



# From Brokenness to Wholeness

BY LINDA R. CRAIN

**F**or many of us, the pace of our lives feels like a sprint marathon—a race of long duration that we run as fast as we can. We rise early, work long hours, eat on the run and see less of our family, friends and neighbors than we'd like. We seldom have down time, and when we do, we schedule every minute. This hectic lifestyle triggers increasing levels of stress. We lose our sense of being centered and anchored. Over time, this accumulation of stress weakens our body, disrupts our mental stability and diminishes our spirit.

People who are whole and healthy are physically, mentally and spiritually balanced. They are aware of the stresses that impact them, and are attuned to their thoughts and feelings in ways that help them cope.

The interconnectedness between our body, mind and spirit makes it difficult to speak about one aspect of ourselves without acknowledging the impact of the others on who we are and what makes us whole and healthy. The way we think, feel and react to the stresses in our

lives plays a critical role in the way we manage them. By focusing on the mental aspect of a whole person, we can give greater attention to how our thoughts, feelings and emotions, under the influence of prolonged life stressors, affect our physical, mental and spiritual well-being (wholeness).

## The Only Constant in Life

It is often said that the only thing constant in life is change. Knowing this does not stop us from wishing we did not have to change. Life stressors are those events (negative or positive) that force us to change.

Negative stressors are the ones we are most likely to notice and name. We experience the impact of these stressors when daily hassles and minor irritations accumulate to the point of loss of emotional control, or lead to unhealthy behaviors.

Divorce, life-threatening illness, unemployment and downturns in the economy are negative events that cause us to adjust, whether we want to or not. We associate these stresses with abandonment, rejection, disrespect, helplessness, hopelessness, even danger. The anger and anxiety that follow these stressors is turned inward, rather than expressed outwardly in a healthy and appropriate manner. When we fail to express our fears and acknowledge our hurts, when we pretend we are okay, we often find ourselves emotionally drained.

Acts of discrimination, terrorism and environmental pollution are stressors that affect us without our having anything to do with their origin. Nor can we mediate their resolution. Rage, paranoia, low self-esteem, anger, depression, even suicidal behaviors are reactions to these stressors. Over the past five years, there has been a significant increase in the number of people coming to me to seek help in reconciling fears and stress related to personal security.

Recently, perhaps due to global warming, we are seeing more unexpected and life-threatening natural disasters, including earthquakes, floods and unusual weather conditions. I find these stressors very unsettling. Death and destruction in the aftermath of such events occur swiftly and emphatically. The fact that these stressors are to a large extent unpredictable and devastating heightens my anxiety when they occur in proximity to me.

# When we encounter stress, we should notice it, name it and assess it. In time, our emotional reaction will lessen and we can return to our usual way of functioning.

Positive life events can be equally stressful. I have never known anyone who held a stressless wedding, attended a hassle-free graduation or gave birth to a baby in a mild-mannered way. As exciting, meaningful and joyful as these events can be, they also come with pressures, challenges and changes.

## How We Choose to Respond to Stress

It is not the presence of stress that is the problem. It is how we choose to respond to it. The way we think, feel and react to stressors can be either beneficial or detrimental. When we encounter stress, we should notice it, name it and assess it. In time, our emotional reaction will lessen and we can return to our usual way of functioning.

When symptoms do not go away, or when they appear to be gone but resurface in other stressful situations, we must consider them seriously. After years of marriage, I faced the challenge of unexpected divorce. Intellectually, I knew I would survive, but emotionally, I tried not to feel the loss, betrayal and anger. Three years later I realized the pain in my chest was not a heart attack, but heartbreak. It took me that long to deal with the depth of my despair.

It is important to remember that the ideal way of reacting to stress is moderately. This occurs when we

recognize our stress but continue to maintain control of our emotions. Too little stress may give us a false sense of being prepared, but too much stress may cause us to be too anxious to cope with the challenges before us. When stress stirs us just enough to increase our level of performance, we often are able to successfully complete our tasks by realistically anticipating circumstances.

## Maintaining Our Emotional Well-Being

In 30 years as a psychologist, I have been amazed at how many people are able to maintain a positive self-image and emotional equilibrium in the face of substantial stress. They tend to be individuals who live consciously, deliberately and realistically. They know they are human; therefore, on any given day, they allow themselves to be wise, foolish and other than perfect. While they ultimately make their own decisions, they are open to the recommendations of others and actively seek help when they sense a need for additional information or a differing point of view.

The ability to socialize, express themselves and feel comfortable in diverse groups also characterizes emotionally healthy individuals. Relationships and a sense of community play significant roles in our lives. Family, peers and friends

provide us with opportunities to socialize and express ourselves. They help us expand our thinking and equip us with new ways of coping. These relationships are best when they are interdependent rather than codependent.

Managing our finances, having a meaningful career and living in a secure environment contribute to our sense of well-being and optimism, as well. As the price of gas, food and other necessities increases, it is necessary to proactively manage our budgets. In this way, we face our fears and seek rational solutions to challenges before they become overwhelming.

Emotionally healthy individuals tend to be physically healthy, too. I am impressed by the number of friends, family members and patients who are altering their diets, insisting on getting proper rest, building in downtime and participating in regular physical activity. They see their physicians on a regular basis as a preventive measure. Prolonged stress over time weakens the body's ability to heal itself. Heart disease, cancer, clinical depression, autoimmune diseases and reproductive problems all have been linked to the adverse effects of stress. Emotionally healthy individuals take care of themselves.

Being a lifelong learner is one more characteristic of emotionally healthy individuals. Reading and

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exploring new avenues of thought are common among members of this group. Taking classes, learning a new hobby, or acquiring additional skills in an area already mastered stimulates our “gray matter.” Permitting ourselves to participate in book clubs and study groups, or attend art museums and craft shows, keeps us aware and involved.

Emotionally healthy individuals are able and willing to take responsibility for the outcome of their lives. They know when they have done their best, when circumstances are outside of their responsibility and when they are able to mediate differences. They speak from their own convictions. For some, this means deciding to follow their passion and begin second careers after having been successful (or unfulfilled) for many years in another field. I am noticing a trend among women 50 and over who have put the needs of everyone else above their own—they are beginning to rediscover their own voices, get additional training, volunteer in their communities and start their own businesses.

### **Connecting to the God of Our Knowing**

When I reflect on my own life, I know my physical and emotional well-being is grounded in my conscious spiritual connection with the God of my knowing. This is not the


God someone told me about in Sunday school or that we dissected in seminary. This is the creator and sustainer of my life whom I meet during my prayer time, in deep introspection and contemplation. When the storms of life rage, when friends and family fail, when I allow my doubts and fears to take center stage, I recognize that I have never been abandoned or left alone. I am constantly nurtured by this patient and loving truth.

In my work as a spiritual director, I have learned that when we have made sufficient emotional and psychological breakthroughs, wholeness demands that we also focus on spiritual growth and development. When we reach the place where we can comprehend the nature and cause of our deep inner wounds, we must continue to journey toward an encounter with the “Healer.” This work is beyond words or thoughts. It requires that we intentionally and regularly open ourselves to the God of our being.

Times of solitude, prayer, scripture reading, journaling and other spiritual practices assist us in our journey inward. There we can relax, let go and connect with God. Our efforts are aided by being in community through regular worship services, Bible study and prayer.

Recently, I led a Soul Care retreat for women. Our theme was “Women with Issues.” This was a

play on the words of the Gospel story about the woman with the “issue” of blood (*Matt. 9:20–22; Mark 5:25–34 and Luke 8:43–48*). We began with the scripture. Then we imagined ourselves as the woman. Finally, we began to discuss our own issues. Everyone shared deeply and openly, and everyone experienced growth simply by taking the time to discuss their issues in a safe and accepting group. Taking time and attending to our concerns in a group really made a difference.

As unique individuals, there is no one best way to cultivate wholeness in our lives. Nor can the actual steps be prescribed. We have to do more than want transformation. Our unwavering commitment to physical, mental and spiritual wholeness requires substantial effort, and no one can do the work for us. Our pastors, lay leaders, spiritual directors, Christian counselors and religious educators are available to help us develop our relationship with God, but the invitation is for us to uncover and discover our own way. When we do, the return is far greater than we can imagine. 

Linda R. Crain, DMin, PhD, is spending the second half of her life helping others notice, name, recognize and respond to the movement of God in their lives. She integrates psychology, pastoral theology and spiritual direction in her work.