

what your
soul needs
for
stressful
times

60 POWERFUL TRUTHS
to Protect Your Peace

HOLLEY GERTH

Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author



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before you get
started

For additional tools and resources that go with
this book, visit holleygerth.com/stress.



introduction

What's causing you stress right now? Maybe it's a bad day or a busy schedule, the headlines on your television or the news you got from your doctor, family challenges or the latest project at work. You find yourself asking questions like . . .

What's going to happen?

How will this all work out?

Why do I feel so tired sometimes?

If that sounds like you, then this little book is an invitation to pause for a few moments of peace and strength each day. As a bestselling author, counselor, and life coach, I've worked with thousands of people who feel like you do. I've personally struggled to deal with stress in my life too. You're not the only one, and you don't have to handle this alone.

I've learned how you can deal with the stress in your life, and I'm excited to share it with you! I'll give you spiritual truth to soothe your soul and practical tools to apply that will make a difference. You really can live with more peace and less pressure, more calm and less chaos, more worship and less worry.

Imagine waking up to each new day with more hope and facing the future with confidence, even when life is hard or the world seems to be falling apart. Imagine being able to give

your friends and family the steady support they need in *their* stressful times.

Stress is inevitable, but letting it control our lives is optional. You've already taken the first step toward a new way of living by reading these words. I'll give you what you need to keep moving forward no matter what happens.

Let's start this journey together today.



what you need in every stressful moment

*God replied to Moses, “I **AM WHO I AM**. Say this to the people of Israel: I **AM** has sent me to you.”*

Exodus 3:14

Think of the last moment when you experienced stress. It could have been at home or in traffic, in your kitchen or in a conference room, in the hallway of a hospital or as you scrolled through social media. It might even be right now as you’re reading these words.

What do all the times we experience stress have in common? The outcome feels uncertain. We don’t know if our dream will succeed or fail, if the conflict in our relationship will get resolved, or if the test result will come back the way we’d hoped.

Humans feel stress when we experience uncertainty, and there’s plenty of it in our world right now. It seems in the middle

of all the challenges we face, some people have unshakable faith, that they never struggle with questions or doubts, fears or messy spiritual failures. It's best you know right up front that I'm not one of them.

Instead, I often find myself worrying about the future. I picture the worst-case scenario—the world falls apart, completely runs out of coffee, or I make an epic and unredeemable mistake. Then I start asking, “Where are you, God? Why won't you help me?”

In those moments, it helps to remember that when Moses asked God his name, the answer was simply, “I AM.” Why does this matter in stressful moments? Because I AM is *present tense*.

God's name is not I Was.

His name is not I Will Be.

His name is I AM.

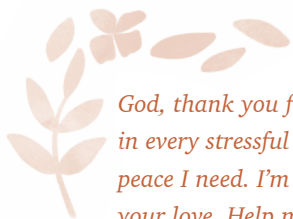
This means the only place we can fully experience the presence of God is the present. So, of course, it feels like he's not in our imaginary, worst-case scenario future. When we get to tomorrow, he will be there. But today he is exactly where we need him to be—with us.

As Melissa Spoelstra, author of *The Names of God* study, says, “When Moses needed confirmation, Yahweh said, ‘Whatever you need, I AM.’ If you need a provider, I AM. If you need help, I AM. If you need deliverance, I AM.”¹ Moses wasn't in church or at a spa getting a pedicure when God spoke the name “I AM” to him. He was in a desert—a dry, lonely, difficult place. So we can take comfort in knowing God is with us even in our hard places. Our challenges do not change his character or commitment.

what you need in every stressful moment

Paul writes in Romans 8:38, “I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love.”

Here’s what we all need to know in every stressful moment:
God is with me right now.
God is with *you* right now.
And whatever tomorrow brings, he will be there too.



God, thank you for always being with me. You are present in every stressful moment, and you alone can bring me the peace I need. I’m so grateful nothing can separate me from your love. Help me trust you with everything that brings me stress, whether big or small, knowing you care about it all. Amen.

What’s one thing you hope to gain from going through this book?

what you need in every stressful moment

HE'S WITH US IN THE BIG AND THE SMALL, leaving His fingerprints on every page of the story, forever reminding us: Remember My goodness here. Look around. Do you see Me? I'll hang the clouds in the sky and fling stars into the velvet night all so that you remember in both daylight and darkness, I'm with you always.

KAITLYN BOUCHILLON





less stress, more peace

Peace be with you, dear brothers and sisters.

Ephesians 6:23

What is stress? We describe everything from awkward conversations to major catastrophes as “stressful.” That’s actually appropriate, because experts define stress as the response our minds and bodies have to pressure. When we experience worry, fear, or anxiety, that’s the psychological side of stress. When our hearts pound, hands shake, and thoughts race, we’re being impacted by the physical part of stress.

While *stress* has been present throughout human history, that specific term has been used for less than one hundred years. Hans Selye, a Hungarian doctor, first came up with it in 1936 to describe a set of symptoms he repeatedly noticed in patients even though they had different illnesses. Because of stress’s medical origin, we tend to think of it in negative terms—like a sickness we need to cure. And many of the most common causes

of stress *are* negative, including personal problems, professional losses, and unexpected events like pandemics.

But stress itself is neutral. We also experience stress in positive situations like getting married, having a baby, being promoted at work, and moving to a new place. Stress is part of every worthwhile endeavor, from making a new friend to winning an Olympic gold medal.

In other words, stress actually has a purpose. It points out what matters most to us. It helps us identify possible threats. It prepares us for action. *Our natural human stress response is God-given.* He hardwired it into our brains and bodies. We need it to survive.

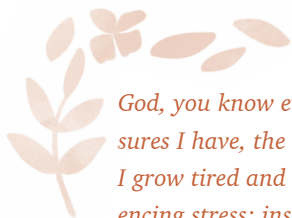
But we're fallen, broken people in a fallen, broken world, and sometimes a response that's intended to be helpful becomes a hassle and a headache (literally). Thankfully, God also gives us what we need to manage our stress, to make it work for us rather than against us.

Understanding stress matters, because stressed-out people often experience guilt or shame about the way they feel. Or they become determined to get rid of stress completely. But what we really need is to know how to make stress work for us, to keep it from wearing us out and bossing us around. That is possible, but it takes spiritual truth, psychological insights, and practical tools—all of which are coming in the pages ahead.

Think of your natural stress response like a wild horse. It can trample your yard and throw you onto the dirt. But it can also be tamed. And when that happens, it has surprising potential

less stress, more peace

to help you move forward in life. What makes the difference?
Who's in control. God will help you show your stress who's boss.



God, you know every detail of my life. You know the pressures I have, the challenges I face, and the moments when I grow tired and weary. You don't condemn me for experiencing stress; instead, you come alongside me to lead me back toward peace. Guide me on this journey. I give all that concerns me to you. Amen.

What have you been taught about stress? What's one new thing you learned about it today?

HOW YOU THINK ABOUT STRESS AFFECTS everything from your cardiovascular health to your ability to find meaning in life. The best way to manage stress isn't to reduce or avoid it, but rather to rethink and even embrace it.

KELLY MCGONIGAL





helpful responses you can use

Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think.

Romans 12:2

I'm writing my ebook *Fear, I'm Over You* from my upstairs office on a sunny day. Outside everything looks the same. The Canadian geese that come to our pond every year have built their nest in the usual spot. The dogwood tree on the corner is in bloom. The turtles are lined up in the sun like teenagers at the beach. But, really, nothing is the same. Because I'm writing in the beginning stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. School is out. Restaurants are closed. Social distancing is suddenly the norm.

When I ventured to the grocery store for a few necessities, I could feel the fear like electricity in the air. When I looked at social media later that day, I could sense it too. In times like this, how do our brains respond?

Most of us are familiar with the fight-or-flight response. It's necessary for our survival. If a bear came charging out of the woods at us, we would react instantly by fleeing or becoming aggressive. I see versions of this response now, as some people buy all the toilet paper even though someone else might need it (fight) while others ignore what's going on (a form of flight).

But is fight-or-flight our only option? Thankfully, no, our brains have two other responses to stress that can prove much more helpful.

The first is the challenge response. Think of a time when you were afraid but also determined to take action. Examples would include an athlete before a big game, a presenter preparing to give a speech, or a parent handling a crisis involving their child. The difference in the challenge response is that we tell ourselves, "I've got this" or, as believers, "I've got this because God's got me."

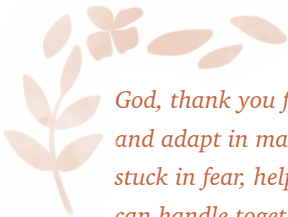
Health psychologist and author Kelly McGonigal says,

Like a fight-or-flight response, a challenge response gives you energy and helps you perform under pressure. Your heart rate still rises, your adrenaline spikes, your muscles and brain get more fuel, and the feel-good chemicals surge. But it differs from a fight-or-flight response in a few important ways: You feel focused but not fearful. You also release a different ratio of stress hormones, including higher levels of DHEA, which helps you recover and learn from stress. This raises the growth index of your stress response, the beneficial ratio of stress hormones that can determine, in part, whether a stressful experience is strengthening or harmful.¹

Making a plan or asking ourselves, “What’s one helpful action I can take right now?” helps our brains move into the challenge response.

The second alternative response our brains have to stress is called tend-and-befriend. We see this during any disaster when the helpers appear. When we assist others, our brains release oxytocin, which is sometimes called the cuddle hormone. It bonds us to others, and it’s good for us personally; it can literally strengthen our hearts. Asking, “Who can I help right now?” helps shift our brains out of fight-or-flight mode. McGonigal says, “When you help someone else in the middle of your own distress, you counter the downward spiral of defeat.”²

We all experience the fight-or-flight response, especially when the unexpected happens, but we don’t have to stay in it. God said he’ll take care of the birds and flowers I see outside my window. That, too, is still the same. He also takes care of us in many ways—including giving us remarkable, adaptable brains.



God, thank you for giving me a brain that can respond and adapt in many ways to whatever happens. When I feel stuck in fear, help me see it as a challenge that you and I can handle together so I can take action. And give me the courage to help others, because we are better and braver together. Amen.

helpful responses you can use

**What's a time when you chose the challenge response?
What's a time when you chose the tend-and-befriend
response?**

MANY OF THE THINGS THAT HAPPEN TO US are beyond our control. . . . What matters is how we respond.

CAROLINE TESELLE





what true peace means

The LORD gives his people strength.

The LORD blesses them with peace.

Psalm 29:11

I recall a holiday season when Mark and I braved a local shopping area for some last-minute gifts. We braced ourselves for big crowds, long lines, loud songs playing over store speakers, and irritable drivers fighting to get the last parking spot. When we walked through our door an hour later, I took a deep breath and thought, *Peace at last.*

In our culture, we tend to think of peace as the absence of what troubles us. The blaring music gets turned off. The crowd thins out. The pace of our life slows down. But when Mark and I went to church that night, our wise pastor, Mark Schatzman, talked about what God really means when he says he will give us peace.

The biblical word for peace is *Shalom*, and while it's difficult to translate into our language, it essentially means wholeness

and well-being. Theologian Tim Keller says, “Shalom experienced is multidimensional, complete well-being—physical, psychological, social, and spiritual; it flows from all of one’s relationships being put right—with God, within oneself, and with others.”¹

What strikes me most when I read this is how often I settle for less than Shalom. I’m content with a shallow, surface-level peace. If I’m gut-honest, I even feel a bit nervous about the idea of Shalom. I’m a woman who knows how to work hard and fight harder. I’m used to my faith feeling like a battleground. If life is calm and things are good, I start wondering what will go wrong.

I tend to focus on the part of the gospel that is the cross. Yet sometimes in doing so, I forget that part of the purpose of the cross is to bring us Shalom.

The punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed. (Isa. 53:5 NIV)

The story of Scripture starts with Adam and Eve in the garden, a place of complete peace. It ends in heaven, also a place of well-being and wholeness. It seems God is intent on seeing his people thrive, whatever it takes.

This doesn’t mean we’ll experience Shalom fully in this world. But there’s something comforting in knowing that God is always working to bring us closer to it until we’re Home forever.

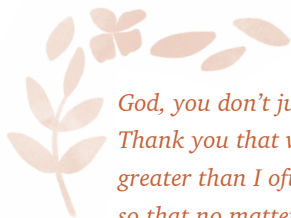
Great is the **LORD**,
who delights in blessing his servant with peace!
(Ps. 35:27)

We will go *through* hardship and suffering in this life. But peace is the place God has for us to dwell.

If we're in a season where life is happy, then that means we embrace it without fear or apology. We receive the gifts God is bestowing on us. We celebrate and savor every moment. We let the joy we feel now be a small preview of what we'll one day experience forever.

If we're in a season where life is hard and stressful, then that means we let Shalom be our hope. As Mark Schatzman said, "God makes peace out of our pieces."² No matter how broken we feel now, we can trust one day we'll be whole and that all will be well.

Yes, I thought for so long that peace was the absence of something. I know now that it's the presence of Someone. A God who loves us. A God who is for us. A God who is making all things new, including me and you.



*God, you don't just give me peace; you are my peace.
Thank you that what you offer is so much deeper and
greater than I often know. I ask that you give me Shalom
so that no matter what my circumstances might be, I can
know that all will be well and I will be whole. Amen.*

How have you defined peace? How would you do so now, based on what you just read about the meaning of Shalom?

SHALOM IS GOD AND SHALOM COMES FROM GOD. We will never find rest or peace or wholeness in any other person, thing, or circumstance. It has always come from Him. He gives us peace and He sustains our peace. The world could be raging around us, but if our gaze is fixed on Him, we will not be moved.

KARINA ALLEN





the power of your perspective

For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.

Proverbs 23:7 NKJV

Years ago, my in-laws bought a beautiful SUV with pristine paint and not a dent in sight. They came to visit us for the weekend, and my mother-in-law needed to run an errand. She offered to let me drive. I promptly backed the aforementioned SUV directly into a trailer parked behind it. I cried. My mother-in-law might have too. In the moment after the incident, I told myself things like “You’re such a mess! You always do stuff like this. You’re never going to get it together.”

Years later, my in-laws were in town again and we were heading out for a day at the lake. I had a sudden craving for a latte, so we pulled into the parking lot for a local coffee shop. I made my purchase and exited, only to discover my family talking

to a stranger. Someone pointed to the bumper of our SUV, and I could see the crumpled metal and shattered headlight. The responsible party said, “I didn’t see you in the rearview mirror. It’s a work truck I’ve never driven before, and I’m not used to it. I wish I had backed out slower.”

I stood there, coffee in hand, and considered our very different explanations of two strikingly similar events. Back in graduate school, I learned about research by a psychologist named Martin Seligman. He asserted that there are two distinct ways of explaining events in our lives. With the first style, pessimism, people see unfortunate events as personal, permanent, and pervasive. In other words, those with this style believe it’s their fault, it will last forever, and it affects every area of their lives (see my response to backing into that trailer as an example).¹

With the second style, optimism, people see those same events as external, temporary, and specific. In other words, they attribute the cause to something outside themselves, and they believe whatever happened won’t last forever and that whatever happened is only related to this individual situation (see the response of the man who backed into Mark’s SUV as an example).

This optimism is not the stereotypical kind where someone ignores reality and insists everything is good all the time. None of us want to be that way, so put that definition of optimism out of your mind. What we’re talking about actually gives us a *more* realistic view.

Seligman found that those with the pessimistic style were more prone to anxiety, depression, and even physical illness.² They were

more likely to quit jobs, not push through obstacles, and give up.³ Here's the good news: we can change our style. Doing so begins with recognizing our natural stress response. If we tend to react with a pessimistic style, then we can pause and choose to process events in a different way. We can ask the following questions:

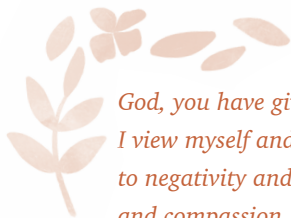
- *What external factors contributed to this?* (Example: I was driving an unfamiliar car, and the trailer was parked in my blind spot.)
- *Will this really last forever?* (This is unfortunate, but it can be fixed in a few days.)
- *Does this really affect every area of my life?* (One bad moment as a driver doesn't make me a bad person.)

The goal of this reflection is not to say, "I'm fine!" with a fake smile on our face. It's also not about getting out of our responsibilities or passing the blame. Both the man in the parking lot and I ended up paying for new bumpers.

Explaining events differently simply helps us be more resilient and minimizes the long-term damage to our emotional, mental, and physical health as well as to our relationships. It decreases our anxiety and helps us fight off depression. Also, while Seligman calls this optimism, it sure feels a lot to me like living in grace. As believers, we aren't limited to just "pessimist" or "optimist." We can go above and beyond either because we're indwelled by and empowered through the Spirit.

Sometimes I'm still tempted to look at what happens in my life as personal, permanent, and pervasive. We all have this tendency. When our spouse leaves. When our evaluation report at work is not what we had hoped. When our teenager yells and then slams the door. When we get laid off. When our friend stops returning our calls. When we spill the milk.

We often can't control what happens to us. But we can control what we think about it. And that can make all the difference.



God, you have given me a powerful mind that shapes how I view myself and my circumstances. When I start to give in to negativity and self-criticism, shift me back toward grace and compassion. I so often do this for others, but it's much harder to do for myself. Empower me to do so. Amen.

Think of a recent mistake you made or an unfortunate circumstance you experienced. How did you explain it to yourself? If you leaned toward the pessimistic style, write a new explanation below that's more optimistic (you can use the three questions from the devotion to help).

the power of your perspective

IT'S THE CYNICS WHO HAVE A LIMITED, bruised vocabulary of *no*. It can seem easier to reject the world before the world hurts you again. It's the brave who say a prayerful *yes*, the brave and wise who believe that the faith-filled *yes* is what heals things. It's the brave and free who are the optimists.

ANN VOSKAMP

