism on the one hand or rage and destructiveness on the other. A history of being devalued can lead to a reciprocal pattern of uncaring behavior. One cannot help but wonder if horrendous acts of violence such as the "wilding" attacks by juvenile gangs are, in part, attempts by those who have been regarded as insignificant and irrelevant to feel significant and powerful.

It has been our counseling experience that the combination of heavy work demands, lengthy commuting, and impersonal treatment contributes heavily to the formation of addictive behaviors involving alcohol, drugs, sex, overeating, and even too much television viewing. Tom, for example, who is married and a sincere Christian as well as being a successful young photographer found himself trapped in an intense addiction to pornographic magazines, videos, and prostitutes. Bill is an energetic computer programmer in his thirties who has struggled with homosexuality since he was a teenager. Since becoming a Christian, he has abstained from most sexual activity, although he has occasionally failed. Both men began to be freed from their sexual addictions when they realized that they were most susceptible to sexual temptation when the daily hassles of life intensified. Their addictions were a destructive, unconscious attempt to relieve stress.

Bioecological Factors

In 1976, forty-three major cities in the United States had unhealthy air quality.¹⁴ Simply breathing the air in cities like New York is equivalent to smoking two packs of cigarettes per day.¹⁵ Pollution fosters stress as a result of its negative impact upon both physical and emotional well-being. It costs six billion dollars a year to treat pollution-impacted respiratory diseases, according to the U.S. Public Health Service. Burning eyes, headaches, dizziness, and allergy-like sinus problems diminish the quality of life. Higher levels of air pollution have been found to be associated with psychiatric emergencies¹⁶ and hospital admissions.¹⁷ Students subjected to unpleasant but nontoxic air in laboratory experiments reported feeling more anxious, fatigued, and aggressive, and less able to concentrate.¹⁸ Bad odors have been found to lower performance on complex tasks and reduce persistence at difficult problem-solving tasks.¹⁹ The need to curtail exercise because of heavy urban pollution eliminates an important way to reduce tension and stress as well.

Finally, poverty introduces and magnifies stress at several critical points. Prenatal conditions are typically worse for the poor, resulting in children being born with biological and intellectual impairments that lessen their ability to cope with stress. Significant numbers of obstetricians, family physicians, and nurse-midwives are limiting their practices among women with high risk pregnancies. These often include low-income women who are likely to smoke and have poor diets during their pregnancies. Addicted babies of addicts (if they live) suffer inordinately from stress on many fronts. General medical care for the poor is inferior, increasing the probability of biologically-induced stress and decreasing adaptive energy supplies.

Poverty creates additional stress due to the daily struggle for physical survival. A high percentage of poor families are fragmented, unstable, and fatherless. The poor lack resources for more healthy living environments and are far more likely to be exploited and victimized. A recent survey by Partnership for the Homeless, a nonprofit New York group that operates a system of homeless shelters, indicates that the dramatic four-year trend (1984-1988) of fast-growing numbers of homeless families with children has stabilized. Nevertheless, 31 percent of the homeless are families with children. Overall, homelessness may affect as many as 2 million people in the U.S. and many more in major cities such as Manila, Bogota, and Mexico City. Even for those poor people with homes, there is no money for the kinds of stress-reducing comforts that greater affluence brings. One of the amazing realities of the city is how well many who are poor do cope by finding strength in their relationships with God and through their extended family units.

Summary

Healing for the city must address the sources of stress and its damaging effects on urban dwellers. Often the most destructive effects of stress are due to faulty coping patterns that actually accentuate it. In any case, the experience of stress varies from person to person, so counseling must help each individual discover primary sources of stress and shape appropriate stress- reduction strategies.

This intervention may be primarily psychospiritual in focus, or consist of practical advocacy efforts aimed at changes in environmental conditions. The objective is not to completely remove stress, but to help urban dwellers manage it so that they can function in the healthiest way possible. Urban dwellers who constructively relieve stress, will be free for more positive spiritual, emotional, relational, and physical life patterns. They will also have energy for greater ministry involvement and a more dynamic Christian experience. We will consider a variety of counseling strategies for stress reduction and management in Section 3.

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