

CHAPTER 9

THE IMPORTANCE OF A BALANCED LIFESTYLE

Regarding the long-term future it is important to keep a few practical guidelines in mind – things that will equip us better to handle future traumatic experiences and stress.

- **Physical exercise**

Research showed that a person who is physically fit, has a stronger and healthier heart and also better blood circulation. The following is characteristic of fit people:

- They are able to handle exhaustion and tiredness for longer periods.
- They are able to handle stressful situations much better.
- They sleep better and are emotionally more relaxed.
- They have a better self-image and self-confidence.
- They are less prone to anxiety and depression.
- They hold better energy reserves whereby exhaustion could be counteracted.
- They have a better capacity to work.
- They are less prone to illness.
- They have more control over stress than the unfit person.

- **Healthy eating- and drinking habits**

A Healthy person is able to handle stress and trauma better. Therefore, we have to eat and drink in such a way that we can be healthy.

- **Alcohol**

Never abuse alcohol because it has a destructive influence on folic acid, vitamins and magnesium. Magnesium is the mineral that is necessary for producing energy. Alcohol is not a stimulant but a depressant and it temporarily decreases stress symptoms but uncontrolled use of it can harm the body and it also leads to addiction and more stress.

- **Caffeine**

Excessive use of caffeine must also be avoided because it has a depleting effect on vitamins, iron and glucose – it results in decreased energy levels. Your body can only handle 310 mg caffeine per day without side-effects. People with a high stress-level can only handle 80 mg per day. Percolated coffee contains 220 mg caffeine, instant coffee 95 mg, decaf 35 mg and tea 45 mg per cup – cola drinks 98 mg per 30 ml. Caffeine is actually a drug – in this case a psycho-active stimulant that restricts the functioning of chemicals that helps the brain to transport messages. Caffeine also restricts the functioning of chemicals in the body that serve as a natural anaesthetic. It serves as stimulant for the body and the brain but as soon as the effect is exhausted then it causes a person to fall back into anxiety, nervousness and trembling. It impedes normal sleep and can also restrict brain- and nerve functions. People who are susceptible to depression must especially be careful because caffeine could worsen this problem.

- **Building blocks of nutrients**

The most important building blocks of nutrients that our bodies need, are the following:

- **Protein:** We need protein for energy, to build and restore tissue and to fight infections.
- **Carbohydrates:** these are the fuel food – it is the same as a car that needs fuel.
- **Enzymes:** they help to 'unlock' the nutrients in the body so that the body can benefit the most of it.
- **Vitamins:** they are actively involved in the body's system of defence.
- **Minerals:** Vitamins and minerals are both essential for life and growth – they work together to keep the body healthy and in good shape.
- **Fats and sterols:** they are important for energy as well as maintenance of healthy cells.

The abovementioned can be described as the chain of nutrients. We know that all of these nutrients are important for good health. Furthermore, it is also important to realize that if there is a long-term deficiency of some of the abovementioned

elements in the food chain, then it may result in illness. Medici and other scientists showed through research that certain basic elements have to be present in the diet to prevent illness. It is findings such as these that for example forms the foundation of the RDA (*South African Recommended Daily Allowance*) formula for vitamins, minerals etc.

Some examples of basic food elements that has to be part of a balanced diet, will be the following:

- **Calcium:** it counteracts osteoporosis and is very important regarding women – research showed that 25 million Americans and 75 million women world-wide suffer from this problem.
- **Copper:** it promotes healing processes in the body in general.
- **Iron:** it prevents anaemia, builds red blood cells and promotes resistance towards stress and illness.
- **Magnesium:** it promotes growth, stimulates blood-sugar metabolism as well as metabolism of calcium and vitamin C.
- **Selenium:** it improves the elasticity of tissue and also increases resistance regarding cancer.
- **Zinc:** it helps with the healing of wounds, eliminates the residue of cholesterol and was successfully applied in the treatment of arteriosclerosis. It is also important especially to men regarding the problem of prostate cancer.

David Seamands shares the interesting example from a conversation that he had with a physician who specialized in emergency treatment at an academic hospital. He asked her about their procedure when depressed people are admitted after unsuccessful suicide attempts. From her answer it became clear that one of the first reactions often imply that the person receives a healthy plate of food with a large portion of meat. The reason is that their protein levels are usually very low because they usually haven't eaten properly during the preceding two or three days. If the protein level is low then it leads to low energy levels which make the person more susceptible for depression.

There are often Christians who neglect the physical area of their bodies and then they wonder why they feel so depressed and why God feels so far from them.

- **Rest, recreation and holidays**

Even if you are psychologically and physically very strong, you can't go on all the time without taking a break. A bow that is stretched to its utmost tension all the time will eventually break. Often breaks have to be taken, such as going away for a weekend, short holiday, etc.

- o **A more relaxed approach**

Some of us are perfectionists. We are of the opinion that, *"If I don't get to do everything, and do it well, my life will be miserable."* Consequently, you try to complete everything at the same time. Therefore, it is necessary sometimes to take a slower pace. If you are the type of person who carries around loads of frustration, you will have to learn to make things less complicated. Make the decision to pace your program in future, one step at a time and one task at a time (Backus, 1998:134).

- o **Take regular walks at beautiful and safe places**

It is astonishing what positive effect fresh air could have on the lungs. Furthermore, it is also wonderful how a beautiful, panoramic view can lift your perspective from personal problems and give you a broader vision on life (Schiraldi, 2001:99).

- o **Begin to practice the 'joy' that you left behind, again**

Do you miss an old friend? Did you have to give up a hobby when you got married or when the children arrived? Are you too caught-up in your work? Try to return to what you've lost even if it is only sporadically. Develop the approach of, *"From now on I am going to make the right decisions regarding my own welfare."* A person doesn't have to necessarily exclude other people or be selfish when you value your own health (Backus, 1998:133).

- o **Did you know that to smile also helps?**

By purposefully work on a cheerful facial expression, could have a positive influence on your emotions. It could also have a calming effect on your autonomic nervous system so that it becomes less reactive to stress. Furthermore, it is proven that a cheerful facial expression increases flowing of blood to the brain and it leads to

releasing beneficial neuro-transmitting chemicals in the brain which promotes the functioning of the nervous system. Whenever you are anxious or depressed and you simply pay some attention to your appearance and demeanour, it could also change your emotions. The Bible emphasizes this in Proverbs 7:22: “A *cheerful heart is good medicine.*” Remember it and apply it to yourself.

o **Don't forget to play**

Whatever you do for recreation and pleasure, counts as 'play'. It could include aspects like the following:

- Listening to music.
- Spending time outdoors and in nature.
- Reading for pleasure.
- Computer games.
- Chess, board games or other similar games together with someone.
- Having a nice chat with someone.
- Hobbies.
- Sport.

• **Re-arrange your priorities**

It is important to take care of yourself. Excessive stress is a warning sign that you have to take the pace slower. Don't simply take more and more responsibilities upon yourself but learn to say 'no'. Avoid activities that are not necessary, and use your time effectively. Plan your day and draw up a work schedule to bring order in your personal life (Macdonald, 1988). If certain tasks cause too much stress, try to establish whether it is due to a lack of knowledge, competence or the wrong approach or attitude. If there is a problem regarding any of the latter, you will definitely experience stress before and during the task. The benefit of such an analytical approach is that you are able to identify the problem area and pay more attention to it.

Draw up a list of tasks that have to be done. Take them one by one and as you progress, you will get the feeling of being more and more in control. It might seem

impossible to take a heap of stones out of your way but if you could only begin to carry them away, one by one, even one per day, then the heap will be gone before long.

Furthermore, it is critically important not to procrastinate. To procrastinate is one of the surest ways to lose control. Before long all the procrastinated tasks will seem like a mountain and you will become miserable. If you have the tendency to procrastinate, begin to immediately pay attention to one of the tasks at least. Don't become the victim of your circumstances but rather be the creator of it and stay in control (together with the Holy Spirit), whatever happens. Accept that you are only human and don't drive yourself to achievements that is unnecessary, or regarding which you don't really are capable of doing or which may result in unnecessary exhaustion.

Guard against tunnel vision by losing perspective of the bigger picture – it could be meaningful to discuss your situation with someone who looks at it more objectively. Time, money and energy are limited sources and when people use these sources for things that they view as precious, they are usually happier and their lives are more fulfilled than when they squander their sources on something of lesser value. The latter option usually leads to a feeling of worthlessness and aimlessness together with frustration and unnecessary stress.

Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate your activities – one way of doing this is to divide them into the following categories:

- Things that are part of your responsibilities and that have to be done.
- Things that you would like to do.
- Things which are actually unnecessary.

After you've done the allocation, ask yourself the question: *"If I had only one year to live, how would I spend this year?"* You could determine your priorities according to this and experience life in a much more meaningful way, not only for one year but for the rest of your life.

Regarding this aspect Steven Covey (2004:151) came to an interesting observation when he says that activities can generally be divided into two categories: either urgent or important.

- **Urgent matters**

Urgent implies immediate attention – that is ‘now!’ Urgent things pressurise us – a ringing phone is urgent. Most people can’t accept the idea of sometimes just ignoring a ringing phone (because something more urgent could need their attention at that moment). Urgent things are usually visible – they ask for reaction, such as crises and deadlines. These are usually matters that are important to other people and it usually comes and stand right in front of us. Very often these things are a pleasure to do, but often they are of lesser importance in the long-term. These kinds of activities often completely take up people’s time and result in them becoming crisis-managers, problem-orientated people and dead-line driven suppliers. As long as you concentrate only on these kinds of aspects, they tend to become bigger and bigger until they dominate you completely. It could be compared to a huge wave: that problem comes and hits you head over heels, you battle to get up again only to be knocked down again by the next wave. Some people’s days are literally consumed by these types of urgent problems and they spend most of their time reacting to it, with the viewpoint that these things are also *important*. The reality however is that the urgency of these things is often based on the priorities and expectations of other people.

- **Important matters**

Important things on the other hand have to do with *results*. If something is important, it contributes to your mission, your values and high-priority goals. These types of activities often have to do with prevention, team-building, long-term planning, recreation, physical exercise, discovering new opportunities, writing a personal mission-declaration, preventive maintenance, preparations and time that we want to spend with our family. All of these are things that we know we have to do but actually neglected it because it didn’t seem urgent at the time. These things often have to do with the answer to the following question:

Which one thing would you like to do in your personal and professional life, which if you could do it on a regular basis, it would bring about an enormous positive difference in your life?

We often react to urgent matters – important matters on the contrary ask of us more initiative and pro-active action. If we don't have a clear idea of what is important in our lives and also which results we eventually want to achieve, we are lured into only react on urgent matters. Goethe once said:

“Things which matter most must never be at the mercy of things which matter least.”

- **The value of a pet**

According to Backus (1998:135) regular interaction with a pet such as a dog or cat could have a positive influence on your health. By loving and paying attention to God's creation in this way, could repay your much more than merely the time and energy that you've put into it.

- **The value of a hobby**

It is important to every person to have variation and diversity regarding a daily routine. A hobby gives the opportunity to transfer your mind completely and in this regard it also has therapeutic value. Some hobbies could also have the effect of 'milieu-therapy'.

- **New goals**

A person who don't have any goals in life tend to experience feelings of worthlessness which could also lead to unnecessary stress as well as depression. Therefore, it is important to formulate your goals. However, it must be realistic and achievable because goals that were not reached could be one of the major sources of excessive stress. In this regard Proverbs 13:12 makes an important statement:

“Hope delayed makes the heart sick; longing fulfilled is a tree of life”
(CEB).

It is also important to have short-term, medium-term and long-term goals. If you only have short-term goals, the possibility of stress becomes bigger. The reason is that after completing a task, especially one in which you've put a lot of time and

energy, a person tends to experience a feeling of emptiness if there is no further project or challenge on which you can concentrate – this feeling of emptiness could also become a source of stress.

- **The importance of a support system**

To each person (especially the traumatized person) there must be a network of people who can serve as support system and a safe framework within which he/she could function. This form of socializing is the best countermeasure to loneliness and isolation. Through the recent years there has been a worldwide shift in emphasis towards small groups. A person who went through a huge traumatic experience has to be afterwards involved in some form of small group for long-term support.

Within the religious milieu there are researchers who describe this emphasis on small groups as one of the biggest transformations the past 1600 years – even bigger than the Reformation during the time of Luther and Calvin. It was found during an extensive study of small groups in the USA that 40% of all Americans are involved in a small group – more than 70 million people. Regarding these groups more than 60% are related to churches – they originated within congregational context or are part of the activities of the congregation. The rest are groups which are organized to help people to overcome certain problems (for example the AA) or to have a hobby or any other interest (even within these groups there are often some form of religious activity). It

used to be that *modernism* placed a lot of emphasis on the dynamic individual and the community actually developed around this individual and his/her rights. Currently a shift in emphasis however took place in that *post-modernism* emphasized community experience. The image of the dynamic individual is no longer viewed as authentic and there is also a growing need amongst people to experience intimate spiritual relationship with other people amidst the daily hectic pace. To become part of such a small group represents a close and personal support system. Especially during times of crisis and trauma it becomes a huge source of support and encouragement without which the person can't survive (Backus, 1998:150; Schiraldi, 2001:96; Meier *et al.*, 2000:322).

- **How much emotional ‘weight’ do you carry?**

Do you allow too many persons to unload their emotional baggage onto you with the result that they leave much lighter, but leave you behind with heaviness? Don't start with a campaign to try and change these people because this would only make your burden even heavier because you are going to experience much more frustration. Rather begin to look for more friends that are willing to listen to you, support and encourage you.

- **You can't solve everybody's problems**

Furthermore, it is also important to realize that you can't solve everybody's problems – the need around us is simply too overwhelming. Each one of us has to realize our limits and if we on a regular basis exceed those boundaries, we land into trouble. You must also realize that not every person that knocks on your door or phone you are necessarily sent by God - Satan can also send people to you in such large numbers that it could drain you physically and emotionally in such a way that it results in burn-out and compassion fatigue. A striking example in the earthly ministry of Jesus is the man whom he healed at the Pool of Bethesda. He only healed that one person at that occasion although there were many others around this man who were in pain and misery (John 5:3). His Father's instruction on that specific day centred on the need of that one man and therefore Jesus focused fully on this. Our spirit must be fine-tuned to obey the Father's instructions day by day amidst the overwhelming need of the world.

- **Apply the approach that “*I will regain control over my life*” (together with the Holy Spirit)**

In the process of valuing your own health you don't have to cut out people from your life or to become selfish (Backus, 1998:155).

- **The importance of spiritual growth and church involvement**

- **Attending church services**

To be involved at your church is not merely a good idea in itself. Studies showed that people who regularly attend church services, are healthier and live longer than those who don't go to church (Backus, 1998:147). There are many physical-, emotional- and spiritual benefits attached to spiritual connection with brothers and sisters in Christ. Traumatized people have to be invited to congregational activities and attendance.

- **Learn to dialogue with God**

One of the names of the Spirit of God is the *Comforter*. The Greek phrase is *Parakletos*, which means: *He who was called to walk next to you, to support you*. In its broader sense this phrase means: *helper, one whom you can lean on, one who can support you*. Thus, the Holy Spirit was sent to support especially also the traumatized person – He is indeed the One whom he/she can trust in completely. Those who've discovered this truth will be able to handle trauma, stress and crises much better (Backus, 1998:171-185; Clark & Henslin, 2007:193; Hicks, 1996:210).

- **Positive self-communication**

We are in conversation with ourselves most of the time. This inner discussion, our self-talk, greatly determines our reaction in certain circumstances. Our self-

communication also determines our physical reactions and that could play a huge part in influencing our emotions to eventually be able to react positively to our environment. One must ask yourself the following questions to determine whether your self-communication fulfils a positive role or not:

- If this thing that I fear really happens, what could be the worst consequences?
- Had it happened before? How did I deal with it at that time?
- What is the possibility that this thing in fact could happen?
- Is there any clear indication or proof that my fears will come true?

- Is it possible for me to influence the situation positively if I engage in negative self-communication?

With regards to this matter the Scripture in Proverbs 4:23 is very much applicable:

“Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it”

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- **Widening your circle of involvement**

Maybe it became time for you to become more involved in the lives of people around you. Maybe you feel overwhelmed by personal- and family obligations as it is currently. On the other hand, it is true that involvement with people outside your home could have a great healing effect on you.