

# The Freudian Slip

Pathways to Discernment

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## **STRESS!! DOES IT HAVE TO BE SO BAD?!**

### **How do You Spell Relief?**

Have you become a connoisseur for antacids? Are you a spokesperson for headache medicine? Do you look at the pet hamster and can relate to the endless life on a treadmill? When discussions about stress emerge, do you engage in "who's got the most stress" stories? Do you feel as though there is a perpetual dark cloud hanging over your head?

Stress is a fact of life. I imagine many individuals, including myself, could do without this fact. Unfortunately, life is full of ups and downs that result in stress. I am intrigued by the number of magazine and newspaper articles telling us how to cope with stress. There is a "cookbook mentality" of following these steps and stress will decrease in your life.

One typical step to reduce stress is to reduce daily responsibilities. Another step would be to get plenty of rest and to breathe deeply. Having relaxing activities is another step to reduce stress. Taking care of yourself by setting limits and liking yourself is another step in reducing stress. Learning to manage anger is another step stressed by these articles.

Each of these steps has validity, but when a person is stuck in a stressful situation, none of these steps seem viable. People have the tendency to approach a problem in the same manner. When I say this, I get a mental picture of an army of barbarians using a battering ram to break down the castle door. What is missed is the aspect of there being another way to enter the castle: They keep pounding at the door and maybe it will break.

A common thread in daily stress is the tendency for people to attempt to control external events. When this occurs, a vicious cycle is created. Stress can be directly related to the levels of anxiety and powerlessness a person feels in controlling external circumstances. The more external events are tried to be controlled, the more anxiety and powerlessness a person experiences.

Control is the determining factor to initially break stressful vicious cycles. To examine the issue of control, wisdom needs to be gained. I am drawn to the Serenity Prayer when I need to gain wisdom. Through this prayer I ask for courage, acceptance and wisdom.

Through this concise prayer, a person can learn discernment of what he or she can or cannot change.

In finding this form of wisdom, the definition of control changes from external to internal control. It sounds simple, but it is not. How can the Serenity Prayer help alleviate stress? To take the prayer one line at a time and dissect its meaning is a start.

The first line is, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change." In this statement, an individual acknowledges he or she cannot change things, not being omnipotent and all powerful. Acceptance means a person has changed a belief system requiring life to be full of absolutes. In other words, a choice is made not to demand that events go the individual's way and that it is not awful if they don't.

The second line states, "the courage to change things I can." What is interesting is that all people focus on the other person's behavior first, instead of looking for their own behavior. This is a normal pattern we all have. When a person is perpetually focusing on what others need to do to change, stress and victimization can become accentuated.

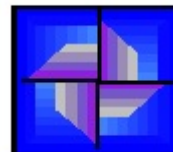
The last line of the prayer is, "and the wisdom to know the difference." This is the most crucial part of the prayer, because an individual needs to develop an inner wisdom to discern controllable vs. uncontrollable items. So the statement of what can or can't I do about the situation aids in gaining wisdom.

So in theory this prayer is great, but is it really practical? Of course it is! Job related stress is a good example to use in applying the Serenity prayer. If job

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stress is related to the work environment and the workload, a person can learn to thrive in the stress. I am sure there are many doubting Thomas's that would disagree with me.

If the workload is the stress producing factor in a person's life, there is not much he or she can do about it. The workload of the job is just the nature of the Beast. So I ask the question, "Why try to change something that is unchangeable?" Changing the workload is like bailing out a swiftly sinking boat with a tea cup. More water enters the boat than water is removed, so failure is inevitable.

If the work environment is a stress producing factor, then who is producing the stress? When I ask this question, the usual answer is that other people are causing the stress. The next question I usually ask is how the person is trying to change the other people? With this question, the stress producing factor emerges.

With focusing all one's energy on changing someone else's behavior, failure and frustration is inevitable. The more energy is misdirected toward changing other people, the more helpless a person will feel about changing the situation. Victimization occurs and the anthem becomes, "look what they did to me!"

In redirecting emotional energy, an individual will find he or she does not exert as much emotional energy. Take for instance a situation where a person is calm vs. a person is stressed. A common description of the stressed person is that he or she is "spinning his or her wheels."

A tremendous amount of energy is being exerted, but the situation does not change. Watch a car stuck in the mud observing how much energy is expended and progress is made. Without putting something to help the car tires gain traction, the car will find it stuck deeper in the mud. Another aspect not described is how much mud is covering the people helping push the car out of the mud.

Mud-drenched people represent the effect a stressed out individual has on other people. A ripple effect can "make" life miserable for other people. By trying to control external events, and/ or other people, a person can alienate himself /herself from the support others can give. So to use the stuck car analogy, control only aides in keeping a person stuck in a stressful situation.

How can someone respond to stress more effectively? One question to ask is, "What can I do about this situation/person?" If the answer is changing it or them, then stress is inevitable. With an answer that reflects taking personal responsibility for behavior, options are available. Stress may not decrease, but it probably will become more manageable.

Asking for help is risky business. Anytime a person sticks his or her neck out there is a risk of being hurt, although it may not happen each time. What is so hard about asking for help? For some people, it is not hard at all. For others, asking for help is equal to admitting defeat and avoided at all costs. Where is the happy medium when it comes to asking for help?

For individuals, who have experienced much rejection in their lives, asking for help becomes a "white knuckle event." The injunctions of "you don't belong" create anxiety as the individual attempts to connect with others. Part of the anxiety results from assumptions being made about outcomes of situations.

Globalized thinking is associated with these kinds of predictive assumptions. However, when tested, these predictions are not 100% accurate. I am sure some people would differ with me. So I offer out a challenge to prove me wrong!

Emotional and physical distance is often used to protect a person from being hurt. Some times these are appropriate measures, but there are times when they foster isolation and loneliness. Chronic feelings of "being on the outside and looking in" rule opinions when a person meets groups of people. So often a halfhearted attempt is made to join the group. When the group does not respond with open arms, a projection is made about the group acceptance of the person. This pattern can become a self fulfilling prophesy of "they don't like me, so why try." The attitude of being the "dumper" rather than the "dumpee" is more palatable.

An individual can become overwhelmed by groups of people and experience performance anxiety. What is forgotten is that groups consist of many individuals. I often hear the shy people say, "I can't think of anything to say." Why not make life easier? An open-ended question to the other person can provide the information for a conversation to develop.

Making friendships is a slow process, but it is possible. There are people who are caring and friendly. The necessary risk to be taken is to reach out and get to know these people. A certain level of openness is needed so others will get the message of "I would like to get to know you."

### Suggested Readings:

Who's Pushing Your Buttons by John Townsend  
 The Dance of Connection by Harriet Lerner  
 The Language of Letting Go by Melody Beatty  
 Hinds Feet on High Places by Hannah Hurnard