

## 1/26/20 Self-Stewardship 4 – Self-Care, Your Brain, and The Bible

Your Stressed Brain: Stress, by definition, is an imbalance between the demands placed upon you and your ability to manage or cope with them. It can come from both positive and negative stimuli, for example, graduating from college or getting married is positive but also stressful. The telltale signs of being “stressed out” can include negativity, forgetfulness, self-criticism, irritability, low empathy, inability to focus, overwhelming emotion, isolation, etc.

Our culture being what it is, many of us live with chronic stress, and thus chronically-stressed brains. Multi-tasking is one culprit: our brains function best doing one thing at a time, but both by our own choice and what our jobs may ask of us, we’re often trying to do several things at once. To that end, research has shown that brains need to be “bored” (low stimuli, with a refusal to pursue easy escapes or jolts, e.g. T.V. or our favorite app) in order to be at their most creative/imaginative, and thereby find novel answers to problems or see a situation in a new light. Another reason we are chronically-stressed is threat detection: our brains are wired to look for threats, both real and perceived, several times every second, so we tend to be anxious or take a defensive posture toward the world around us.

The long-term cost of high stress is the rewiring of your brain. Your reactive centers (or lower brain) grow more influential, while your rational/reflective center (or higher brain) is pushed offline. Said differently, the longer you stay stressed, the more the effects are written into the unconscious portions of your brain, and thus the harder they become to change. One effect of this is a skewing of your actual memories; you begin to change the meaning of your past experiences, and not for the better. Another result is that it becomes more and more difficult to unlearn a past belief by way of new learning or experience; your perception of your life becomes a hamster wheel or a song stuck on repeat.

Biblical Self-Care for Your Stressed Brain: While our ancestors in the faith weren’t neuroscientists, they were already advocating for practices that effectively reversed or protected against an overly-stressed brain, as you’ll discover below.

1) BODY: Sometimes, the only way to relieve an overly-stressed brain is to disengage your thinking, and start at the bottom, so to speak, with your automatic nervous system (your body and its functions/senses). This is the basic physiology behind ancient exercises like breathing prayer, mindfulness meditation, or using nature for spiritual renewal. There are just times when you can’t think your way out of stress: as Richard Rohr puts it, “You don’t think your way to new ways of behavior; you behave your way to new ways of thinking.”

- Online resources: *“The Human Body and Spiritual Growth”* (Dallas Willard); *“The Present Moment: A Christian Approach to Mindfulness”* (Gregory Bottaro); *“Five Ways to Practice Mindfulness,”* at [premierchristianity.com](http://premierchristianity.com).

2) SILENCE/STILLNESS/SABBATH: It’s not a coincidence that God is often best heard or known when it’s quiet, when you’re not moving about, or when you’re not multi-tasking; as Dallas Willard writes, “God does not ordinarily compete for our attention.” By focusing and breaking your normal, often hectic, routine, your brain is at its most attuned. The spiritual practices of stillness, solitude, and silence unlock your brain; the Sabbath, as outlined in the scripture, is an elongated adaption of those habits, infused with healthy rest and play.

- Online resources: *“The Spiritual Discipline of Rest”* (Richella Parham); *“Understanding Solitude”* (Richard Foster); *“Slowing Down for a Sabbath Rest”* (Bill Gaultiere), at [soulshepherding.org](http://soulshepherding.org); *“Foundations 20 – The Discipline of Solitude and Silence,”* (Chris Hall), 15 min. video at [renovare.org](http://renovare.org).

3) REFLECTION: A signature of the stressed mind is that it’s going through life on autopilot, just hoping to stay in the air and not crash. Only pausing and reflecting assigns meaning to an event or interaction; it turns mere experience into insight, wisdom, and growth. As Kierkegaard notes, we may live life forward, but we only understand it backward. Moreover, only reflection gets you out of the ruts your stress has dug in your brain.

- Online resources: *“Why Reflection is the Cornerstone of Spiritual Growth,”* at the Geneva College blog, 1/19/17; *“The Discipline of Reflection”* (Boyd Pelley), at [churchteams.com](http://churchteams.com); *“Reflection Prayer: The Traditional Ignatian Examen”* (Teresa Blythe), [patheos.com](http://patheos.com), 7/2/19.

4) REPETITION: We need to interact with a message 30 times before we actually remember it, and several hundred times, if not more, before it finds its way into our unconscious and becomes a rote part of us. So repetition is a spiritual key: read the same thing (or similar things) a few times over the span of a week or month, pray the same thing repeatedly for awhile, and so on. The only way to affect deep change is through this kind of repetition.

- Online resources: *“The Spiritual Value of Repetition and Routine”* (Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat), at [spiritualityandpractice.com](http://spiritualityandpractice.com); *“Repetition a Spiritual Discipline”* (Don Clymer), at [donrclymer.blogspot.com](http://donrclymer.blogspot.com)