

OVERLOAD

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How to Unplug, Unwind, and Unleash Yourself
from the Pressure of Stress

JOYCE MEYER



NEW YORK • BOSTON • NASHVILLE

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FaithWords
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10104
www.faithwords.com

Printed in the United States of America

RRD-C

First Edition: March 2016

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Meyer, Joyce, 1943–

Title: Overload : how to unplug, unwind, and unleash yourself from the pressure of stress / Joyce Meyer.

Description: First [edition]. | New York : Faith Words, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015039434 | ISBN 9781455559831 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781455559848 (large-print hardcover) | ISBN 9781455559855 (Spanish language trade pbk.) | ISBN 9781478985082 (audio download) | ISBN 9781478985099 (audio cd) | ISBN 9781455559862 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Stress (Psychology)—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Stress management—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4509.5 .M4755 2016 | DDC 248.8/6—dc23 LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015039434>

ISBN 978-1-4555-6625-9 (international trade)

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Anxiety in a man's heart weighs it down, but an encouraging word makes it glad.

Proverbs 12:25

INTRODUCTION

Wow! I am so excited about this book. I have a great expectation that it will truly help you learn how to manage and even eliminate the stress in your life. Let me tell you why I have a special excitement about *Overload: How to Unplug, Unwind, and Unleash Yourself from the Pressure of Stress*.

In my years of ministry, I've taught and written on a wide variety of topics. *Knowing God Intimately, The Power of Your Words, Obeying God's Voice, Overcoming Fear, Living with Hope, The Battlefield of the Mind, Receiving God's Love, Enjoying Your Life*—just to name a few.

And while each topic that God has led me to write or teach about is important, I feel like there's something particularly significant about this book. You see, *stress* is a subject I'm all too familiar with. This isn't just an issue I've studied. It's not a theme I've merely read about. And it's not a topic I've only witnessed from a distance.

Stress is something I've had to deal with.

It's a nagging enemy I've battled. Sometimes winning and sometimes losing, stress is an adversary I've dealt with in the past . . . and something I still need to confront and resist in my life today.

There have been many days when stress has tried to steal my peace and hijack my joy. Hectic circumstances, busy schedules,

and poor choices have been the entryway through which stress has come barging in. And I do mean *barging in*. Stress rarely sneaks into our lives through a back alley. It prefers to come rushing through the front door.

You may be able to relate to what I am saying. As a matter of fact, I have a feeling you know *exactly* what I'm talking about. I'm sure you've dealt with your share of frustrations, pressures, and stressful situations. You've probably had days when the bills piled up, the kids drove you crazy, the boss seemed unreasonable, and the car started making that funny noise again. (You may be having one of those days today.)

So, it looks like you and I are in the same boat. You may not know all the specifics (though I'll share some of them with you in the pages to come), but you can relate to the stress I have experienced. And I may not know all the specifics, but I can relate to yours.

I think that's why I'm so excited to be writing this book, and I'm equally excited you're reading it. I feel like we're in this together. You and I—we're fellow sojourners on this journey to reduce our stress levels. We've both felt exasperated, we've both been discouraged, and we've both contemplated escaping to a beach somewhere so everyone will leave us alone. (Just kidding... kind of.)

But let me zoom the camera out wider than just you and me. There's a bigger picture here I want you to see. Did you know there is someone else who understands the pressures of stress? Someone else who can identify with what you're going through when life gets crazy and things get out of control?

That person is Jesus.

If that answer surprises you, consider for a moment some of the stressors I believe Jesus faced:

1. His ragtag group of disciples needed correction on a regular basis.
2. The Pharisees and the Sadducees constantly tried to publically discredit His ministry.
3. Huge crowds formed everywhere He went, begging for miracles.
4. The people in His own hometown of Nazareth rejected His teaching.
5. One of His chosen followers betrayed Him for thirty pieces of silver.

Sounds pretty stressful to me. And that doesn't even take into consideration the fact that Jesus was on a divine mission to save humanity from our sins and reconnect us to God. Jesus knew He was going to die a cruel death; it was no surprise to Him. Yet He never stopped marching toward the cross. That's a stress that none of us can ever imagine. It may be difficult to remember that Jesus experienced stress, but the Bible teaches us that He understands all of our weaknesses and infirmities because He was tempted in all respects just as we are, yet He never sinned (Hebrews 4:15).

But in the midst of all the stress and all the pressure, Jesus said things like:

Peace I leave with you; My [own] peace I now give and bequeath to you.

John 14:27 (emphasis added)

In the world you have . . . distress and frustration; but be of good cheer [take courage; be confident, certain, undaunted]! For I have overcome the world.

John 16:33 (emphasis added)

I have told you these things, that My joy and delight may be in you, and that your joy and gladness may be of full measure and complete and overflowing.

John 15:11 (emphasis added)

Also, in the midst of a hurricane-type storm, He rebuked the wind and told it to be still, and then He said to His disciples . . .

Why are you so timid and fearful? How is it that you have no faith (no firmly relying trust)?

Mark 4:40

Isn't that amazing? Despite the inconveniences, the challenges, and the pressures all around Him, Jesus remained peaceful and at rest. He went about the work before Him with confidence and joy, even as others were panicking and losing their cool.

No matter the circumstance—whether it was an unexpected storm or an angry mob—Jesus was a calming, steadying presence. This is why He could say in Matthew 11:28, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy-laden and overburdened, and I will cause you to rest.”

Jesus is still speaking those words—“Come to Me, and I will cause you to rest”—today. The life He wants you to live is not a life overrun by stress. You weren't meant to go through each day worried, anxious, and afraid, just waiting for the hammer to fall or the other shoe to drop. You can take all that stress, all that pressure, and learn to give it to God and live in the peace and the joy He has planned for your life.

I know that's true because I've seen it happen in my own life. I was faced with a choice years ago: I could give in to the stress and anxiety that I was feeling, or I could learn to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit and cast every care upon God.

When I began to trust God with my life, and as I began to really study and understand the effect stress and worry were having on me (spirit, soul, and body), I was amazed at the turnaround that began to take place. A transformation started to unfold in my life as I chose to make God-directed, daily decisions to overcome stress.

Sure, I still face the same stressors I always have. And, yes, there are still days that are more stressful than others. But my life is no longer overloaded with what Jesus called the “cares and anxieties of the world” (see Mark 4:19). Now when I’m faced with a situation that used to absolutely drive me bananas, by the grace of God, I’ve learned to keep my joy, trust God, and keep moving forward.

That’s why I decided to write this book. I can’t wait to show you what the Lord has taught me—and what He is *still* teaching me—about overcoming stress. No matter what you’re facing—big or small, annoying or terrifying—believe me when I tell you: You don’t have to live an anxious, worried, stressed-out life.

Trust me, I understand that you’re dealing with challenges and difficulties, sometimes on a daily basis. I know it can be exhausting trying to successfully navigate the stormy waters of life. But I want to encourage you today—you don’t have to navigate those waters alone. God has promised that He is with you and that He will never leave your side (see Deuteronomy 31:6). And if God is with you, there is no problem, no debt, no trial, and no obstacle worth stressing out about. God’s not going to let you sink. He is in control, and He is going to see you safely through to the other side.

Is your bank account running on empty?

Don’t stress out. God is in control!

Do you have a big decision to make for your future?

Don’t stress out. God is in control!

Is your marriage going through a difficult struggle?

Don't stress out. God is in control!

Has your doctor ordered more tests?

Don't stress out. God is in control!

Is there a new opportunity you've been hesitant to go after?

Don't stress out. God is in control!

That is what this book is all about. There will always be stressful situations we face, but with God's help, we're going to discover how to overcome that stress and learn to live the joy-filled, abundant life Jesus died to give us.

So, get ready. I believe God has something good in store. In the pages to come, I'll share my story and others. We'll talk about God's promises and His instruction. I'll give you some very practical and powerful steps to take. And through it all, in every chapter and on every page, I pray that you begin to see that stress is something you don't have to be overloaded with any longer—stress is something you can overcome!

OVERLOAD

**KEEP
CALM
AND
DE-STRESS**

CHAPTER 1

Start Defeating Stress Today

Anxiety does not empty tomorrow of its sorrows, but only empties today of its strength.

—Charles Spurgeon

Stress. It's a word none of us really likes but we've all come to accept. The unfortunate but undeniable fact is that you and I live in a stress-filled world. Student or teacher, stay-at-home mom or working professional, living in the country or residing in a city—stress seems to find us all.

I came across one article that said stress is the new normal. And I guess for many people that's true. You don't have to look very far to find the evidence of that. We've all known friends or coworkers who suffer from “stress headaches.” Drug companies produce numerous stress-reducing medicines. Retail stores make a fortune selling “stress balls.” Physicians, websites, and employers offer a variety of “stress tests.” Stress is like a virus that just keeps spreading.

Many people have contracted the stress virus . . . but they don't seem to realize it. Their friends and family see it. Their bosses and coworkers see it. Everyone around them knows that they're stressed out, but they're oblivious to it. They have not learned to recognize the symptoms of stress. They're going about each day

anxious, upset, worried, tense, and frustrated, and they've just accepted this as a part of life. It's their "new normal."

Many people have contracted the stress virus...but they don't seem to realize it.

This certainly was the case for me. In the early years of my ministry, I was highly stressed, but I didn't know it. There were a number of contributing factors to my stress—the ministry was growing quickly, which kept me extremely busy; I wasn't resting or getting the proper nutrition; I overfilled my calendar because I didn't want to tell anyone no; I was still dealing with the emotional repercussions of having been abused by my father throughout my childhood; and in the midst of all the busyness, my husband Dave and I were raising four children. And...did I mention I was in the midst of the change of life and could not take any hormone therapy because of having had breast cancer?! Wow! Now I look at all of this and can fully understand why I was stressed out all the time, but amazingly I didn't recognize the symptoms.

With all the anxiety and frustration and running around, I just assumed this was how I was supposed to live. Stress became my new normal.

Because of my personality and work ethic, I didn't take the time to slow down and learn to prioritize my calendar or care for myself. I had a hundred plates spinning at once, and I was determined to not let any of them fall. The result of my well-intentioned but stubborn refusal to slow down was physical and emotional exhaustion. My body started breaking down, and I would cry at the drop of a hat.

Finally, I went to see a doctor. I was sure he could simply give me some medicine to get me back on my feet again so I could continue meeting all the demands I was putting on myself. I'll

never forget what he told me: “Joyce, your physical and emotional problems are a result of stress. I think you need to make some changes.”

This infuriated me. *Stress? I’m not stressed! I’m just busy!* It really bothered me that he would suggest I was stressed out. I thought I was too

I thought I was too strong for stress.

strong for stress. And I was convinced I was in God’s will and, therefore, He wouldn’t let me feel the bad effects of stress. After all, I had dedicated my life to serving God; how could I be suffering from stress? Looking for a different answer, I consulted another doctor, but he told me the same thing. No matter how many appointments I made, and no matter how many doctors I talked to, the answer was consistent and firm: “Joyce, you’re stressed out.” The last doctor suggested I see a psychiatrist, and that really made me mad! My mother had suffered with mental illness, and I think in the back of my mind I was convinced if I admitted I was experiencing stress, I might somehow be headed in the same direction she had ended up in.

Things were a little different back then. Information wasn’t as readily available as it is today, and not as much study had been done in regards to the harmful effects of stress. I think this is why I was hesitant to believe how much damage stress was bringing to my life. At the time, it was a total shock to me that stress could be the root cause of so many of the issues I was facing.

Here I was, serving God and doing what I knew He had called me to do, but I wasn’t really enjoying my life. Rather than celebrating the opportunities God was giving me to teach His Word (what I love to do), stress had me in bondage. I was easily frustrated, I had aches and pains, I wasn’t sleeping well, I was argumentative—the list goes on and on.

But I began to read about stress, and with the Lord's help, I finally began to see that the doctors were right. Stress was hurting me physically and emotionally. But the Lord also began to show me that stress was hurting me spiritually. I was allowing the external pressures of my life to affect my internal peace and joy. If I didn't make some major changes, I was never going to fully enjoy the life Jesus died to give me.

The Effects of Stress

The more people I've talked to over the years, the more I've come to realize that my story isn't that uncommon. As I share with friends and ministry partners how stressed and overwhelmed I felt at times, I'm usually met with understanding nods and I-know-exactly-what-you-mean reassurances. People from all walks of life have told me that at some point they, too, had to face the cold, hard truth that stress was keeping them from really living their best life.

Health, peace, rest, relationships, laughter—stress wants to take it all.

Stress is an indiscriminate thief. It will take whatever it can from whom-ever it can. Health, peace, rest, relationships, laughter—stress wants to take it all. And like any thief, we can't deal with it until we realize it is out there, lurking in the shadows. If we don't know we're at risk, how can we protect ourselves?

Let me share some eye-opening statistics with you from recent studies and surveys:

- 49 percent of people surveyed said they have had a “major stressful event or experience” in the last year.¹

- 83 percent of Americans are stressed out on the job.²
- 69 percent of people with high stress say their stress actually *increased* in the past year.³
- 41 percent of adults who are married say that they lost patience or yelled at their spouse due to stress in the past month.⁴
- 52 percent of those aged 18 to 33 years report that stress has kept them awake at night at least once in the past month.⁵

Stress, pressure, and anxiety are being reported by people all over the world at an alarming rate. There are studies too numerous to count that show we are a society overrun with stress. And this stress we face is having an alarming effect on the way we feel and act each day. Look at some of the effects the Mayo Clinic says stress has on us:⁶

Physical effects

- Headaches
- Muscle tension or pain
- Fatigue
- Change in sex drive
- Upset stomach

Emotional effects

- Anxiety
- Restlessness
- Lack of motivation
- Irritability or anger
- Sadness or depression

Behavioral effects

- Overeating
- Angry outbursts
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Tobacco use
- Social withdrawal

And as bad as those effects are, they aren't even the most dangerous effects of stress. The National Institute of Mental Health says that "the continued strain on your body from routine stress may lead to serious health problems, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, depression, anxiety disorder, and other illnesses."⁷

We can't close our eyes any longer. Stress is a real enemy, capable of doing real physical, emotional, and spiritual damage. It's not something to be trivialized and swept under the rug. Stress isn't just being "overly busy" or "a little nervous." Stress is a dangerous tool the enemy uses to try and keep us from enjoying the life Jesus died to give us.

What About You?

So far in this chapter, I've told you about the stress I was under—a stress that was holding me back even though I didn't realize it at the time. And I've told you about friends of mine who could relate because they had been through stress, too. Now I want to ask you about your life.

You see, I'm wondering if you're really experiencing and enjoying the best God has for you. I say that because I meet so many people who are worn down and worn out. It seems they're always tired, always upset, and always wishing for something better. No matter

how hard they try, they just can't quite seem to pinpoint why they aren't happy. Sure, they have their good days, but if they're completely honest, they'll tell you that the bad days outnumber the good.

And it's not always about circumstances. Some of the most frustrated, unhappy people I know have all they've ever asked for—a loving spouse, beautiful children, a successful career, a great house. But even with all these things, they can't seem to find peace and celebrate life. There's no time for that. Instead, their days are filled with worry, nervousness, and uncertainty about the future.

Do you know that feeling? Have you felt unsettled or discontented recently? What about those symptoms from the Mayo Clinic? Headaches, pain, fatigue, restlessness, lack of motivation, irritability, anger, sadness, overeating, social withdrawal—have you dealt with any of these lately? If so, it's quite possible that you're dealing with stress (whether you know it or not). And stress is trying to rob you of the good things God has in store for your life.

Let me encourage you: The stress you're facing doesn't mean there is something wrong with you. As a matter of fact, it just means you're human. As the statistics show, men and women all around the world are feeling stress. But there is good news for us today—we don't have to live like the rest of the world. As believers, we have been promised a new life in Christ. We don't have to let stress rob us of our happiness. We don't have to sit back and think, *Oh well, I guess this is as good as it gets*. We can stand on the promises of God and trust that He is working out His great plan for our lives (more on this in the next chapter).

God has a better life in store. A life full of laughter, contentment, provision, peace, and joy.

So, if you've ever wondered, *Is this as good as it gets?* the answer is a resounding no! God has a better life in store. A life full of laughter, contentment, provision, peace, and joy. But an

important part of realizing all that God has for you is choosing to de-stress. Let me give you some simple steps to start that process.

5 Ways to De-Stress

Once you realize that stress is trying to keep you from experiencing God's best in your life, you can start making some necessary choices to change things. We're going to talk about those choices all throughout this book, but I want to give you some practical things right away in this first chapter so you can begin taking some initial steps today.

When you get a new phone or piece of electronic equipment, the manufacturer usually includes a "Get Started" card at the front of the instruction manual. Well, that's kind of what this is. Here are some steps you can take today to "get started" on overcoming stress:

1. Seek Out Social Support

Studies show that isolation leads to elevated stress levels. As social beings, spending time with others is one of the best ways to improve our outlook. There are different social outlets that work better for different people; here are a few suggestions:

- **Family:** Spend time with family members who love and support you. Don't take them for granted.
- **Church:** The local church is where the family of God gathers to worship Him, learn His Word, and encourage one another. If you're not in a strong, Bible-based church, I encourage you to find one to attend.
- **Groups and clubs:** Social groups of all kinds—book clubs, walking groups, Bible study groups, even groups

of friends that simply meet for dinner once a week—are all shown to reduce stress.

- **Counseling:** If you don't have anyone else to talk to, being able to process emotions with a counselor can be a tremendous help in reducing stress and increasing overall emotional health. My suggestion would be to make sure it is someone who is well grounded in God's Word so the Holy Spirit, who is "the Counselor," leads the advice they give you.

2. Practice "Shrug Therapy"

There are some things in life you can control—what job you take, what friends you spend time with, how much coffee you drink, and what time you go to bed. But there are other things you can't control—what other people say or do, fluctuations in the economy, that rude driver on the freeway.

How you react to things you can't control will many times determine your stress level. People who regularly get upset over small things are easily frustrated and highly stressed. People who shrug those things off are much happier.

People who regularly get upset over small things are easily frustrated and highly stressed. People who shrug those things off are much happier.

Shrugging doesn't mean you're indifferent or don't care about what is happening around you; it simply means you're acknowledging there is nothing you can do at that moment to change the situation. The best approach when things are beyond your control is to shrug it off and trust God to work things out for your good (see Romans 8:28).

3. Find Your Comfort Zone . . . and Stay There

My husband, Dave, once did one of the wisest things I've seen. When he was working as an engineer, he was offered a promotion that came with a big pay raise and a lot of prestige. But he turned it down. At first I thought he was making a big mistake. *Couldn't we use the money? Didn't he want people in his company to look up to him?*

When I asked him about it, Dave told me that he had watched the other men who had previously been in that position. He said they traveled extensively, and they were constantly given unreasonable deadlines that put them under tremendous stress. He told me, "Joyce, that's not the way I want to live." Instead, he chose a position that allowed him to stick to his core values—commitment to family and comfort with self—rather than chasing what other people were chasing.

I'm convinced there would be much more happiness and less stress in the world if people would take the time to know themselves and their comfort zone and stay there. This extends beyond the workplace. If you are involved with something that is stealing your joy or your health, that is not your comfort zone—get out of there as quickly as you can. Removing all the things from your schedule that aren't bearing good fruit will greatly reduce your stress level and enable you to enjoy the things you choose to focus on.

4. Nutrition, Proven Supplements, Healthy Diet, and Exercise

What you put in your body has a huge impact on your stress level. Proper nutrition, proven supplements, and an overall healthy diet are major influences on how you feel each day.

I encourage you to thoughtfully put together a well-balanced, sensible combination of nutritious food and healthy, proven supplements and vitamins in order to help offset daily stress.

I cannot state strongly enough the need for regular exercise. Many people think they don't have time to exercise, but the truth is if you don't take the time now, you may lose more time visiting doctors and having to be inactive and unproductive because you feel bad. Exercise is one of the best sources of energy you can find!

5. Schedule Time to Relax

Relaxation is not selfish or lazy. It is not slacking off. It's a way of recharging your batteries—physical, emotional, and spiritual—so that you can charge back into the fray at full strength the next day. You will get much more accomplished and live longer and healthier if you'll take the time to treat yourself right.

There are thousands of ways you can relax. Whether it's unwinding with music, reading a good book, taking a warm bath by candlelight, going for a walk, or engaging in a sport you enjoy, you know what relaxation feels like, and you know when it's happening to you. I strongly encourage you to make relaxation a part of your daily life.

If you've felt robbed or shortchanged lately—if you've wondered, *Is this as good as it gets?*—remember that a life in Christ keeps getting better and better. Proverbs 4:18 says that “the path of the [uncompromisingly] just and righteous is like the light of dawn, that **shines more and more (brighter and clearer) until [it reaches its full strength and glory]**” (emphasis added).

That means God has great things in store for your life! No

matter how irritating, frustrating, or stressful the situation is that you're facing today, don't let it steal your hope or decrease your joy. If you'll trust God and learn to let go of the stress that is trying to hold you back, you'll be amazed at how much better life can be.

Things to Remember:

- Stress is a real enemy, capable of doing real physical, emotional, and spiritual damage. It's not something to be trivialized and swept under the rug.
- We don't have to live as victims of stress. As believers, we have been promised a new, powerful, overcoming life in Christ.
- Once you realize that stress is trying to keep you from experiencing God's best in your life, you can start making some necessary choices to change things.
- Five ways to de-stress: seek out social support; practice "shrug therapy"; find your comfort zone... and stay there; nutrition, proven supplements, healthy diet, and exercise; schedule time to relax.

Did you know?

Big stress or little stress—your body reacts the same way. The human body doesn't differentiate between a major or minor stress. Regardless of the catalyst, a typical stress reaction floods the body with a wave of 1,400 biochemical events. If this happens too frequently, we age prematurely, our cognitive function is affected, and we are drained of energy and clarity.⁸