

# Care for the Caregiver

A guide during the COVID-19 pandemic

## Introduction

Are you caring for others during this COVID-19 crisis? This lesson can help you care for yourself so that you thrive even as you pour out your life for others.

You will benefit the most from this lesson if you are able to do it with a small group, and if you pause and do the discussions and activities before reading further. This allows you to express your thoughts and feelings and have them be heard so that you realize you are not alone. It also helps you digest the materials so you can experience the healing and peace God has for you. If a small group is not possible, you can do the lesson on your own and write your reflections in a journal.

You'll need about two hours to do the whole lesson in one sitting, but you can also do it in several shorter sessions. If you do it in several sessions, end each one with prayer and start the next one with a review. If you have time, do the things suggested in Section 3 together. If your time is limited, (1) select in advance the sections and questions that you feel are most relevant and (2) have participants fill out the stress test in advance.

If you do not already know how to write a lament, you can learn this either in *Beyond Disaster: A Survivor's Guide for Spiritual First Aid*, or in *Healing the Wounds of Trauma: How the Church Can Help*. Those booklets and other resources to help you and your loved ones during this pandemic can be found at the websites [beyonddisaster.bible](http://beyonddisaster.bible) or [traumahealinginstitute.org](http://traumahealinginstitute.org).

### Overview of sections

The amount of time suggested for each section is the minimum. Feel free to spend as much time on each section as you need.

1. Story: Stress and more stress (25 minutes)
2. Sources of stress (25 minutes)
3. In moments when you feel overwhelmed (20 minutes)
4. Principles of caring for yourself (35 minutes)
5. Closing exercise (15 minutes)

## 1. Stress and more stress

“I just can’t take much more.” Pat was outside the hospital where she was working in the ICU. She had just come off a 12-hour shift and was talking on the phone to her friend as she walked to her car. She slid into the driver’s seat but didn’t start the car. Tears came to her eyes as she went on talking. “I’m exhausted and my skin hurts from all that protective equipment I have to wear, but that’s not the worst part. It’s watching all these people dying and not being able to stop it. I’ve worked in the ICU for a long time, and it’s never been like this!” Her friend listened to all Pat was saying, and encouraged her to get home and eat and sleep.

As Pat approached her house, her usual fear came to mind. “Am I bringing this virus back to my family?” She kept away from her husband and children until she had showered and changed her clothes. Her youngest child, three-year old Joe, whined and sobbed. He had been waiting for his mother all day and couldn’t understand why he had to wait even longer for a hug!

Pat’s husband Mike was the pastor at a small and struggling local church. He greeted her with a sigh. Dinner was waiting. She tried to eat as Mike gave her a briefing of his day, but she didn’t have much of an appetite. “I could hardly get the children to do their schoolwork and my phone kept ringing. Priscilla’s mother is down with COVID. Sam’s mother is feeling depressed again. And both John and Sally have been laid off. When will this nightmare end?” He sighed again. “I wonder if the church will survive all this!”

Pat tried her best to empathize with Mike and then headed to bed. That night she didn’t get the rest she needed. Even when she was asleep, pictures of dying people flashed through her dreams.

The next morning, the alarm went off at 6 AM. After a quick breakfast, Pat was off again. Mike got to sleep in. He felt bad that Pat was working so many hours and at such risk. He felt he shouldn’t complain but at the same time, he was stretched to the breaking point.

The children felt the stress, too. Little Joe kept crying for his mother. The oldest boy, Ron, would have spent all his day playing video games if Mike let him! He was easier to deal with than the middle child, Susan, who was anxious about the virus. She washed her hands over and over and kept asking if she was going to get sick.

There were more patients than ever at work that day. After many hours, Pat got a short break. In the breakroom she found the chaplain getting a cup of coffee. He asked her how she was feeling. Pat sat down and let her feelings flow out like a flood. “I feel so guilty that I can’t help them all. I wasn’t trained for a situation like this—maybe no one was! The part that upsets me the most is seeing people dying alone because we can’t let visitors come in. And I feel so angry that we don’t have the proper equipment! This didn’t have to happen!” The chaplain listened and acknowledged how overwhelmed she felt, especially since her role and the procedures seemed to change daily.

That night after the children were in bed, Pat sat with Mike and talked. Before long, she burst into tears. He listened and consoled her. Just being heard felt good and she slept better than night.

### ***Reflection questions***

1. How are Pat, Mike, and the children feeling?
2. Why are Pat, Mike, and the children feeling this way?

3. Have you ever felt like Pat or Mike? Explain.

## 2. Sources of stress

### *Reflection question*

What are the main sources of stress you've been facing as a caregiver?

Your list may be quite long. How much of it fits into these broad categories?

- **Being overloaded:** You may simply have too much to do and not have time for the rest your body needs. Our bodies were created to release adrenaline for short times of crisis, but if we are running on adrenaline all the time, we will wear our bodies out. We may become exhausted and not be able to function.
- **Trauma and secondary trauma:** You may experience trauma firsthand and find yourself behaving differently: reliving the experience, avoiding things that remind you of the trauma, and being on alert all the time. In addition, if you listen to people telling you about their traumatic experiences, you can experience "secondary" trauma and have the same reactions. This can be as overwhelming as firsthand trauma.
- **Moral dilemmas:** You may have to make hard decisions where there are no good options. You may be forced to do what you consider wrong, or not be able to do what you think is right. You may not be able to stop the wrong you see. You may want to help, but not be able to. You may realize that your group is actually doing harm. You may feel guilty that you survived while others did not. All these things can wound your soul and wear you down.

High levels of prolonged stress rob us of energy and joy, and can even lead to death. As you care for others during the pandemic, if you neglect caring for yourself, you will soon be running on empty with no fuel to keep going. God wants living sacrifices, not dead ones! (Romans 12:1). The Bible refers to our bodies as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). By taking care of ourselves, we honor God, whose image we bear.

Time spent taking care of yourself is time well spent. Your cup can be refilled so you have something to offer others. When you are refreshed, you can do better work (Ecclesiastes 10:10, NIV).

### *Activity*

Take the stress test found at the end of this lesson. Then discuss these questions in twos.

1. How much were you aware of your stress level?
2. What is the biggest source of stress for you?

### 3. In moments when you feel overwhelmed

#### **Reflection question**

When you feel overwhelmed, what are some things you do to calm yourself in the moment?

Here are some things to consider:

1. Name and recognize your feelings. Accept them as normal.
2. Take five minutes to breathe in and out slowly from your belly. This deep breathing increases the supply of oxygen to your brain and helps you feel calm, connected to your body, and quiets your mind. God gave us our first breath and gives every breath we take (Acts 17:25). The breath he gives us can calm us when we are crumbling under the weight of worry.
3. Take a short break to rest, go outside, enjoy the beauty around you. Take a photo. Even a five-minute break can reduce stress.
4. Repeat a short biblical truth. Ask God to show you a word or words that are meaningful to you, for example, "Peace, be still."
5. Imagine a container and put your problems in it, and close it. Then when you have time, open the container and work through your problems.
6. Spend time with the Lord in the Word, prayer, worship, and the fellowship of believers (even virtually).

#### **Daily Check-in**

This check-in can help you stay in touch with your inner self and turn your attention to God, who cares for you. You can do it now, and then find time every day to do it.

Think back over the last 24 hours.

1. What experiences made you feel good?
2. What experiences made you feel bad?
3. What losses did you experience? Include things you can't see like hope, faith, joy.
4. Choose one thing that stands out and pray about it—either a prayer of praise, request, or lament.

### 4. Principles of caring for yourself

#### **Reflection question**

What have you done to care for yourself during this time?

Consider the ideas below, to add to those you've already thought of.

## **A. Have someone who cares for you**

If you are giving out all the time, you need someone who can listen to you and care for you. This is not a sign of weakness: counselors have counselors and soldiers have buddies to share their burdens with. The Bible encourages us to do this:

Help to carry one another's burdens, and in this way you will obey the law of Christ.  
(Galatians 6:2)

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28 NIV)

Find someone who knows how to listen well, someone you feel safe with. Make regular times to check in with each other. Or, you may want to form a small group of people who can support each other in this way.

### ***Reflection question***

Who do you know who might be able to listen to you and help carry your burden?

## **B. Take care of your body**

When there are many demands on your time, we can become too stressed to eat proper meals, exercise, or get enough sleep. And that can keep increasing our stress levels. Taking care of our physical body can be exactly what we need to recover emotional and spiritual strength!

The Bible tells the story of the prophet Elijah. After a very stressful time in his ministry, he was afraid of getting killed, and he fled for his life.

Elijah walked a whole day into the wilderness. He stopped and sat down in the shade of a tree and wished he would die. "It's too much, LORD," he prayed. "Take away my life; I might as well be dead!"

He lay down under the tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said, "Wake up and eat." He looked round, and saw a loaf of bread and a jar of water near his head. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The LORD's angel returned and woke him up a second time, saying, "Get up and eat, or the journey will be too much for you." Elijah got up, ate and drank, and the food gave him enough strength to walk forty days to Sinai, the holy mountain. (1 Kings 19:4-8)

### ***Reflection questions***

1. What did God do for Elijah when he was overwhelmed, tired, and discouraged?
2. How much priority do you give to taking care of your body?
3. Which part is hardest for you: eating well, getting enough sleep, or getting enough exercise?

### **C. Find others who can help**

If your workload is too heavy, try to find others who can help. Sometimes even a small amount of help can lighten your load and your spirits.

The Bible tells the story of Moses at a time of high stress. He was a great leader with a lot of responsibility—a busy, burdened man. His father-in-law Jethro visited him one day, saw the situation, and gave him some helpful advice:

Moses was settling disputes among the people, and he was kept busy from morning till night. When Jethro saw everything that Moses had to do, he asked, “Why are you doing this all alone, with people standing here from morning till night to consult you?”

Moses answered, “I must do this because the people come to me to learn God’s will.”

Then Jethro said, “You are not doing it the right way. You will wear yourself out and these people as well. This is too much for you to do alone. Now let me give you some good advice, and God will be with you. It is right for you to represent the people before God and bring their disputes to him. But in addition, you should choose some capable men and appoint them as leaders of the people: leaders of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. They must be God-fearing men who can be trusted and who cannot be bribed. They can bring all the difficult cases to you, but they themselves can decide all the smaller disputes. That will make it easier for you, as they share your burden. If you do this, as God commands, you will not wear yourself out, and all these people can go home with their disputes settled.”

(Exodus 18:13-23, adapted)

#### ***Reflection questions***

1. Are there things you are doing which you could ask others to do?
2. What keeps you from asking others to help?
3. How can you find good people who are willing to help?
4. What would you need to do to train your helpers?

### **D. Accept limitations, adjust expectations**

During a disaster, you may see things that stay in your mind and haunt you. You may simply have too much to do. You may be tired from making so many hard decisions. And even the simplest things in life may need to be recalculated—from how to greet friends without catching the virus to attending church.

Because of all this, you may not be able to do everything you used to do, or everything you hope to do. And you may not be able to do things as well as you like to.

There is a time for everything (Ecclesiastes 3:1–5). This is a time to relax your standards and accept your limitations. Extend grace to yourself. God understands your situation, and delights in you whether you are able to do much or little.

His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse,  
nor his delight in the legs of the warrior;

the LORD delights in those who fear him,  
who put their hope in his unfailing love. (Psalm 147:10–11 NIV)

As you release the expectations you have of yourself and rest in God’s love, you may discover an inner strength of a different fiber—God’s strength in you. As the apostle Paul said the Lord told him:

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Corinthians 12:9a NIV)

### **Reflection questions**

1. Are there things you would like to do but simply can’t?
2. Are there expectations you have of yourself that you need to adjust?
3. What part of accepting limitations and adjusting expectations is most difficult for you?

### **E. Find ways to ‘get away’!**

Resting is different from sleeping. You need both! After seeing so much suffering and need, you may feel guilty for wanting to take time away to rest. But even Jesus took his disciples away to a quiet place when he was in great demand.

Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”  
(Mark 6:31 NIV)

Try to get away from your work for an extended period of time, if and when you can. When you are away, try to forget about your work and do something that energizes and renews you. It could be a walk outside, artwork, music, watching children play. Beauty refreshes our spirits. Laughter releases good chemicals in our bodies that help us heal. Singing helps us restore our strength, especially singing with others, if possible.

## **5. Closing Exercise**

Get quiet and reflect on the load you are carrying.

1. Think of all the things that are contributing to your stress.
2. Draw a picture of you releasing each one of these stresses to God.
3. Decide on one thing you can do to take care for yourself better in the coming week.

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If you have questions or comments on this lesson, please contact  
**[info@traumahealinginstitute.org](mailto:info@traumahealinginstitute.org)**.

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## How stressed are you?

Source: Headington Institute

*Please note:* this scale is not a clinical diagnostic instrument and is provided for educational purposes. It merely identifies some of the more common symptoms of stress. If you have any concerns about your state of emotional health, you should consult with a mental health professional.

**INSTRUCTIONS:** In the last month, how often has the following been true for you?

Write the number that fits your reality on the line before each question.

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0   Never	1   Seldom	2   Sometimes	3   Often	4   Always
___ 1. I feel tired.				
___ 2. I find it very hard to relax or “wind down.”				
___ 3. I find it hard to make decisions.				
___ 4. My heart races and I find myself breathing rapidly.				
___ 5. I have trouble thinking clearly.				
___ 6. I eat too much or too little.				
___ 7. I get headaches.				
___ 8. I feel emotionally numb.				
___ 9. I think about my problems over and over again during the day.				
___ 10. I have sleeping problems (e.g., trouble falling asleep, trouble staying asleep, trouble waking up, nightmares, etc.).				
___ 11. I have trouble feeling hopeful.				
___ 12. I find myself taking unnecessary risks or engaging in behavior hazardous to health and/or safety.				
___ 13. I have back and neck pain, or other chronic tension-linked pain				
___ 14. I use caffeine or nicotine more than usual.				
___ 15. I feel overwhelmed and helpless.				
___ 16. I have nervous habits (e.g., biting my nails, grinding my teeth, fidgeting, pacing, etc.).				
___ 17. I forget little things (e.g. where I put my keys, people’s names, details discussed during the last work meeting).				
___ 18. I have stomach upsets (e.g., nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, gas).				
___ 19. I am irritable and easily annoyed.				
___ 20. I have mood-swings and feel over-emotional.				
___ 21. I find it hard to concentrate.				
___ 22. I have trouble feeling that life is meaningful.				
___ 23. I am withdrawn and feel distant and cut off from other people.				
___ 24. I use alcohol and/or other drugs to try and help cope.				
___ 25. My work performance has declined and I have trouble completing things.				

TOTAL SCORE: \_\_\_\_\_



## **How stressed are you?**

*Source: Headington Institute*

### INTERPRETATION GUIDELINES

#### **0—25:**

A score in this range suggests that you're probably in great stress-shape!

#### **26—50:**

A score in this range suggests that you may be experiencing a low to moderate degree of stress.

#### **51—75:**

A score in this range suggests you may be experiencing a moderate to high degree of stress.

#### **76—100:**

A score in this range suggests that you may be experiencing a very high degree of stress.

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