

Warning Signs & Practical Help for Stress Overload

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Ask someone how they are doing. The common response: “I’m good, thanks!” Here’s the more candid version I’m hearing these days. “I think I’m pretty good, but I’m not really sure. Honestly, I don’t know.”

That’s an honest answer. It’s an answer of a leader who may be on overload. It could be someone in your family or a leader you are developing. Or you.

It will soon be half a year since the coronavirus invaded our lives. Overall, I think most are doing well under the circumstances, but cracks are beginning to appear as people are hitting their limits.

We need to learn how to handle a new level of sustainability in terms of:

- Unanswered questions
- Unresolved problems, and
- Unknown future

Sustained unanswered, unresolved, and unknown... That’s the new overload. It’s been building up in all of us for over five months. *Stress, Fear, Worry, Anxiety, Anger, Frustration, Depression...* Some leaders are reaching breakpoints, others are holding up pretty well everything considered.

But no one completely eludes the effects of this season. One person said it this way describing a family member: “He’s really mad – but doesn’t know who to be mad at.” That sums it up well. It’s a moving target that changes weekly.

Health, finances, emotions, career, future, and now it’s impacting *relationships*.
Why is it that some people are dealing with all this craziness better than others?

- Some entered this season with more emotional reserves in their soul.
- Others live and lead in healthier environments.
- Others still have determined to find the good rather than get stuck in the negative.

We are all different, but there are several things in common. Let’s start with some warning signs.

4 warning signs of overload:

(None of these are healthy or helpful.)

1) Escapism

Entertainment, imagination, and just “unplugging” for a few hours is good, but not if it is a consistent escape from difficult realities.

When a leader behaves as if everything is fine when everyone knows it’s not, they lose credibility. That leader knows there are significant problems to be faced and solved, but they pretend as if it will all get better soon by itself as a way to handle the overload of pressure.

It's an understandable coping mechanism, but unfortunately, it doesn't work. Only when you and I face reality head-on can we begin to wrestle down an honest and healthy resolution to our internal overload.

2) Antagonism

An antagonistic disposition often starts from prolonged frustration, moves to anger, and eventually resentment. When anger finds its way to the surface, it can make itself known in very destructive ways.

If you find yourself moving from conversations to debates, be careful. Debates by nature require a winner and a loser. Debates require someone to be right and someone to be wrong. In contrast, a conversation gives space to disagree and learn.

Social media is a common arena for battle that results in unnecessary division. The sad thing is that so many times, it's between people who don't even know each other, but both are hurting. Lashing out never solves issues of anger, hurt or fear. Listening, conversation, and understanding that leads to real solutions helps to resolve stress overload.

Refocusing the energy of anger toward solutions is a healthy step in the right direction.

3) Detachment

Escapism pretends the current issues are not real, detachment knows the problems are real, but withdraws to self-protect. Detachment chooses isolation to cope with overload and block the angst that accompanies unrelenting pressure and problems.

Detachment is a futile attempt to shrink real problems to a manageable size and make life safe again, but it only exacerbates the problem by refusing to engage. It's only by engaging the real issues that we begin to find a healthy outlet of emotions in stressful times.

4) Pessimism

The pessimist sees the present and future as a dark cloud and has difficulty seeing a silver lining. Pessimism is often accompanied by distrust, cynicism, and a negative outlook.

It's almost impossible to lead effectively with a pessimistic outlook because the nature of vision approaches the future in a positive manner. That does not mean the road is an easy one; in fact, it can be extremely challenging, but it's still full of hope.

We all have challenging days, maybe even weeks where it's hard to see the good, but it's there, and it's our job as leaders to help find the way.

Let's move now to practical remedies.

5 practical everyday ways to handle pent-up stress and pressure overload:

1) Honest conversation

An honest conversation does three really healthy things.

- It gets your stress, pressure, and negative emotion from locked up inside, moved outside, slowly and healthily.
- It helps you clarify and define the scope and depth of your stress. That enables you to determine the best solutions.
- You often discover you're not alone, that others feel exactly like you do, and they can offer helpful solutions.

Conversation with a trusted friend or mentor is great, but if you need a professional counselor, do not hesitate to make an appointment.

2) Get outside and keep moving.

Sunshine and fresh air have a tremendously positive effect on your emotions and overall disposition. Getting outdoors and taking a simple walk around the parking lot or up and down your street is a great stress reliever. Exercise, of course, adds even more value to your mental health.

3) Intentionally cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in your life.

Galatians 5:22-23 lists the fruit of the Spirit.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." -Galatians 5:22-23

Each of these resides within you, but it is up to you how strong their presence is in your life. Intentional cultivation through prayer and practice increases their presence and strength.

4) Enjoy the simple things in life.

I really appreciate the value of the simple things, but I am not always good at it. I typically move too fast and love to take on even more and greater challenges. The simple things in life require us to slow down, cease striving, find that content place where you are not measuring success but instead enjoying the moment. You know you are there when you quietly smile and sense a deep inner peace.

I have a new "simple thing," I love. My granddaughter is five months old and has just started eating solid foods. I fed her for the first time, and I was utterly lost in the moment. We all have simple things that make us smile and create inner peace, don't miss them, and be sure to enjoy them.

5) Unplug and get some quiet.

I'm not referring to your quiet time with God, although that's always a good thing to do! In this case, I am just talking about good old fashioned quiet. Quiet is rare these days. I'm not big on putting my iPhone in a drawer for a week, but I do think that laying it down in another room for a couple of hours or so, is healthy.

Turn your devices off, even if just for a couple of hours, two-three times a week. It really makes a difference.