

Navigating the stress of uncertain economic times.

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One of my favorite cartoon strip characters from childhood is Charlie Brown. I particularly enjoy the strip where Lucy holds a football while Charlie attempts to kick a field goal. No matter how many times Lucy assures Charlie that she will not remove the football when he attempts the kick, inevitably she whisks it away at the last second resulting in Charlie kicking high into the air and landing flat on his back with a resounding crash. While this recurring clip is a favorite to many, I can't help but think how often we resemble Charlie Brown. That is, we put our faith in someone or something only to experience later that things changed outside of our control and we are left on our backs reeling in pain.

A difficult lesson that many are experiencing in today's world is that we cannot sufficiently control people, situations, or outcomes. Often when we think we have a good lead on things, we can still experience disappointment, failure, and loss which can be very hurtful, discouraging and stressful. This appears to have particular relevance to today's world in light of our nation's worsening economic situation. Due to dwindling savings, loss of employment or job security, and significant adjustment in lifestyle habits, a large percentage of people have been left feeling wounded and fearful. Psychologists tell us that the number of people who report stress

as a major factor in their lives over the past year has grown exponentially. With no clear end to our economic woes in sight, many are understandably anxious and stressed about what lies ahead in 2009.

According to recent research, a prominent sentiment that continues to emerge in peoples' lives is a perceived loss of control in the events taking place around them. One close friend of mine spoke to this issue when he recently shared with me the analogy that while he is trying to hang on, life right now feels like an uncharted course with gail force winds and tsunami size waves threatening to overtake him. What struck me most was his statement that "In all of this, what I struggle with most is that I can't do anything about it." According to Dr. Robert Sapolsky, one of the nation's top scholars in stress, this type of attitude is no surprise. In over thirty years of stress-related research, he has noted that a perceived sense of powerlessness and lack of control is one of the quickest ways to activate the stress response and create a state of tension and worry in an individual. On the other hand, if a person feels he or she has input into a problem, OR can exercise choices in coping with a problem, they are likely to feel less stressed both physically and emotionally.

In our struggling economy, most of us have limited or no power to influence the financial and employment



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Navigating the stress..., *continued*

problems encountered, however we do have control over how we choose to respond to the stress and demands influencing us at present. While some of the choices we may employ might be vast, here are a few recommendations to consider first:

1. First realize that no matter what happens in our lives, God is sovereign and is always in control. As such, we can choose to draw strength and comfort from this reality and His active role in our lives even when it doesn't make sense. While this should not excuse us from taking responsibility for our lives, we can take comfort that nothing that happens to us escapes His concern and attention. As a pastor recently remarked "God never says 'Wow, I never saw that one coming.'"

2. Take inventory of how you normally react to stress and the coping resources in place in your life. Do your personality tendencies tend to help or make your experience with stress worse? Do you have adequate resources to help you deal with

stress effectively such as intimate personal relationships, healthy lifestyle habits, a strong relationship with God and involvement in a fellowship of believers? Do you engage in unhealthy and high-risk behaviors to help you cope with stress? The answers to these questions might indicate if you need to learn new skills and invest energy in shoring up vulnerable or unhealthy areas in your life.

3. Choose to reframe the stress and uncontrollable aspects in your life as a way to grow. Even though you might feel scared, anxious, or hurt, often times our struggles in life can become opportunities to learn and benefit from in the short- and long-term.

4. Wherever possible, look for ways to exercise the power of choice in your life to help negate a sense of powerlessness. Even if all you have in your arsenal is to choose a different attitude in the midst of your struggle, this can be extremely powerful in impacting your mood and resiliency.

5. Consider getting professional assistance to help teach you effective ways to approach and deal with stress. Although all of us experience stress, some may be unaware of how to cope with it effectively, particularly if a lack of control or powerlessness is involved. A professional consultation with someone confidentially can allow for greater understanding, awareness, and answers regarding how to deal with stress with greater effectiveness.

So, in a world where we may play the role of Charlie Brown, several choices need to be made. Do you get up after you are on your back? Do you let Lucy hold your football again? Do you walk away from the game and go do something else? The choice is yours! If you are interested in talking with a qualified professional about how to navigate times of change and uncertainty, call us at LifeGate at (404) 842-3150 or go to our website for more information on our services at www.lifegatecenter.org.

