

Aim of lesson

To help the young people to cope with the stresses they find in life, and to learn the relevance of Bible teaching.

Bible background

There are many passages in the students' notes.

Preparation required

Think about your own life, and work through the students' notes with your own experiences in mind. How relevant are they to you? What things have helped you in the past, or caused you difficulties?

Suggested outline of lesson

This is a discussion lesson. It is more important for the young people to talk than to take notes. Depending on your relationship with them you may find helpful the notes on 'Talking with young people' in the Introduction to this book.

Be content for the discussion to wander a bit. It is better to keep it on track by asking questions and apparently casual remarks than by working formally through the list of topics in the students' notes.

Some things to think about:

What are they? Do you think everyone suffers from them? What are typical causes?

Stress and anxiety are caused by situations we can't cope with. They may have a variety of sources:

	To do with you	To do with the outside world and other people.
Physical	an injury or illness ...	poverty, unemployment ...
Psychological	guilt, grief, fear of failure, thinking that you are ugly or 'not good enough' ...	arguments, dealing with people we are afraid of or don't like, difficult relationships with people we care about such as members of the family or boy/girl friends ...

It is important to recognise that situations which some people find stressful are no problem to other people. Some people enjoy an argument or thrive when they're overworked. Some are quite happy to sit around and do nothing all day, or don't worry if they don't know where their next meal is coming from.

This means that it is not the situation itself that is stressful, but the way we cope with it. In a sense everything belongs in the 'To do with you' column. That doesn't mean it's your fault, but it's important to recognise that no situation is entirely out of your control.

It's also important to realise that most people suffer from stress. It may be helpful for the young people to think of others they know and to identify things that they worry about. (Be careful that this does not turn into a gossiping session.) This is a good time to talk about the things you worry about as well as to ask the young people about the things that cause them problems. If they are honest they will probably talk about their relationships with their parents and friends, and it is essential that you should keep what they say to yourself.

How do they make you feel? How do you recognise them in other people?

It is good for us to learn to recognise the symptoms of stress: things like

- tense muscles
- inability to concentrate
- feelings of panic
- over-reacting - being short tempered or bursting into tears, often over trivial things
- rushing about doing unnecessary things

- doing nothing because we are overwhelmed by the amount we have to do
- behaving in a stupid way that we afterwards regret

so that when we find ourselves behaving like that we can stop and think about why.

Similarly, when we see others behaving in these ways, rather than criticising them or looking down on them, we can try to understand the cause and make allowances - or even help!

Often, of course, problems which are apparently medical can be caused by stress, and it is amazing how our health is affected by our frame of mind.

What can you do about them?

There are some useful steps that we can take, which are common sense:

- Make a list of the things you are worrying about. Often when you do this you realise that they are not as serious, or as numerous, as you thought.
- If the problem is overwork, make a list of what you have to do and prioritise it. If it really is too much, decide on some things you're not going to do. If that affects anyone else, go and explain the situation to them.
- If you are feeling tense, do some relaxation or breathing exercises.
- If the problem is to do with a relationship with someone else, and you could talk to them, go and explain the problem in an unemotional way. Explain how you feel about the situation; ask them how they feel; try to discuss a solution.
- If you have a friend you can trust, go and talk to them.

These steps can be important and very valuable, but in the end the most important thing is for us to talk to God. If we can explain our problems to him and trust him to help us, then a lot of the burden of responsibility or guilt can be lifted.

How can you avoid them?

We often cause stressful situations ourselves by the way we behave.

- If we don't pray about decisions, or about our everyday life, we are taking all the burden of responsibility on our own shoulders. That means that if things seem to be 'going wrong', we have only ourselves to blame.
- If we don't think before we act we can often walk into trouble. Anyone who has watched a TV soap opera will realise that nearly every story is based on someone acting stupidly, failing to listen properly to someone else, or getting their basic values wrong. Life can be much simpler if we live it God's way.

So the keys to avoiding stress are things like:

- Praying to God so that we can trust him to take responsibility for our future, and know that he is controlling the present.
- Trying to do things God's way - that means reading his word so that it can guide us.
- Talking, and listening, to other people, so that there are no misunderstandings.
- Trying to think ahead so that we don't walk into trouble.
- Recognising that we are human and have limitations. We can't do everything or be best at everything. We have the looks, abilities, and background that God has given us, and we should not feel ashamed or embarrassed about them.

If we can realise that stress and anxiety come not from the situation we are in but from the way we handle it, we can learn to deal with them and to avoid them.

Can they be good?

Stress and anxiety can be good if an otherwise lazy person is spurred into action, or if they cause us to recognise a problem that we have been ignoring.

Most often, however, they are destructive and entirely unhelpful.

What can we do to help other people?

If we have learned something about how to deal with our own stresses and worries, then we may be able to start helping others. In the same way as the solutions to our own anxieties lie within ourselves, so do those of other people. So it is no good simply telling them what to do. To help them we have to show them how to help themselves.

What the Bible says:

Tell God

The fact that Paul had learned for himself 'Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God' explains how he had 'learned to be content whatever the circumstances'.

Recognise that some things are a result of our faith, and view them positively

'Suffering as a Christian' sounds like something we never have to do, certainly when compared with the persecution of the first Century. But if we decide to go to Youth Weekends or Bible Class instead of working all the time, we may get fewer marks in examinations. If that's the case we should be able to accept that we have made a good choice in our lives which we are perfectly entitled to make, and if that costs us a mark or two, well, so what? We have chosen right and should not feel defensive towards anybody. This principle applies all through our lives. If we take decisions prayerfully and with respect to God's will, we should never look back with regret, even though we may superficially seem to be suffering because of what we decided.

Coping with guilt - ours and other people's

This is really just the principle of prayer carried out at the human level. In practice, talking to people face to face without any aggression or defensiveness, but a willingness to listen to their point of view, is amazingly effective in defusing stressful situations.

Trust God about the future; he does understand

This is really the essence of faith. Abraham trusted that God would take him to a better land, would bring him countless offspring, and would fulfil all the other promises. This is a great example for us, and when we manage to do it all our problems fade away. How to get there? - this is why we read the Bible and why we need regularly to pray to God about our everyday lives.

Recognise that God brings difficult times in order to develop our personalities.

The NIV translation of Hebrews 12:7 seems to be accurate, and is very helpful: 'Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons'. If when difficult times come we can remind ourselves that they have been put there by a loving father for our good, even though perhaps we can't understand why, a lot of the hurt can fade away.

Make time to think and meditate

The lesson of the fishermen in John 21 is a very pointed one. Jesus had come into the world as its light. When his disciples slaved away all night they wasted their time and effort. Five minutes guided by Christ was better than many long hours of hard work without him.

Relevance to our lives

It is important to recognise that we will always have things to worry about. However much we may imagine that our problems are temporary, they will be replaced by others. But if we can learn how to approach today's difficulties we can also learn how to cope with tomorrow's.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, help us to obey you so that our lives will not be complicated by sin; help us to pray to you so that we can trust you to guide us; help us to share our problems with you, knowing that you want to help us. Amen.

Other suggestions for activities

Get the young people to look through the Psalms for one that shows how the writer learned to cope with a stressful situation. Examples are Psalms 3, 4, 7, 13, 23, 34, 51, 52, 54, ...