CHAPTER 1

# Hassles, Problems, and Pressures

When I talk to clients in my counseling office about stress, they often discount my advice. Sure, stress plays a part in their damaged relationships and damaged bodies, but so what? They think stress is like the weather—something people talk about but are helpless to change—and a peaceful lifestyle became extinct somewhere between "Little House On the Prairie" and "Happy Days."

They would love to go back to the time before beepers and cell phones and rush-hour traffic, but the idea is impractical. Somewhere back in history they might have had to face an occasional bear, but at least there would have been no soccer practice, carpools, and problems with the Internal Revenue Service. However, the truth is that even a time machine could not guarantee a stress-free lifestyle. Hassles, problems, and pressures have always been part of the human experience.

My grandma was a woman under pressure. She married late in life and started her family just in time for the Great Depression. Since Grandpa was a sharecropper, they were the poorest of the poor. With little education, limited job skills, and five little girls to rear, her choices were very few. At times starvation was a real possibility.

Wealthier farmers in those days grew large fields of blackeyed peas. Those were the days before chemical fertilizers, and the peas were plowed under in the fall in an effort to enrich the soil.

One such farmer lived near Grandma's family, and he offered to let her glean the peas before the crop was turned under. The whole family worked from dawn 'til night securing every pea and drying them. That winter the peas comprised 90 percent of the family diet and they were eaten every day for months.

It was not only poverty that challenged Grandma. The physical work and time pressures were constant. Planting and harvesting have deadlines assigned by nature that are just as strict as anything invented by corporate America. In addition, there was an urgency in every job assigned her. Such tasks as sewing dresses out of feed sacks and making lye soap in a kettle over a fire in the yard were not optional adventures but necessary items filling her "in-basket." Grandma and Grandpa were a godly pair and they raised their children well, but they lived and died under pressure and were intimately acquainted with stress.

The only thing that has changed since Grandma's day is that we now have a word for the struggle of life. We call it STRESS. It is a word Grandma never used because it was not even invented until shortly before 1956. Today, we can measure it, scientifically examine it, and prescribe drugs when our bodies start wearing down under the weight of it. But, like a raging epidemic with no cure, most of us believe we can't do anything substantial to *prevent* it.

The good news is that this belief is wrong. We *can* do something about stress. And the best news of all is that we can do it without taking a time machine back to Walnut Creek or trading our cell phones for butter churns.

In this short, easy-to-read book, I promise to teach you how to cope with stress and how to do it without significantly disrupting your modern lifestyle. I will show you fifteen stress-busting ideas divided into digestible bites. Selecting a couple of these ideas and following them for three weeks can impact both the quality and the length of your life on earth. We will discuss these ideas in detail in the next few chapters, and all fifteen are listed in abbreviated form in Appendix I.

However, before you race on to the Appendix in an effort to defeat stress instantly, you will do yourself a favor if you read through the next two chapters so you can understand the dynamics of stress and how it has impacted your personal life. An enemy with an unknown face has a distinct advantage.

Learning a little about stress will become a major asset in your efforts to defeat it. So slow down and read the next two chapters at your leisure. I guarantee the knowledge you gain will be worth it. Then, adapt the suggested stress busters to your personal schedule and needs. In twenty-one days you will be well on your way to peace.

## THE STORY OF STRESS

Much of what we know about stress and how to cope with it can be credited to one man, Hans Selye. In 1925 Hans was a first-year medical student at the University of Prague. The troubled political times had pushed academia to allow students to enter the medical programs as quickly as they could pass the necessary exams. Hans was only nineteen when he attended his first medical lecture. He was starry-eyed enough to believe that any question could be answered if proper methods of research were applied and young enough to not be contaminated by the medical biases of the older generation.

The thing that struck Hans from the very beginning was the strange way that his teachers seemed to seek solutions for specific diseases and symptoms, yet paid little or no attention to the general idea of just being sick. Often he would be told that while a patient might be achy, feverish, somewhat nauseated, and generally not feeling well, the attending physician should wait until more specific symptoms developed before attempting treatment. Only when a specific disease was identified could intervention be applied.

Hans could not understand why a doctor should wait. Of course there must be a specific disease for a specific treatment to be applied, but should not the medical establishment want to

study sickness in general? Why did sickness itself exist? What was its process?

He would later express his amazement by writing, "Surely, if it is important to find remedies which help against one disease or another, it would be even more important to learn something about the mechanism of being sick and the means of treating this 'general syndrome of sickness, which [is] apparently superimposed upon all individual diseases!"[1]

Hans' desire to understand sickness in general rather than any disease in particular was laughed at by his professors. It was self-evident that people who were sick would look and feel sick. They assured him that there was no common thread among the many various diseases, and if there was, it would never be found. Hans accepted the evaluation of his professors and tried to forget about it, but in the back of his mind remained a simmering question: Why not study the general process of all disease? It would be another ten years before Hans took up the question for serious study.

Shortly after World War II, Hans immigrated to Canada, where he was employed as a young research assistant in the biochemistry department of McGill University in Montreal. It was here that Hans once again took up the study of sickness in general. He felt that studying the general way the body adapted itself to various demands would eventually lead to a way to prevent disease from getting a foothold, thus curing the patient long before specific symptoms began to appear.

Like many scientific discoveries, Hans' work was helped forward by a fortunate accident that enabled him to devise specific experiments which put his ideas to the test. Hans had asked a new lab assistant to give injections to several dozen white rats, but the assistant accidentally failed to place the needle deeply enough. When Hans returned to the lab, he found several dozen rats with pockets of air on their backs. These large bubbles were located between the skin and the underlying tissues. When his anger cooled, Hans realized that he could use the pockets of air to take his study to the next level.[2]

Dr. Selye designed a set of experiments around rats with pockets on their backs. He was sure that he could demonstrate to a skeptical medical community that the bodies of all animals had certain general responses to any kind of sickness or injury. These general responses came before a specific illness could be identified and were always a precursor to it. He believed that the future of medicine would be in controlling and treating these underlying general responses rather than waiting for specific illnesses to become fully active. Seyle's experiments were detailed, very controlled, and strictly scientific.

Hans filled the air pockets on the backs of his rats with various irritants, thus creating an injury against which the body of each rat would have to fight. Every rat would be working in exactly the same way trying to rid himself of exactly the same amount of trouble, and if the irritant was mild, it was logical that each rat would recover. Then he introduced another element to half of his carefully matched rats, thus creating two groups. That element was what he would later call *stress.*

Part of the rats were allowed to rest while the remainder were forced to adapt to various difficult circumstances, such as limited foods, strenuous exercise, cold, heat, or psychological[3] strain. These difficult circumstances were, of course, hard on the rats. However, they did not have any *direct* bearing on the injury each rat carried equally on his back.

In one of his early experiments, Selye injected the air pockets on several dozen of his rats with a mild irritant. He let half the rats rest while the other half were subjected to stresses. Surprisingly, the stressed rats got well faster than the ones who were allowed to rest. Hard work had cured them!

In his next experiment the rats were injected with a stronger irritant, and again half of them were stressed while the other half rested. The results were the exact opposite of previous experiments. This time, the stressed rats died and the rested ones slowly got well. Hard work had killed them!

In both of these experiments, it was not the irritant in the back pocket that killed the rats. The injury had not been

enough to cause death. Also, it was not the stress that killed the rats. Stress alone would not have been enough to cause death. Something happened inside the body of each rat. There was some kind of response process that was reacting to both the injury and the other stressors. Somehow the body was combining these responses and the internal systems were being overwhelmed as they tried to fight on both fronts.

As he watched his rats and carefully documented their progress, Hans proved that difficult circumstances that had no direct bearing on the original injury could impact the healing process. It did not matter what the difficult circumstance was, just so long as it took energy.

This new approach to study needed new words to describe the process. Hans coined the word *stress* to describe the process of adaptation and *stressor* to identify any substance or situation that put the process in motion. Because the stressors were general and could come from any source—heat, cold, physical injury, psychological strain—he gave stress the official title of *general adaptation syndrome.*

In time, Hans was able to isolate the three organs that were always affected when a body was forced to adapt to difficult circumstance. They were the (1) stomach, (2) adrenal glands, and (3) thymus/lymph nodes. These three sets of organs were always affected in the same way and always produced the same results: illness.

It did not matter what stressor had been used, and it did not matter what animal was involved in the experiments. The results were the same whether the subject was a rat dealing with excessive exercise or the CEO of a major corporation dealing with a union strike.

When the energy required for adapting to difficult circumstances lasted long enough, or when it was severe enough, symptoms of disease would appear in these three organs. In time, specific signs of illness came as the body began to break down at the weakest link. If the demand was not released, disease would progress and the organism would die.

Hans knew he had found what he had been seeking for so long. He had found a syndrome of body responses that *preceded* specific disease symptoms. For the first time in human history a scientist was not studying a specific disease, but rather a precursor to all diseases.

**A PERSONAL NOTE**

Invariably, after I have given a lecture on stress, someone will come up and ask about my personal lifestyle. Fair enough. I would not give money to a financial agent who had just declared bankruptcy, and I can't expect readers to trust me unless I have successfully dealt with stress in my own life. Therefore I offer the following personal glimpse.

About eight years ago I went through a trauma that some call "burnout" or "hitting the wall." I was horrified and amazed that someone still in her forties could feel so bad for so long and still be functioning. My family physician said I had "chronic fatigue syndrome." I had never heard of it. The problem is much more understood now, but in the early nineties it was a mystery to most people and hotly debated even by those who believed it existed.[4]

It did not take long for me to give up on the medical establishment, but that did little to relieve my symptoms. Some days were better and some were worse, but the evening that it took both hands on the stair rail to pull myself up to my apartment I knew I was in deep trouble. I threw myself on the sofa and had to rest for ten minutes before I had energy enough to take off my coat.

Because this is not an autobiography, I won't go into detail about my ailments and my journey back to health. It is sufficient to say that the road involved learning about nutrition, rest, and time, and learning to invest more of myself in relating to others. It was also the beginning of my journey toward learning about stress and how it impacts the body.

Now I am in my late fifties and feel better than I have in years. I recently completed my doctor of philosophy degree, or

Ph.D. Anyone who has been involved in a program such as this knows how much pressure and work are involved. This particular degree required professionals to be working in their field before they were admitted to the program.[5]

When the day of graduation came at last, several of us were gathered for the event, and a colloquy was conducted to evaluate the experience. We went around the room sharing our personal stories and telling what the past few years had been like. I was surprised to hear what the others had gone through during the dissertation process.

One man got up at four o'clock each morning, worked until 6:30, then went to his job. Like mine, his profession was that of a counselor. He worked eight hours at the clinic. Then immediately upon returning home he ate a quick supper and saw clients in private practice until ten each night.

Another student said she had worked each night until three in the morning, then got up at seven to go to work. The rest of the students had followed a similar routine. When it came my turn to speak, I felt apologetic. I had slept eight to nine hours each night, and until the last few weeks of the program I always took at least a twenty-four-hour rest during the week.

But as I reconsidered the situation, my slight embarrassment faded. I had carried a full-time job as a counselor, written one of the books I used in the teaching practicum, completed a dissertation on philosophical anthropology, and finished the program in just over two and a half years. Since the program required a minimum of three years, I had to petition the graduate committee to be allowed early graduation.

I enjoyed several benefits that helped make early graduation possible, but I suspect the primary edge was that I got a full night's sleep each night and I occasionally took specific time to rest during stretches of peak stress. I had learned the hard way that burning the candle at both ends gives only a short-term increase in light. Ultimately, it just produces more ash than anything else.

Today, I don't perfectly practice what I teach, but I know that unless I am willing to rein in my strong type-A temperament and deal with the physical realities of my limitations, a very real and unmovable wall is waiting around the bend. Pushing myself until I hit that wall is not only unwise. In the end, it is unprofitable.

Realizing our limitations and maximizing our strengths is what stress management is all about. We must leave the rat race to the rats. Instead, we carve out times of rest for our bodies and practice times of peace for our souls. That is what I hope this book can help you accomplish.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book contains eight chapters. You are just finishing Chapter 1, where, hopefully, I have convinced you that managing your stress **is** possible. In Chapter 2 you will understand more about stress and be given an opportunity to measure the impact it may be having on your body. In Chapter 3 you will be introduced to the most fundamental process of all stress reduction: choice.

Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 form a set of specific stress-reduction ideas, and the information is divided according to how much time it takes to implement each of these stress busters. There are fifteen ideas ranging from those that require no time commitment at all to a few that will involve a change in your basic lifestyle.

Don't worry. No one is expected to implement fifteen ideas! The number and variety of these stress-busting ideas is so that you can choose among them and find one or two that fit your lifestyle and personal need. I suggest that you never choose more than two ideas. It is far better to choose one or two doable things that you actually implement than to make a checklist of five and wear yourself our trying to relax!

The last chapter is a reality check. Life is hard, and reading this book will not change that fact. Some illnesses have no cure. Some problems have no solutions. However, even in those realities there

is hope. Faith is the final solution and the ultimate answer to stress. Knowing what we believe and why we believe it will add to our peace and maximize our years on earth.

The last portion of this book contains two appendices. Appendix I lists all fifteen stress-busting ideas and gives a brief synopsis of each. Page numbers are given so you can quickly cross reference any idea for which you want more detailed description. However, I urge you to resist the temptation to turn to Appendix I now, assume you understand a few concepts, and immediately embark on a twenty-one-day trial.

Such action is possible, but it is not likely to be successful. After all, the whole idea of stress reduction is to slow down life. It is not to pack more into each day and do it more quickly than before. Racing to the Appendix would likely undermine the very purpose you are hoping to achieve!

Appendix II is specifically designed for those of the Christian and Jewish faiths. A list of fifteen passages from both the Old and New Testaments is given, and from the Old Testament the Hebrew names for God are listed. These lists provide an easy reference for meditation exercises.

I don't know if there ever has been a time when the life depicted in a Kincade painting or a peaceful place like Walnut Grove really existed. Somehow, I doubt it. But I do know that Jesus told His disciples that peace would be His parting gift to them.[6] It is a shame when we fill our world with schedules and pressures and the gift slips away.