

In the previous newsletter, I began discussing the ramifications of living under the killer called "distress." You may remember that I made a distinction between stress, which is not a bad thing, but an inevitable fact of life, and distress, which is the added burden we bring upon ourselves. We do this by our bad habits of the mind, which was looked at in the last issue, and our bad habits of lifestyle, which I will now discuss.

STRESS AND OVERLOAD - PART II

As I was pondering how best to describe our bad habits of lifestyle for this newsletter, I came across an article by Dr. Richard Swenson in a past issue of *Christian Counseling Today*. The essence of that article was that distress is often caused by our unwillingness to respect the God-given limits of our finite humanness.

It never ceases to amaze me that each time I watch the Olympics, new world records are being made. How can this be? When will it stop? Athletes now call upon nutritionists, weight trainers, and even sports psychologists to help push them just a little further. What is not seen is the incredible price that these athletes pay. Do you think a human will ever swim across the Pacific Ocean? Run a minute mile? Or go three months without sleeping?

Me either. The reason is that there are established human limits that God set forth. Though there is great variability, for every person there is a measurable point that defines the threshold of his or her limits. In the performance progression, we go from ease to challenge to pain. How many of us are living at the threshold of pain in our everyday lives? People everywhere are collapsing in exhaustion, wondering what hit them. What hit them was overload.

Contrary to the popular T-shirts and bumperstickers which boldly profess *No Limits!*, I believe that God gave us limits to protect us from inflating our roles to God-like proportions as well as protect us from overload. We observe the consequences of lives lived on overload. We see divorces and broken families, various illnesses, destructive addictions and shattered dreams as a result of such lifestyle choices, yet we still all strive to keep up with the insanity of modern-day production.

Dr. Swenson wrote about a concept called margin, as have others. Margin is related to our reserves. It can be defined as the space between our load and our limits. How much space do you have? If you're like most Americans, the answer is just about zilch. Margin and overload are opposites. From activity overload to financial overload to work overload we have become a

marginless society. Overload is highly promoted while margin is not respected. Most Americans spend at least 10% more than they have--whether it be money, energy, or time.

The longer I spend as a professional counselor, over 10 years now, the more I am absolutely convinced that poor lifestyle habits (i.e. lack of margin) is one of the leading causes for all forms of distress. Many counselees of mine who are desperate for something other than a daily diet of distress and overload are in dire need to regain margin in their hectic lives. There are two paths which may lead in the direction of margin. The first is *Radical Change* and the second is *Incremental Change*.

A small, yet growing, percentage of people are ready for sweeping change. These radical changes may include cutting work hours, getting a different job, buying a smaller house, or relocating. Most of these changes require considerable simplification, and while this can be drastically effective at regaining margin, caution needs to be exercised. Such important restructuring should not be done on impulse. The more important the decision, the longer we should deliberate.

Most people would rather ease their way out of their torment incrementally, one step at a time. The danger with this approach, however, is that many of our lives are so marginless that incremental revisions may not accomplish enough substantive change to decompress the pain.

Swenson believes we need to live more intentionally by tending to the following:

- *Accept responsibility
- *Acknowledge your limits
- *Understand God's will
- *Consciously slow the pace of life
- *Define and defend your boundaries
- *Learn to say "No"
- *Get less done, but do the right things.

And finally, did you ever notice that Jesus never seemed to be in a hurry? The scriptures never mention him running. There is no indication that He worked 24-hour ministry days. Neither did He visit or teach or counsel all in need. Jesus understood what it meant to be human and have limits. Jesus understood that busyness, productivity, and efficiency are speed words, not Kingdom words. Jesus lived a life which demonstrated that meditation, wisdom, and worship are slow, mellow, and deep. Perhaps it is time for us all to challenge the bad habits of our minds and lifestyles.