

# TOO BLESSED TO BE STRESSED

Week #4 of a 6-Week "Gratitude" Series

November 9, 2022

Rev. Richard Rogers

Okay. So I want to talk about your stress level. I want to talk about the level of anxiety that you live with on a regular basis. Because as we're moving closer to the holidays, I want you to just notice your stress level. Okay?

So would you say that your stress level -- your anxiety level -- is a high? A medium? Or a low? Because what I believe is that some of us are just wired differently. Like, some of us are wired just to be wound a little tight, right? And we just know that we're wound a little tight, right? And we just tend to experience things at a higher level of stress than other people.

So people that are at a high stress level, it's serious. Everything's serious. It's serious! Life is serious! The moment is serious! Right? We're stressed; we're anxious. Right? Then the people that are kind of in the middle, they kind of go back and forth. They get stressed out, but then they kind of relax, and they're okay. And then there's the people that are just chill. Like, they don't get wound up about anything, right? They're just ... Everything works out for them. Like, there's no stress. Everything's good. They're just chill! I want to be that person, right? Because I tend to be a little bit more wound. Right?

And so my question for you is: When you look at the family that you grew up in ... [laughs] Or the family you crawled out from underneath, right? [Congregation laughs] Like, when you look at the family you grew up in, were they pretty anxious folks? Were they wound a little tight? Were they fearful? Were they stressed out? Were they pretty worked up about everything? Or were they pretty kind of just chill?

And what I believe is that, for most of us, we kind of learned our level of anxiety from our people. You know, if our people were stressed, we learned to be stressed. If our people didn't worry about things, we learned not to worry about things. But it doesn't mean that we can't change that.

Because I believe that our spiritual life is about moving into a higher level of peace. That one of the promises about engaging your spiritual life -- about deepening and broadening your spiritual life -- is that we are invited into a level of peace. Like, it wouldn't make sense if you were going to have a spiritual life that just made you more anxious. It wouldn't make sense; who would want a spiritual life if you prayed more and got more anxious? That just wouldn't make sense, right? It would be the opposite.

We want to know that, as we deepen our relationship with God, we just feel safer. We feel more relaxed; more deeply connected. That we know a deeper level of peace. And especially during this time: about the elections; about all that's going on; where we've come from through the pandemic.

There was this article I found in the *Harvard Business Review*. [Laughs] I'm just going to say that again. *Harvard Business Review*. [Tosses head; congregation laughs] Here we go. Ready? I want to read just a little segment of it:

*"Taking care of our mental health during a pandemic isn't easy. Since the outbreak began, we've been feeling -- understandably -- a lot more stressed. One study found that 57% of the people experienced greater anxiety over the last three years. And that 53% of us are more emotionally exhausted. These kinds of emotions tend to rise when we lose some of the forms of stability that our life is based on right now, we just don't know what comes next. We're living in a constant state of uncertainty that can feel like running a race with no finish line or completing a puzzle without a reference point. Everything seems to be a little less clear, and the worst seems possible more than ever before."*

*And, of course, this is not a fun state of mind to be in . So what can we possibly do to help minimize the impacts of uncertainty on our well-being? While we may not be able to address the root cause, research shows us that gratitude can help bring us back into balance."*

Dr. Guy Winch said this:

*"Gratitude is the emotion that grounds us and is a great way to balance out our negative mindset that uncertainty engenders."*

He wrote the book, *Emotional First Aid*. He said:

*"When we express gratitude, our brain releases chemicals -- hormones -- that help us feel lighter and happier inside. If we want to take care of our mind during the pandemic, and understand the triggers that are impacting us, gratitude is a major focus of our life."*

So here's why I want us to talk about this. Because I believe that, while we're in this 40 days of gratitude, that gratitude is one of the ways that we profoundly shift into peace. That if we are grateful, it is truly hard to be stressed and grateful in the same moment. And the more time and energy we spend being grateful, it actually rewires our nervous system.

Because for many of us -- maybe for most of us -- we were raised in situations that taught us to run scared by people who were running scared. And the idea of actually spending 40 days over and over and over again with our dominant thought, *"Thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God!"*, is transformative!

Will you say that with me?

[With congregation]: *"Thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God!"*

One more time!

[With congregation]: *"Thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God!"*

How many of you remember the story of Chicken Little? Right? And what was Chicken Little's story? Who can give me the Chicken Little story in a nutshell? What was her line? What was her fear? What was the thing that was out of control? [Congregation yells out answers] *"The sky is falling!"*

Now, if you literally believe -- if you believe the sky is falling -- is your stress level low or high? [Congregation yells out: *"High!"*] High! You cannot hold that thought -- that the sky is falling ... You cannot hold the thought that, *"I am doomed"*; that nothing's going to work out; that our country's going to heck ... You cannot hold these thoughts and be in gratitude at the same moment.

Now, you have a God-given right -- because it's your mind -- to focus on whatever you want to focus on. It's your mind! But what I want you to see over and over again is that, when you take dominion over your mind and you decide what you're going to focus on ... If you decide, by your own decision, to focus on gratitude, your stress level will go down. It is impossible to be spending time day after day after day saying, *"Thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God!"* without, at some level, it rewiring your nervous system for a deeper, deeper, deeper level of calm.

One more time!

[With congregation]: *"Thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God!"*

Gratitude reminds us that we are blessed. It allows us to focus on the good in our lives. Because our mind can only focus on one thing at a time.

How many of you know that you're multi-taskers? Right? Like, you can do three ... But what I want you to see is all we're really doing is one thing in a schizophrenic way. [Congregation laughs] That's all we're really doing! Like, our mind can only do one thing at a time. So what we're doing is: we're doing this; this; this; this; this; this; this; this. And what happens is that the activity of going back and forth to multiple things, because we can only focus on one thing at a time, actually leads to a high level of stress. And because we're used to it doesn't mean it's normal.

You know the average length of commercials has dropped over the course of your lifetime? Like, it was normal ... Well, depending on where you were born and when you were born. But for many of us, it was normal to have a 60-second commercial. That is now a mini-series. [Congregation laughs] They have commercials that are six seconds! Like, they have micro-commercials now where your mind isn't even sure what it just saw, but it's in there. Because our attention span is not getting longer; it's getting more and more segmented to do it quicker. So we have to decide.

Now. I'm going to make another case tonight. I'm going to make a case that it's actually easier to focus on the problem. I have a belief -- and I can't prove it, but I have a belief -- that 97% of your life is good and holy and fabulous and of God. That would leave 3% that is the challenge/problem/interesting opportunity. Right?

Now, for most of us, holding the 3% is actually easier than holding the 97%. If you and I went to the grocery store, and we were going to get 100 items without a cart, and I said, "*I'm going to hold the three, and you're going to hold the 97,*" which one of us got the easier job? Me, right? So it's actually easier for us to focus on the problem, because there's so few of them! Even if we have a healing, and we're worried about our body doing this or doing that, for most of us our body is 99.9% functioning fabulously, and it's that one-tenth of 1% that we tend to focus on.

Over and over again, we have to train ourselves to not look at the smallness of life. To look for the blessings. To see the blessings. To have the compassion to hold the blessings.

You know, one of the things that I love about the Old Testament -- the Hebrew Bible -- is that every time the Israelites get into a jam in the Old Testament, often what they begin to do is tell the story of all the ways that God has been with them through every situation. They tell the story of Abraham and Isaac and Moses; they tell the story of Noah; they tell the stories, because in remembering the stories, it reminds them that God was with them in the past. And it's not a huge extrapolation to say, "If God got me out of this problem, this problem, and this problem and this problem and this problem, that maybe there's a solution right now.

But when our mind just focuses on the problem in front of us, it becomes huge. Because wherever you place your focus -- wherever your awareness is -- it always begins to expand.

And tonight, would you be willing to expand your sense of gratitude if you knew -- really, truly knew -- it was going to lead to a higher level of peace?

I mean, I think most of us want to live in greater peace. You know, we're looking for the certainty of the world to give us a level of peace. But truly peace comes from within.

Did you know that there's an American Institute of Stress? Now, I think it should really be called the American Institute of Stress-Free Living, but that's too positive, right? [Congregation laughs] So they call this institute the American Institute of Stress. And there's really lovely articles about managing stress and dealing with your stress. And there's one article that I just loved; it was called, "12 Ways to Help You Live a Stress-Free Life." I'm going to read all 12 of them, because I think all of them are valuable.

The first one is: **Stop overanalyzing situations that haven't happened yet.** How many of you know that you can sometimes do that? Like, you can think about things that haven't happened just because you want to make sure you get your worry in first. [Congregation laughs]

Number two: **Stop taking on other people's problems.** And the funniest line in the whole article, I'm going to share it with you. Here it is: "*The whole advantage of other people having problems is that they aren't your problems.*" [Laughs with congregation] Not a high level of compassion, but a funny line, right? It's just a funny line; it's not your deal, right?

Three: **Stop living only in the past or the future; get in the present moment.**

Four: **Stop focusing on what you don't have instead of what you do have.**

Five: **Stop surrounding yourself with people who don't make you happy.**

Six: **Stop working at a job that you see no future in.**

Seven: **Stop taking on more than you can handle.**

Eight: **Stop holding on to grudges and anger.**

Nine: **Stop living too much in the past.**

Ten: **Stop complaining about things that can't be changed.**

Eleven: **Stop living through other people's lives.** Again, I think that's a duplicate, but whoever. [Congregation laughs]

Twelve: **Stop Focusing only on your weaknesses instead of your attractive qualities.**

The final thought:

*"An astounding thing happens when you release stress; get into a relationship with your mind, your body and your spirit; and just live with yourself without judgement.*

*Your life literally slows down. You stop wishing for weekends. You stop merely looking forward to special events. You begin to live in each moment, and you start to feel like a true human being. You just ride the wave that life is with a feeling of contentment and joy.*

*You move fluidly, steadily, calm and grateful. A veil is lifted, and a whole new perspective is born. And this is how you live a stress-free life."*

What I want you to see is: every one of those 12 points is an aspect of living the spiritual life. Each one of those things literally is an aspect of learning to trust God. That over and over again, when you move the focus off of the problem and move it on to being grateful -- "*Thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God*" ...

Say it with me!

[With congregation]: "*Thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God!*"

Your whole system calms down.

So here's where we're going today. I'm going to boil the 12 or the 27 into five things I want to make sure that you hear me say tonight.

First one is: **Learn how to manage your mind.** Managing your mind is the basis of pretty much every spiritual practice. Whether it's prayer, meditation, learning to manage your mind. In Unity we talk about moving from negative thinking to positive thinking.

But as you know, positive thinking isn't the be-all and end-all! The true height of spiritual living is when your mind becomes quiet. When you can live with a quiet mind. Because when you can live in a quiet mind, there's nothing that separates you from the Divine. Your mind doesn't interfere, doesn't create the noise that actually gets in the way of you having a profound relationship with God.

Two: **Live from a "growth mindset."** You know, I talk a lot about having a fixed mindset. And a fixed mindset is the belief that I should already know, or I should already have it figured out, or it should already be right, or it should already be fixed or should already be done. And that's a fixed mindset. A fixed mindset is that life is always fixed; it's always going to be this way; and this is the way it's always going to be.

But a growth mindset says that wherever I am, I can evolve. I can learn. I can change. I can make new choices. And it's very different when you move from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset. Because from a fixed mindset, you're always running from behind. From a fixed mindset, your mind is always saying, *"I should have already been there; this should already have been fixed; I should already be better; this should already have been changed; it should already be different."*

A growth mindset says, *"I have the power within me to evolve to a higher level of life."* That no matter what's going on within you, *"I can be better; I can transform; I can evolve; I can be and do and experience more."* And it's amazing -- when you move from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset -- how much your level of peace increases.

And three. Three is the simplest of all these techniques, and it's to **Breathe**. So what I want you to do is take a deep breath. In fact, we're going to take three deep breaths together. Right? And I want you to feel the difference when you go from shallow head breathing to breathing deep within your belly. Because when you begin to shift the way you breathe, there's automatically a deeper level of peace.

So we're going to practice this. You ready? Take a big, long, deep belly breath. Breathe all the way down to your belly. Nobody's looking at your belly; it's okay if it sticks out a little bit, right? Take a deep, long, belly breath. [Breathes deeply] Hold it. And then let it go. Deep, long exhale. Back in: deep, long inhale. [Breathes deeply] Now exhale. One more time: big, deep inhale. Completely exhale; just empty your lungs of everything. [Exhales]

How many of you could feel a deeper level of peace just by changing your breath in three breaths? Three breaths! Now, imagine every day you just bring your focus back to your breath over and over and over again. You bring yourself back to your breath.

Four: **Love yourself through it.** Whatever you're going through; whatever the situation is; whatever the condition is, love yourself through it. Offer yourself the love, the compassion, the gratitude and love yourself through it. See if you can just open your heart and see -- in the activity of opening your heart -- if you don't feel better.

And five: **Expand the gratitude.** Expand the gratitude.

So here's your homework. You ready for this week?

I want you, every time you notice you're anxious ... Because for some of us, a lot of our anxiety is done unconsciously. We're not aware that we're freaked out. That's a spiritual term, right? [Congregation laughs] We're just not even aware. Like, we're so freaked out that we don't even want to know we're freaked out! Right? So we're anxious, but we don't want to know we're anxious. So we do our anxious, but then we go unconscious. It's like, *"I don't want ..."* Pull the covers up. *"I don't want to know!"* Right?

So the first job is just to realize that you're anxious. When you realize that you're anxious, then you can change your breath. You can open your heart. You can practice gratitude. But you actually have to know that you're anxious before you can choose something else.

So the first step in this is: every time you notice you're anxious, I want you to come up with at least five things in your life that you know that you're grateful for. I want you to crush the life out of your anxiety.

Like, every time you notice you're anxious, I want you to hammer your anxiety with five positive, grateful things. And I want your anxiety to just get so tired of being beaten up that it just stops. Like, your anxiety knows that every ... *"Oh, I'm worried about my finances. Okay! Here's five times when I know that God has come through and made sure that I had everything that I needed."*

Or, *"Oh, I'm worried about my health. Okay! Here's five different situations where I know that I was healed."* Or your relationship, or whatever it is! Something at work. *"Here's five times where I know that I've been blessed."* And I want you to be so clear about your 97% that your 3% gives up.

Now, from time to time, is an angst thought going to pop up? Yes! But I want you to see how long do you hold on to it? Is it a week? Is it a month? Is it a year? Are you going to spend 10 years worried about this? Or when it pops up, do you instantly think of three things for which you're grateful, and it just evaporates?

You can only entertain one thought at a time. We need to use that to our benefit. We need to rearrange our life so that every time we go in a dark place; in a scary place; in an anxious place; in a fearful place, we instantly move our mind back to something for which we are definitely grateful.

You ready?

*"Thank you, God; [congregation joins in] thank you, God; thank you, God!"*

One more time:

[With congregation]: *"Thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God!"*

Will you pray with me?

I want you to open your mind, your heart, your soul, and I want you to feel the power that is within you. God is giving you the full power of Spirit. You've been given the full power of God. And every time you master your mind, you become more powerful; you become more awake; you become more aware. Every time you take mastery over your thoughts, you unleash a greater level of good in your life. Do you want to live in greater peace? Spend more time giving thanks. Thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God! And so it is. Amen.

**Copyright 2022 Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center/Rev. Richard Rogers**