

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR *Real Life*

70. The Distraction of Stress Says, "Focus on the Overwhelm"

You are listening to episode 70 of the Encouragement for Real Life Podcast, titled, *The Distraction of Stress Says, "Focus on the Overwhelm."* Welcome back, friend, and thank you for joining me here on the podcast today. This is about the time in this season that I can get a little stressed. Okay, a lot stressed. At the airing of this episode, Christmas is a little less than three weeks away. Even though I have Christmas on my mind and this episode is geared a little towards that, what we discuss in it can be applied to any season of life and any time of the year. So, even if you're listening in after this season, you can still apply the encouragement offered. Because doesn't the distraction of stress appear any time of year? Let's change that this year, and let's find some help and hope as we get into this episode. Are you ready?

I could feel the stress rising. Over the weekend I glanced at my calendar and was reminded Christmas was just three weeks away.

I have presents to purchase and wrap, groceries to buy, goodies to bake.

A house to make ready before my family of 30 converges here on December 23.

Work responsibilities still need to be completed for both of my part-time jobs before Christmas.

To work ahead so I can take a week off between Christmas and New Year's.

Writing my book.

And my quarterly women's event is this week.

As I wrote these items on my to-do list, that list grew fangs and grew into a beast I wanted to run from. I'm guessing I'm not the only one who has felt this way recently. You know, lists are good, but when they get monstrous, they paralyze me.

Can you relate to this at all?

Does this sound familiar to you? Or am I the only one? How is your to-do list looking these days?

In that very moment, I knew I had to make a choice. I could either sit in the stress and feel my pulse race and my temperature rise, or I could choose to release the stress and let it go. I could either focus on feeling overwhelmed, or I could choose to relax in God's peace, instead.

You see, I committed to myself before Thanksgiving that I was not going to allow stress to overtake me and overwhelm me this season. And here I was, just a week later, facing elevated stress levels already. Good grief!

Because the distraction of stress is good at enticing us away from what's important. It's good at making us feel overwhelmed and overloaded. That's what it does... it wants us to focus on being overwhelmed! And I believe it's one of the most dangerous distractions we experience in our day-to-day lives. Because

it not only entices us away from the moment we're in, it actually negatively affects our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health.

Do a search on the effects of stress, and you'll learn all sorts of facts you never knew about this distraction of stress and the negative effects it has on us. Effects such as heart disease, obesity, high blood pressure, and diabetes. Not to mention the effects it has on our moods, our sleep and eating, and our behavior.

This distraction of stress hijacks our peace, our joy, and our hope.

And it replaces it with agitation, misery, and doubt. When we are stressed, we become overwhelmed. We can't think straight, and we get confused. Some of us lash out and others of us withdraw. This distraction of stress prompts us to either overeat or not eat at all, and it messes with our rest. And if we aren't able to rest, well that invites another list of health issues.

The distraction of stress says, "Focus on the overwhelm." But God says, "Focus on me."

When we focus on God instead of the overwhelming stress, our peace, joy, and hope return. Because stress like this does not come from God. Stress like this tries to consume us and distract us and turn us away from all things good. It entices us away from God and His beautiful plans for our lives (and namely, the beauty of this season). We can either be stressed or we can be at peace. We can't be both at the same time.

God has something to say in His Word about stress and anxiety.

Here are three passages I found. (There are many more.)

The first is Psalm 55:22 (AMP) "Cast your burden on the Lord [release it] and He will sustain *and* uphold you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken (slip, fall, fail)."

The second: 1 Peter 5:7 (VOICE) says, "Since God cares for you, let Him carry all your burdens and worries."

Third: Philippians 4:6-7 (NLT) says, "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus."

But this is the season we have plenty of opportunities to experience this distraction of stress, wouldn't you agree? I mean, we have much to do to get ready for Christmas. We have homes to decorate, goodies to bake, Christmas cards to send out, presents to purchase and wrap, (not to mention the struggle in finding that perfect gift!). We have gatherings to plan, groceries to get, food to prepare, and homes to clean (at least I do!). And what about the Christmas parties, the kids' programs, and fun extra events we're invited to? Mix in the responsibilities we already have on a daily basis, and well, it's no wonder stress finds its way into our lives this season!

It's no wonder we get stressed!

As I mentioned in last week's episode, Christmas was never meant to stress us out. The first Christmas was simple and joyous and uncomplicated. It was all about the birth of the Savior of the world. Yet,

we've made it into so much more. So much more than it probably needs to be. And what better way to distract us from the true heart of the holiday than to distract us with stress! The enemy of our souls knows how to distract us, doesn't he?

So, last weekend when I made that list and had my stress-filled moment of realization, I knew what I had to do. I knew the choice I needed to make. Especially if I wanted to stay in God's peace.

So, I chose to consciously and intentionally let the stress go.

I took some deep breaths, relaxed my jaw and shoulders, and I asked God for His peace and presence to fill me. I pictured myself handing over all my cares to Him, and I let them go. Then I also let the tension melt from my body and chose to add a smile to my face for good measure. Because when I get stressed, I get tense. And not only physically. My attitude and my emotions get tense as well, and my husband would likely testify to that!

I also chose to refuse to rush that day, and I decided I would take my time in everything I did. I wanted to relax and enjoy working and creating and encouraging others. And that's what I did. Until about 2 p.m. when I began to feel the familiar pull of rushing. Because quite honestly, that's my normal tempo. That's what I'm used to. I rush. This is next week's subject, by the way, so hang tight for that. But this season I'm focusing on breaking that habit and becoming intentional about slowing things down, as well as my pace and my thoughts. We'll talk more about that next week.

This season is too important to live it stressed.

So, how can we be intentional about shutting out this distraction of stress this season? What can we do?

Here are a number of ways to combat the distraction of stress this season:

1 - Take it to God.

Whatever is stressing us out in the moment, let's commit to immediately taking it to God. Maybe say something like, "God, this is too much for me right now, and I don't like the way this stress is making me feel. I give this to you. Please replace it with your peace and help me to know what to do next." God's just waiting for us to ask for help, and when we do, He will come to our aid. Stress is not God's best for us.

2 - Instead of trying to do more, ask for help and do less.

We aren't designed to wear capes and be Super Woman or Superman, and we don't need to do everything ourselves. Asking for help alleviates stress... whether it's hanging the lights, cutting out sugar cookies, or wrapping presents. Plus, it's much more fun doing these activities with others, and it blesses them too!

3 - When you feel stress rising, breathe.

Do you ever just push through the stress? That can often make the stress worse. Next time, stop and take a deep breath. Count 4 seconds while breathing in, hold your breath for 7 seconds, and exhale for 8 seconds. This helps to lower our blood pressure which has a calming effect on us, plus it helps turn our focus to something else... the gift of breathing. That's a true blessing!

4 - Focus on blessings, not burdens.

William James once said, "The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another." What if we considered our to-do lists and our overflowing plates as blessings, not burdens? Instead of thinking they are things we "have" to do, what if we changed our words to "get" to do? Considering each a privilege changes our perspectives, our attitudes, and helps us see the blessings.

5 - Take a break.

Pause and take a break from the routine. Go relax somewhere that brings you joy... at home, at a coffee shop, at a park. Even if it's just on your lunch break. Change up the scenery and immerse yourself in it's blessings. Enjoy every moment.

6 - Get moving.

Exercise is not only good for us, but as most of us already know, it helps relieve stress. Mayo Clinic says exercise pumps up our feel-good neurotransmitters, it helps shed daily tensions, boosts our energy and optimism, and actually relaxes us. Even if it's a brisk walk through the neighborhood, or dancing in the living room, a little exercise helps us go from stressed to blessed.

If you're feeling a bit stressed today, I invite you to give one of these a try and notice the effect it has on your stress. Give yourself permission to have less stress in your life and more joy this season.

We're continuing this conversation in our private Encouragement for Real Life Community on Facebook. I invite you over there to join in the conversation and the fun. It's an uplifting place, filled with those who desire some daily, uplifting encouragement for their real lives. The link for this group is in the show notes. Hope to see you over there!

And if you found some help or hope in this episode, would you consider leaving a rating or review wherever you're tuning in from today? This helps other people find this encouragement as well. Subscribe to the podcast so you never miss an episode.

As we close today, this distraction of stress doesn't have to overtake us this season. And I pray for each of us that it won't. We don't want to wake up the day after Christmas and realize we missed the gift of this season because of the stress we were under. Let's alleviate the stress this year and live in a more peaceful and hopeful way. And if you live close to me, I invite you to join me for our Real Encouragement LIVE! event in Cedar Rapids this Thursday, December 8 where we are discussing this further. Details are in the show notes. Thanks for being here today. I sure appreciate you. Merry Christmas and God bless you!

Julie Lefebvre