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## **Stress and the Home: Testifying to the Grace of God**

**Brian K. Heldt**

In *Stress and the Family* Dolores Curran lists the ten most common stress factors affecting the American family.<sup>1</sup>

1. Economics, financing, or budgeting
2. Children's behavior, discipline, sibling rivalry
3. Insufficient couple time
4. Lack of shared responsibility in the family
5. Communicating with children
6. Insufficient personal time of individual members
7. Guilt for not accomplishing more
8. Spousal relationships (personal, physical)
9. Insufficient family playtime
10. Overscheduled family calendar

It would be naive for Christians to think that their unique relationship with Jesus Christ shields them from the effects of these factors. Any factor which psychologists have observed that threatens families in general must be considered (in the light of Scripture) as a probable threat to Christian families as well.<sup>2</sup>

This article will focus on the three contributors to family stress which involve intra-family relationships: insufficient personal time, insufficient couple time, and insufficient family playtime. These three factors are not only interrelated, but the success of each depends upon the success of the preceding factor. Family playtime will not

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<sup>1</sup> Dolores Curran, *Stress and the Family* (hereinafter referred to as *Stress*) (Minneapolis: Winston Press, Inc., 1985) iv.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Thornton, "John Bettler's 'recycling' approach to the relationship of psychology and theology," unpublished classnotes (Lansdale, PA: Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary, May 1990) 26-7.

produce results unless the husband and wife have found scriptural success in their time together, and unless they have established an individual and vital relationship with each of their children. "Couple" relationships will only prosper to the extent that each individual has rightly ordered his or her life in a social way with the Creator.

The purpose of this article is to show how these three factors are interrelated, and to show that Biblical success in these areas will produce two benefits for the family. First, it will put the family in a position to victoriously deal with ANY stress factor which it might face.<sup>3</sup> Second, it will enable a family to be the best possible picture of the grace of God within both its immediate and extended social framework.<sup>4</sup>

Curran worded each element to place emphasis upon the insufficiency of available time. The problem, logically, is not one of

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<sup>3</sup> As a result of a meticulous study of 660 families, Dolores Curran deduced twelve conclusions on family stress. They are worthy of careful consideration.

1. Husbands and wives vary significantly on what they perceive as top stresses within the same family.
2. Work stresses are allowed to impact the family, but family stresses are not allowed to impact work.
3. Four of the ten most-named stressors in family life have to do with lack of time.
4. Healthy families view stresses as normal, while other families view them as evidences of weakness or failure.
5. Healthy families seek solutions; stressful families seek blame.
6. Resolving one family stress often produces another.
7. The named stress is not always the actual stress.
8. While insufficient money is named as the top stress in most families, the real stress stems from how money is viewed and spent rather than the amount available.
9. Low self image is overwhelmingly a woman's stress.
10. Enjoyable volunteer activity reduces a person's stress level; unenjoyable volunteer activity increases it.
11. Ability to deal effectively with stress is related to how much prior experience the family has had in coping with it: more stress experience produces more skills in handling stress.
12. Stress-effective families distinguish between stresses they can and cannot control. They focus their energy on controllable stresses and live with the others.

<sup>4</sup> Considerable debate occurs among family counselors concerning quality of time spent versus quantity of time spent. Good arguments may be presented in favor of each. This study will proceed upon the foundation that if the time spent does not have the proper elements of Biblical quality, the question of quantity has little relevance.

insufficiency (everyone has the same amount of time), but of management. This study will proceed by rewording her observations to reflect the principle of time and management.

### **Personal Time Priority**

In the past decade, psychology has placed considerable attention upon the importance of a proper sense of self-worth in enabling an individual to be at peace with his social environment. One Christian psychologist has written, "Self-love is the criterion and prerequisite for our conduct toward our neighbor. Without self love there can be no love for others."<sup>5</sup> The Bible teaches the necessity of accurate thinking about oneself,<sup>6</sup> and the wise individual will seek to learn everything possible about himself based upon the Word of God.<sup>7</sup> Christians should not, therefore, think that it is improper to consider the importance of personal time priority.

#### **Basic Elements of Personal Time Priority**

**A right relationship with God.** The first element of personal time priority is a right relationship with God. This relationship has a two-fold consideration: positional and practical. Human beings were created by God in His image and are His possession by right of creation. However, as the result of Adam's sin each is born in a position of alienation from God.<sup>8</sup> Salvation through the expiatory sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross is the foundational preparation for a personal time priority. Unless one is rightly related to God, he has no foundation upon which to understand himself, and the prioritizing of his personal time can have no eternal reference.

The second aspect of this right relationship with God is the careful maintenance of a vital, righteous walk with God. As with any social relationship, this walk has three aspects: talking to God (prayer), listening to God (reading His Word), and serving God

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Trobisch, *Love Yourself* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1976) 11.

<sup>6</sup> Jay E. Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1986). See especially chapter 11, "An Accurate Self-Image."

<sup>7</sup> Note especially Romans 12:3, Hosea 7:9, Galatians 6:3, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Romans 5:12, Ephesians 2:1-2, 4:17-18.

(through the local church). The believer will not experience victory over stressful situations or be able to glorify God through them unless this daily walk is maintained.

**Right understanding of personal needs.** Having established these initial aspects of personal time priority, one must understand three elements of man's psychological makeup if he is to augment the functional handling of stress in the home.

First, one must understand the human need to do something which gives a sense of accomplishment. The innate desire to be productive is built into man from the day of his creation.<sup>9</sup> Life is filled with the day-to-day activities of raising children, keeping house, balancing finances, working, or building social relationships. While these are necessary activities, their point of realized productivity is often imprecise or future. The individual who learns to set daily goals (personal priorities) and to accomplish them will, says psychologist David Burns, find that many sources of personal stress would be alleviated.<sup>10</sup>

Second, the individual should realize the psychological need for a sense of diversion. Gerald Borchert writes, "refreshment in life is provided not simply through rest and spiritual renewal, but is also available through periods of relaxation and disengagement from the routine pursuits of life."<sup>11</sup> Diversion may come in many forms, not all of them physically restful. Mowing the lawn might be a diversion for an executive. A housewife might find painting (her house or a picture) a satisfying diversion. Gardening, carpentry, community softball, or hiking are kinds of diversion. Television is an often overused passive diversion. Individuals do well to take stock of what diversions are in their lives, how these diversions rank as productive, and what diversions might be added to or discarded from their lifestyle.

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<sup>9</sup> Jay E. Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979) 134.

<sup>10</sup> Larry Thornton, "Counseling Methods of David Burns," unpublished classnotes (Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary, Lansdale, PA, May 1990) 64.

<sup>11</sup> Gerald Borchert, "Amusements," *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. by Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1973) 19. See also in the same volume the list of nine prominent uses of leisure time in "Leisure" by Paul Fromer, 385-6.

Third, one should realize the psychological need for a sense of personal uniqueness. Everyone is, to some extent, part of a larger social structure in which individuality is partially lost. The individuality of the employee may be lost in the productivity of the company. The individuality of the housewife may be lost in the manifold activities of homemaking. The individuality of the child may be lost in the complexity of the family circle. The promotion of individuality within the family structure may be accomplished by encouraging personal hobbies, recognizing personal successes, giving personal attention, or discussing personal failures.

### **Natural Results of Personal Time Priority**

The fruits of the Spirit will be evident in the life of the believer who is walking with God.<sup>12</sup> This manifestation will have two natural results. First, it will enable the individual to be an instrument whereby the grace of God is revealed to those around him who are yet lost in sin.<sup>13</sup> Those who do not know God personally may be impressed to establish a right relationship with Him.

Second, the individual will be in a position to properly meet and have victory over the stresses of life. This may come directly as a result of the indwelling Holy Spirit, indirectly through wisdom from the Holy Spirit in handling the situation, or as the believer receives grace through the Spirit to live with stressful situations. Individual ability to deal with stress has a direct bearing on both the amount of family stress,<sup>14</sup> and how, collectively, the family deals with stress.

### **Couple Time Priority**

Three levels of relationships characterize the family. The first is the relationship of each individual with the Lord. The second is the relationship between the husband and the wife. The third is the relationship between the husband or wife and each child. This article

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<sup>12</sup> Galatians 5:22-24.

<sup>13</sup> King David recognized this truth. See Psalm 51:13.

<sup>14</sup> If the individual does not deal Biblically with his own stress, it will build up within him until, invariably, others in the family are affected. Unbiblical attitudes harbored by a husband toward his work situation will ultimately be brought into the family circle in a negative way.

views the second and third of these as couple relationships and sees them as essential building blocks toward manifesting the glory of God to surrounding social entities.

### **Primary Foundation for Success**

Couple relationships will find spiritual and social success only as the husband, wife, and each of the children (infants excepted) are saved, immersed, and walking daily in obedience to the Word of God through prayer, Bible reading, and service in the local church. The husband, as the head of the home, should set the example of prayer, Bible reading, and service for his wife. The husband and wife together should set the example for this walk with the Lord before the children and structure time in the daily family schedule when each member can be alone with God.

### **Basic Elements of Success**

**Husband and wife.** The primary couple relationship in the home is that of the husband and wife. In the garden of Eden God portrayed the relationship of Adam and Eve by the phrase "one flesh."<sup>15</sup> This character of the husband-wife union goes far beyond the sexual; it involves "the complete identification of one personality with the other in a community of interests and pursuits, a union consummated in intercourse."<sup>16</sup> Even as communication is essential to a proper relationship with God, so it is essential to a proper relationship between husband and wife. It has a three-fold aspect.

First, it should be spiritual. If either husband or wife are living in known sin, or if they are tolerant of sin between themselves, they are adding to the stress level of the home. Open and honest confession of sin between husband and wife must be a consistent practice along with fellowship in the Word of God and prayer.

Second, it should be mental. A husband and wife should be creative in promoting communication (both verbal and nonverbal) between themselves. Honesty, openness, kindness, and promotion of the other spouse should distinguish this communication. Subject

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<sup>15</sup> Compare Genesis 2:24 with Matthew 19:4-5 and Ephesians 5:31-33.

<sup>16</sup> H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1942) 1:137.

matter may vary from events of the day, plans, problems, ideas, or personal feelings and should not be limited to family or work matters, but should cover local, national, and world events as well as academic, artistic, and scientific affairs.

Third, it should be physical. Physical body contact (kissing, a hug, holding hands) is equally an important type of communication as talking. An important part of physical communication in marriage is sexual intimacy. Mature sexual intimacy is an outgrowth of mental and spiritual intimacy,<sup>17</sup> and should be maintained and enhanced.

**Parents and child.** An essential element of strengthening the home against stress is the development of a stronger relationship between parent and child.<sup>18</sup> This relationship may be cultivated in several ways. Problems at home or at school can be discussed and taken to God in prayer. Discipline situations should be a time of strengthening relationships. A child might be included in a personal activity (going to the store, accompanying the parent on a work-related trip), or introduced to the parents' work situation. Family problems might be shared with the child, seeking his input. Service through the church (visitation, work day, directing junior church) might be shared with a child. Sports, camping, or fishing activities could be an excellent means of building a relationship. Emphasis in this type of couple relationship is on one parent and one child, as opposed to a family activity where all participate equally.

### **Varied Results of Success**

Vital couple relationship priorities naturally produce at least six results. First, as interrelationships within the family are strengthened the family unit is strengthened. Second, if a weakness (spiritual, mental, or physical) is evident in one member, other family members can come to the aid of that one. Third, this type of family promotes its own internally healthy spiritual, mental, and physical growth. Fourth, the strength of the church increases as families are strengthened through couple relationships. Fifth, society is benefited as this type of family produces empathetic, self-sufficient,

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<sup>17</sup> Curran, *Stress*, 169.

<sup>18</sup> Paul called this "bringing them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4)." Walter Fremont calls this "the father's big responsibility" - *Formula for Family Unity* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1980) 88.

communicating individuals who have a keen vision of the future. Sixth, individuals and families external to the structure of this type of family are provided with a clear example of the grace of God in human relationships.

### **Family Playtime Priority**

Essential to the social phenomenon called play are empathy, unselfishness, and a common sense of direction. The family composed of individuals who are all rightly related to God positionally and practically, and who are secure in their relationships with each other, is the family which will find the greatest corporate growth through playtime. The essential element of these activities is not fun, but togetherness (though unhindered fellowship experienced in togetherness should always be pleasant or fun).

### **Type of Playtime Activities**

There are four basic types of playtime activities in which the Christian family should involve itself. The first (and basic to all others) is the spiritual activity. The most basic spiritual playtime activity is family devotions. Then follows church attendance (as a family!), and other activities such as visitation, rest-home services, or all-church fellowships.

A second type of family playtime activity is the work-related activity. This might include raking leaves, building a garage, reshingling the house, or working in the garden. Parents must remember that when children are included in such activities, proper supervision is necessary and patience is essential (the work may not progress as fast as if the adult was doing it all alone).

A third type of playtime activity is the educational activity. These might include visits to museums, concerts, formal restaurants, ballgames, farms, zoos, or such negative places as drug-rehabilitation centers, funerals, traffic court, or the slum area of a large city. Since this is an educational activity, the parent should plan what things might be taught through the activity, and should consider the appropriateness of the activity to younger members.

A fourth type of activity is the fun activity. Not all activities will have an educational or productive emphasis (though all should have a spiritual emphasis). This type of activity might include miniature golfing, a day at the beach, hiking, a visit to the county fair,

Disneyland, or Sea World, or just sitting in the living room while dad or mom (or an older child) reads a classic literature book. Appropriateness and expense are two important factors.

### **Purpose of Playtime Activities**

Any activity of the Christian should champion the glory of God. Family activities should all have some spiritual emphasis. This should include prayer or singing during the activity, an emphasis on evangelism through distributing tracts and personal soulwinning, and the application of Bible principles to situations or things which are observed along the way. In addition, family activities should promote physical exercise, unity within the family, and appreciation for different cultures or sub-cultures.<sup>19</sup> The choice of activity should appeal to the whole family in general.

### **Results of Playtime Activities**

Carefully planned and practiced family activities whose participants are properly related to the Lord and to each other will have two definite results. First, God will be glorified in the eyes of all who observe the family. This may be only in a brief way, or it may be through extended contact leading to the presentation of the gospel. Families which have wholesome fun together naturally attract others who sense that need in their own lives. Second, the family which has learned to enjoy a God-honoring playtime together will be able, in the same way, to face the varied stressful situations of life, whether they be small (car trouble on vacation) or large (death of one of the family members).

### **Conclusion**

The fact that a home is composed of Christians does not mean that it will be without stress, and is certainly no guarantee that it will be perfect. The home which follows the leading of the Holy Spirit in

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<sup>19</sup> This author has read no book on the family which left a greater impression on him regarding family "togetherness" activities than Edith Schaeffer's *What Is a Family?* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, Company, 1975).

personal priority, couple priority, and playtime priority is one which is prepared to find ultimate victory in any stress which it might face.

The Christian home, as a corporate entity, must realize that stress can and must be confronted and refashioned into a means of testifying to the grace of God before the world community. When the stress is caused by sin, the lost should see family members who are willing to admit wrong and strive to do right. When stress is caused by external circumstances, they should be treated to the exhilarating sight of a family which prays together, plays together, and stays together.