



Managing Stress: Turning Challenges into Blessings

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Training Guide

Materials and Preparation Needed

Copies of the publication *Managing Stress: Turning Challenges into Blessings* (FCS 650) for each participant.

Pens or pencils available for participants to write in the publication.

Review the training guide, *Managing Stress* publication, and PowerPoint.

1. Introduction

All of us experience stress of one kind or another. It seems to be an inevitable part of life. Some stresses may be large and some may be small, but we all have stresses in our lives. Even happy events can be challenging. This lesson teaches you ways to turn your stresses into growth, your challenges into blessings.

2. One Crisis After Another

We all have experienced many kinds of stress in the last few years. These include storms and natural disasters, wars with all the challenges of deployments and separations, as well as economic problems including lost jobs, tight budgets, and bankruptcies. Probably one or more of these challenges has affected you and the people you love.

We could create a separate publication for dealing with the stress related to each of these challenges. And maybe there would be a whole new set of challenges next year. Since there are key principles that relate to all areas of stress, we have developed a workbook that deals with stress in general and invites you to apply these principles to the stresses you face.

3. Your Challenges: What have you faced?

Before we talk about how to deal with challenges, let's think about some of the challenges you have faced. Please look at the table on page 3 of *Managing Stress: Turning Challenges into Blessings*. Take a few minutes to list some of the small, medium, and large challenges you have faced, what you have

learned from them, and how you might be better as a result of them. These challenges might be anything from a traffic accident to enduring a difficult pregnancy to the loss of a loved one—anything that has been a challenge in your life.

4. Challenge Table

[Allow 5-10 minutes for participants to complete this form.]

Would any of you like to share a challenge you have face, what you have learned from it, and how you are better as a result of the challenge?

[Allow about 5 minutes for participants to share the ways that challenges have been turned into blessings in their lives. These may include things like greater patience, enlarged compassion, and a greater appreciation for simple blessings.]

5. Old Idea

The old idea about stress was that certain events led to certain amounts of stress. For example, in the Life Change Scale, it was assumed that events like the death of a family member, an injury or illness, or being fired from a job would be very stressful for all people.

Even some positive events such as marriage or pregnancy were seen as stressful. So the old idea was that certain events led to certain levels of stress. If you added up all your life events, you could know your stress level.

One way to represent this is that A (the events in your life) lead to X (the level of stress). It turns out that this idea simply doesn't work. What is stressful for some people in some situations is much less stressful for other people.

6. New Idea: Reuben Hill's Model of Stress

A family scientist named Reuben Hill observed that people who suffered from very similar challenges manifest very different levels of stress. He suggested that it was not the events themselves that led to stress; rather the events, together with our resources and meaning (or interpretation) of the event determined how much stress we experienced.

Let's consider a couple of examples. Hill studied the ways families were impacted by war. One family might send a parent off to war and still thrive while another family that seemed similar might suffer. Maybe the thriving family had friends and extended family nearby who helped with the demands of life. This is a valuable resource. Maybe this family interpreted the opportunity

to support the war effort as a great act of patriotism. This meaning makes the absence of a family member less painful. Such families are likely to thrive.

In contrast, another family might be far from family and friends. Maybe they feel very alone. This lack of resources makes the event (the deployment of a parent) far more challenging. This family might also dislike war. Or maybe they lost a relative to war. The gloomy meaning attached to war would make the absence of a family member still more stressful.

This same principle applies to all forms of stress (i.e., loss of loved ones, sickness, financial problems, etc.) whatever they are. When we bring our resources and positive meanings to challenging events, we are more likely to do well than when we lack resources or assign a gloomier meaning to an event.

This is good news! It means we are not the helpless victims of life. We can rally resources. We can change the meaning of problems by the way we think about them.

As a result of these discoveries, Reuben Hill developed what he called the A B C – X [simply pronounced “A, B, C, X] model of stress. Let’s talk more about these ideas.

7. Your Resources: What tools do you have?

One factor that helps us deal with challenges is our resources. Some people have a wealth of resources that help them deal with challenges as they arise. For example, when a person loses a loved one, having a network of caring friends can make a big difference. Another example: When a person suffers health or financial problems, having flexibility and optimism can make a big difference.

Another resource that can play a major role in helping us deal with stress effectively is religious faith. Research shows that people who have a strong religious faith are better able to deal with challenges.

Let’s turn to page 5 in *Managing Stress: Turning Challenges into Blessings*. Look at the list of resources that is there and mark the ones that you have. Then, in the table below, write ways that you might use some of those resources to deal with the challenges you are currently facing.

[Allow about 5 minutes for participants to mark their answers on page 5.]

Who is willing to share with us some ways you have used your resources to deal with your challenges? Did anyone come up with another resource that was not listed? What was it?

[This could be a rich discussion. Help participants recognize that all of the resources listed could be helpful in dealing with the challenges we face. For example, creativity might help someone find a new opportunity after a job loss. Having previous experience with challenges can teach us skills and attitudes to help us deal with new challenges more effectively.]

8. Your Meaning: How do you make sense of challenges?

Another factor that determines whether or not difficulties lead to stress is the meaning we assign to our experiences. For example, when we face unexpected challenges, it is common to panic. We may think that we will not survive—that we are doomed to misery. Choosing to think differently about the situation can make a big difference.

For example, one man used to say, “We don’t have any problems around here but we sure do have some interesting situations!”

9. We can turn lump of coal experiences into diamonds

Can you think of people who have faced terrible challenges and been enriched by them?

[Encourage participants to think of friends, family members, and historical figures who have turned challenges into blessings. Be prepared to tell a story of one of your personal heroes who has done this. Encourage participants to write their answers after the first question on page 6.]

One example of this might be Dr. Smith in Kansas. When he was told by the doctors that he had degenerative multiple sclerosis, he was at first saddened. When the doctor asked if he could cope with this chronic illness, he responded that he had suffered through childhood asthma and learned to cope with difficulties. He expected that the same would be true with MS.

10. Challenges: Your opportunity for growth?

Think of challenges you personally have faced that have become blessings as you have thought about them differently? Take a few minutes to record your responses after the second question on page 6.

[Allow time for participants to record their responses.]

Who would like to share with us the ways you have taken challenges and turned them into blessings?

[Invite participants to share.]

11. Challenges can help us draw closer to other people...

Research has shown that challenges can bless us! Three blessings of challenges stand out. They help us draw closer to other people, develop greater compassion, and learn to value the simple things in life.

12. Inspiring

One person who has inspired thousands of people is Helen Keller. Though she lost her sight and hearing as a little girl, she still made remarkable contributions to our nation. Her summary of her life is given on page 7 under the heading "Inspiring." Who would like to read it to us?

[You might have a participant read it or you could read it to the group.]

13. Your Story: Application

Our resources and the way we think about our challenges (i.e., our meaning) can help us manage our stress. On the back page of *Managing Stress: Turning Challenges into Blessings*, write some ideas about how you would like to be remembered. How did you turn the challenges you faced into a life of goodness, growth, or strength? Write a few words about the way you want to be remembered. After you write about how you would like to be remembered, take a few minutes to write about the ways you plan to deal with challenges yet ahead in your life.

[Circulate among participants and help them think through what they might write.]

Would anyone like to share something they have written?

[Allow comments as time allows.]

14. Challenges help us grow

The surprising conclusion about stress is that it always invites and often forces us to grow. We can choose to be better for it or bitter because of it. If we use our resources and think about stress in positive ways, we can turn challenges into blessings.

I hope this program will be helpful to you. If you want copies of this publication to share with family, friends, or groups, they are available through your county agent.

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