

Calming the Stormy Seas of Stress



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<i>Introduction</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Praying the Passion</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Stress and Suffering</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>Integrating Stress, Spirituality, and Personal Growth</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>Who This Book Is For</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>How to Use This Book</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>Sharing Our Experiences</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>A Way of Praying and Processing</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>Spiritual Reading</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>The Path of Lectio Divina</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>viii</i>
<i>About the Author</i>	<i>viii</i>
 <i>Meditations</i>	
1. <i>Affirmation</i>	<i>1</i>
2. <i>Prayer</i>	<i>4</i>
3. <i>Silence</i>	<i>6</i>
4. <i>Counsel</i>	<i>8</i>

5. Anger.....	10
6. Coping with Criticism	12
7. Proportion.....	14
8. Perspective.....	16
9. Awareness.....	18
10. Discernment.....	20
11. Dialogue.....	22
12. Common Sense.....	24
13. Tolerance.....	26
14. Ordered Sensuality.....	28
15. Simplicity.....	30
16. Shabbat.....	32
17. Gratitude.....	34
18. Generosity and Detachment.....	36
19. Peace-Making.....	38
20. Fiscal Prudence.....	40
21. Humor.....	42
22. Acceptance.....	44
23. Choosing Our Company.....	46
24. Compassion and Service.....	48

25. Creativity.....	50
26. Humility.....	52
27. Living in the Present.....	54
28. Patience and Perseverance.....	56
Lifestyle Issues and Activities.....	58
29. Music.....	58
30. Boredom Busters.....	60
31. Rut-Breakers.....	62
Moderation and Balance.....	64
32. Sleep.....	65
33. Work and Play.....	67
34. Diet.....	71
35. Exercise.....	73
36. Family Values.....	75
37. Permission and Prohibition.....	78
Synthesis.....	81
Bibliography.....	83

Christian life is a paschal journey; we pass through suffering and stress en route to the cross and resurrection. God is the stress transformer par excellence. Pope Paul VI developed the insight that because Christ was so fully human, His experience and awareness of pain was keener. He is thus eminently qualified to be our ultimate inspiration and authority on stress.

Both the daily and major rejections and ambiguities that cause us so much stress were experienced intimately by Jesus during his passion. Saints Augustine and Albert the Great, just to name two proponents, advocated reflection on the Passion as the highest of spiritual exercises. This can help us transform our stress as well. Viewed in light of the cross, our pains take on transcendent meaning.

The challenge for Christians is to identify the paschs in our lives that invite us to pass from the slavery of selfishness to the freedom of

trusting obedience. By taking these paths and facing our problems rather than hiding in power and control games or apathy, we let God redeem and transform our suffering.

We do not satisfy ourselves with merely coping with suffering and stress; we expect God to bring good out of it. This inspires and energizes us. But first we must differentiate suffering and stress.

I often ask attendees at my stress transformation and suffering workshops to define and distinguish stress and suffering. The general understanding is that stress is a physiological and psychological reaction, while suffering is the spiritual and moral dimension.

Pioneer researcher Hans Selye defines stress as a nonspecific response of the body to an external stimulus. He differentiates between good stress that arises during normal human activity and bad stress.

We will be speaking about the bad or potentially destructive forms of stress flowing from work, relationship, health, and financial challenges rather than natural or good stressors such as exercise, excitement, and normal reactions to change and maturation.

There is a natural link between the way we respond to stress and our path of personal and spiritual growth. Stress and suffering are the

surest paths to personal development because they place us squarely before human weakness and limitations. Both stressors and our response teach us about life and reveal where we need to grow.

This book is meant to facilitate a dialogue with Jesus, who experienced, understands, and sympathizes with our trials, and our neighbors. We do not transform stress in isolation. When we are knee deep in stress and grief, it is difficult to pray, let alone acknowledge the goodness of life and providence. When we don't feel His presence and consolation, we can affirm the timeless complaint of St. Teresa of Avila: "If this is how You treat Your friends, it's no wonder you have so few of them."

Prayer is a battle. It is a suitable language and context for our reflections. It reflects our admission that we are dependent creatures who can't make it by ourselves. Recognizing our need for God goes a long way towards making our stressors worse than they need to be.



While the personal growth and stress transformation focus of this book gives it a universal flavor, it should be of particular interest to individuals in highly stressful fields such as care-giving, pastoral care, chaplaincy, and Christian formation. The book can be used to nurture and guide others as well. Professionals in business and the trades may find it refreshing because of its relevance to a variety of real-world situations and lack of technical jargon.



The meditations can serve as daily quiet time material or as thoughts for beginning or ending the day. While the meditations are presented with a certain progression in mind, the topics stand on their own and can be pondered interchangeably.

Each topic begins with a thought from the Bible or Tradition. The prose reflections discuss how the particular topic can help us transform stress. They are followed by "Reflection Questions" designed to clarify our feelings, attitudes, and experiences. An "Action Response" consummates each meditation by encouraging us to act in some small but efficacious way.

These "little things" can make a big difference in stressful circumstances.

Space is provided at the end of each topic for you to record additional stress transformers, inspirations, and experiences. You can make this a personal or paschal journal.

The meditations are suitable for group settings where sharing, brainstorming, and feedback can inject objectivity and empathy into the growth process. Where group support is unavailable, individuals may wish to share personal reflections with a loved one or confidant. Stress has both individual and communal roots, and should be dealt with on both levels as well.



Christian monastic tradition offers a holistic way of reflecting upon God's word known by its Latin name of *lectio divina*. *Lectio divina* can help us derive meaning and growth not only from written texts, but from all types of personal experiences, especially stressful ones.

Lectio divina is suited to our stress transformation objectives on two levels. First, it is a whole person process for a whole person challenge. Second, what source is more intimately acquainted with stress and suffering

than God's word? A model that helps us contemplate God's written word is suitable for pondering God's present word in our lives.

integrates human and divine values in a natural and accessible fashion. It provides a flexible framework and progression for individuals of all faiths trying to bring their lives in closer touch with God. In a personal enrichment culture bombarded on all sides with new theories and methods for personal growth, the oldest and simplest remains the most trustworthy.

Reading to stimulate personal growth differs from studying, speed reading, or pleasure reading. It is done at a slower, more reflective pace, and in a holistic manner. We can create a comfortable physical, emotional, and spiritual space for prayerful reflection by finding a time and location that is relatively peaceful and free of distractions.