

Keeping Your Head
Above Water

SALLY SHAVER DUBOIS

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Wow! I really wrote a book, and my name is on the cover! For many years, the idea of writing a book was something I had thought about doing. However, I never got around to putting the words on the pages because I knew it would be a long process to organize my thoughts and ideas. Now that this book is complete, I want to thank those who helped me during the book writing journey and others who have inspired me to be the person God has created me to be.

Thank you first to God and the gifts He has given me to share with others during my blessed life. I am so grateful that He gave me a sense of humor which almost always assists me when those stressful trials come my way. I cannot imagine going through life without my faith as this world is full of shark-infested waters.

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Illustration by Angel Contreras

PREFACE

The Flood

I woke up to the sound of water. As I stepped out of bed, the water reached my ankles in my basement bedroom. It had been raining for hours. A flash flood of water flowed under the walkout basement door from the nearby creek and inundated our ranch-style house. I stumbled out of the bed, grabbed my glasses and turned on the lights. Our house was quickly taking on water — 3 feet in all filling up the basement.

My dad had died a year earlier from a sudden heart attack, so it was just us three kids and my mom in my family home. When my dad died, I was 20 years old and experienced how life could change in an instant. One day, I was a carefree college sophomore, and the next day I was moving back home to assist my mother with the household responsibilities my dad left behind.

But on the night of the flash flood in 1984, I almost lost **my** life. I rushed upstairs as the rest of my family woke up. We realized our three golden retrievers were still in the back yard in their kennel and yelping for help. Their backyard kennel was next to this normally small-sized creek. I heard them crying out in the dark and knew they were trapped in the rising water. Their kennel had a top to keep them from jumping out, but

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now it prevented them from escaping to safety. I ran into the dark night and heard the water rush as the creek grew into a river of flood waters. Not realizing how dangerous the water had become in the pitch-black night, I ran straight for the dog kennel to free my furry friends. But as fast as I ran, I was swept off my feet even quicker. The fast-moving flood carried me downstream behind our neighbor's house. Fear swept over me as I bobbed along in the dark, dodging fences, a swimming pool, and trees with no life jacket. Did I mention that I am extremely near sighted and had taken off my glasses before running out of the house? Being nearsighted without my glasses or contacts, my fear of the unknown grew even greater with my limited vision!

In that moment, I knew I was in **big** trouble, and my life was out of my control. I cried out to God to help me as I tried to swim to safety. I believe God heard my cry, and my guardian angels threw me an invisible rope and guided me to safety. I found land and made my way back to the house. My family had no idea I'd left the house! God had saved me — even without a life jacket — miraculously, my head stayed above the water and I was not injured.

What happened to the dogs? We eventually saved them as well. Our kind-hearted next-door neighbor, an assistant football coach at our local university, played a huge role along with my brother Dave in the dogs' rescue.

With God's help, I survived that dangerous flood and literally kept my head above water on that summer night.

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Sally in her flooded basement after she was carried down the flooded stream

You might not have been literally carried down flood waters like me, but you might be feeling like your boat is tipping over. Are you stressed out, overwhelmed, and full of anxiety or worry? Do you feel like you're struggling just to get through each day and keep your head above water with sharks looming nearby? Did COVID-19 pull you under without a life jacket?

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Unless you have been living on a sandy beach somewhere with everything you could possibly want or need, have no issues with your family, have perfect health, and overflowing amounts of cash, you've certainly gone through periods of extreme stress in your life. Or you might be living with chronic stress right now and feel like you cannot possibly stay afloat. If this describes you, then this book can help! In the coming chapters, you will discover my L.E.A.R.N. principles to help you reduce stress and live a healthy active and joy-filled life!

-Sally Shaver DuBois

INTRODUCTION

As I was in the process of writing this book in 2020-2021, our world was hit with a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic event. Many of us never dreamed that life could take such a detour and cause so much stress, anxiety, and hardship for so many people across the world. In the United States, where I reside, we were simultaneously hit with political division, social unrest, and unprecedented weather events. There is no doubt that COVID-19 was incredibly stressful for many people, and I know that the coming years will bring more stressful situations for me and each person who reads this book.

I wrote this book to help you learn about the harmful effects of stress on your body and brain. I wanted to give you some realistic ways to prevent stress or cope when you feel like your boat has capsized in a shark-infested ocean of never-ending challenges. I find these ideas helpful. I share them with others because I know that chronic stress is one of the most common issues many adults and even children face.

Here's a little background information about me. I have worked in education for 30+ years teaching preschool-12th graders. I've been an adjunct instructor for college students and have provided teacher relicensure courses for educators.

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In addition to my many teaching duties, I have coached many different sports, and I own a small business as a professional entertainer and speaker. Previously, I owned a personal training business. I utilized a converted school bus that I drove to childcare centers to provide fitness and creative movement activities for preschoolers. I have also worked many part-time jobs from mowing lawns, service industry jobs to taking care of animals.

Throughout my career, I have dealt with distress. My friends, who are nurses and physicians, explain the daily stress levels they endure. Regardless of your profession, you deal with stressful situations or stressful times of the year.

COVID-19 brought enormous work-related stress to many people. Healthcare workers and small business owners struggled to handle the mental and financial strain that the pandemic produced.

I don't have all the answers as none of us do. I have personally experienced stress during the pandemic, and in the past with relationship challenges, career trials, business failures, work stress, family worries, financial stress and many other life stressors. But as I move through life, I have developed some useful strategies to cope and can now even experience joy and peace when those stressful times come my way. Further, when I forget, other people in my life remind me of these principles when I capsizes into stress-filled waters.

I found many of these ideas helpful as I navigated my way through COVID-19, and I'm hopeful that the principles I will share with you in the coming chapters will help you and get you back in the boat. Moreover, I believe they will guide you back to shore where you can live the life you were put on this earth to live!

I must acknowledge that I believe in God and have a strong Christian faith which helps to keep my stress under control and gives me everlasting hope. I believe that God is in control and try to yield myself to Him which makes the

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strategies that I will lay out much easier for me to accomplish. You may practice a different religion where you find peace and comfort or may not be religious at all. However, I hope you will still find techniques that you can use in these pages.



*Are you fighting stress?
Photo credit: Destri Andorf (D & Orfs Photography)*

1

WHO HAS STRESS?

So, who is stressed and why? According to the American Psychological Association (APA)¹ report **Stress in America**, 78 percent of Americans report experiencing at least one symptom of stress in the last month. This includes physical and emotional symptoms. According to the APA's report, the top four sources of stress are money, work, family responsibilities, and health concerns. The World Health Organization has reported that 80 percent of US workers noted stress in their jobs because of increased workload, interpersonal issues, lack of work-life balance, decreased job security, and poor job conditions.

COVID-19 certainly added more stress for many people. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) conducted a survey² and reported the pandemic was associated with several mental health challenges. The survey was conducted April through June of 2020. "Overall, 40.9 percent of 5,470 respondents who completed surveys during June reported an adverse mental or behavioral health condition, including those who reported symptoms of anxiety disorder or depressive disorder (30.9 percent), those with trauma and stress related disorders (TSRD) symptoms related to COVID-19 (26.3 percent), those who reported

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starting or increasing substance use to cope with stress or emotions related to COVID-19 (13.3 percent), and those who reported having seriously considered suicide in the preceding 30 days (10.7 percent).” I experienced stress during the pandemic and before COVID-19 at various points in my life.

To clarify, stress can be either enhancing or debilitating. It is about how a person reacts to certain experiences and events in life. The positive short-lived acute stress is called eustress and can be beneficial. We express it in our bodies as excitement, nervousness, or when we fulfill a meaningful challenge. Examples of eustress are when you feel nervous before getting up in front of people to make a presentation at work or when you experience excitement before participating in an athletic event. This type of stress stimulates the body for a short-term task and is a normal psychological response for most of us.

However, the type of stress I will focus on throughout this book is called distress which is a more severe and negative type of stress. Distress can trigger chronic health conditions. It can cause considerable psychological and physiological harm to the body and brain. This type of stress often results in chronic health issues when the stressor is experienced on a longer-term basis without stress management intervention.

This distress can either be from an external or internal stressor. External stressors are outside of our control such as unforeseen events, injury or illness, major life changes, the death of a loved one, or financial constraints. An internal stressor is likely self-induced. This may include our attitudes, perceptions, expectations, worries, fears, and lack of perceived control about our lives. See chapter 2 for more about the effects of stress.

Types of Distress

Financial Stress

As mentioned previously, many stressors can cause us distress. According to the APA's *Stress in America Report*, financial concerns are one of the top reasons people feel stressed especially those making less than \$50,000 per year. For those of us who have experienced financial issues with low paying jobs, loss of income, or mounting debt, this can be one of the most difficult things to deal with daily.

Many families were tremendously affected by job loss or furloughs during COVID-19. Personally, I lost most of my business income as an entertainer and speaker, and my husband Paul lost his job right before the shutdown. Fortunately, he eventually secured another job which was a huge godsend since my income will likely not improve for several years. We were also out of debt and had an emergency fund in place that kept us going until Paul found a job. We were not as stressed financially as many others during COVID-19 because we had planned ahead and worked on getting out of debt in the early years of our marriage. This was a huge blessing when a true emergency emerged.

In my opinion, financial stress can either keep you moving forward to financial freedom or take your anchor, with a loud thud, to the bottom of the deepest ocean. Monetary experts are far more adept with financial advice, and that is not the intention of this book. However, I will say that being free of massive debt can reduce anxiety in your life. When we suddenly lost income, a lack of huge debt comforted us and a kept our stress levels in check.

I encourage you to find a system and make financial choices that work for you and the people who live in your household. If you are constantly worried about how to make ends meet and living paycheck to paycheck or are living with massive debt, that is a huge stressor in your life. Seek help from

a financial counselor. Read some financial help books. Change your spending habits. Take on a second job, if you can. You need to make a change, or the debt can sink your boat faster than just about anything else. While you are working through the financial stress, try some of the principles I will lay out for you in the coming chapters.

Work-related Stress

Work-related worry and tension are also a huge concern for many people. I guess that you might be reading this book because your career, current job, or lack thereof might be causing you strain and anxiety. You are not alone in feeling this way. According to the US Department of Labor, “The number-one reason people leave their jobs is because they do not feel appreciated.”³ When people are not acknowledged and appreciated in their jobs, they might experience stress or lose motivation. Therefore, productivity can suffer, and employees get frustrated and might leave. It is important for managers and supervisors to acknowledge and recognize their employees’ contributions to their organization. However, you might not be getting this appreciation from your boss. Additionally, you might be experiencing stress on the job. If so, I have some ideas for you in the coming chapters.

One of my most hectic jobs was early in my teaching and coaching career. I landed a job in a small rural Iowa community with about 350 K-12 students. I was hired to teach K-12 physical education, high school health, 7th and 9th grade science, and was the high school girls head basketball coach. If you are familiar with teaching, you will note how many different preps were involved in this teaching assignment. For reference, I also lived in the small town of 500 people where the school district was located about “an hour from civilization.”

As a younger single woman living by myself, there was very little to do in town except play tennis with some of my middle school students at the local park or visit Maude, an 80-

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year-old chain-smoking woman who befriended me and the single music teacher. If you have ever lived in a small community, you know the challenges of breaking into social networks or getting involved with the long-time residents, not to mention the lack of eligible single men who might be available for dates. You are considered an “outsider” if you were not born in the community. Basically, there was nothing to do in this small town outside of all the schoolwork and coaching I did.

In my early days of teaching, I did not handle stress well, especially when challenging situations arose. More times than I would like to acknowledge, I raised my voice at students or ended up in tears at the end of the day.

My dealings with parents added to the stress of the job. In a small town where the social life revolves around the school community, everyone believes they “own” the school staff. If you have ever seen the movie, *Hoosiers*, I was living it. Parents questioned my coaching abilities. A parent threatened to call the state department of education to revoke my teaching license. High school students left death threats on my voicemail, and many students challenged my authority.

One such stressful student interaction was when a high school boy purposely poured bleach into my 50-gallon fish aquarium in my science room because he was upset with something. Needless to say, the fish had it rougher than me that day, but my stress level skyrocketed. Another day, a student threw a roller skate across the high school gym when he was upset. When I confronted him, he told me to “F-off” which resulted in a shouting match between us. In both situations, the school administrators gave me little support. Last, at the end of my first year of coaching basketball with an 18-5 winning record, a group of parents tried to get me dismissed from my coaching duties. Thankfully, that didn’t happen.

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All these situations created tension and caused major burnout. I lasted two years in that job before I quit completely frustrated with the teaching profession. I headed to graduate school. In those early days of teaching and coaching, I was not highly effective at keeping my head above water when stress mounted.

Teaching can be an incredibly demanding career, and I hear educators express their high stress levels on a daily basis. According to a Gallop-Healthway Well-Being Index survey⁴, teachers and nurses are at the top of the chart of experiencing a lot of daily stress. Physicians, sales professionals, and managers follow closely behind them.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, teachers experienced a huge amount of additional distress. Many of us barely kept our boats afloat as we navigated online, hybrid and in-person teaching all in the same school year. There were and are so many unknowns of how to teach while keeping children distanced, keeping masks on students, cleaning and disinfecting equipment, and navigating technology for virtual learners. Educators are still drowning as they try to keep up with the incredible amount of additional work and expectations. The school year 2020-21 was one of my most challenging and demanding times as an educator. I re-created all of my physical education curriculum to accommodate distancing students. I spent more time supervising students and disinfecting equipment. Most importantly, I was concerned about catching the virus and giving it to one of my family members. I felt like a brand-new teacher as I tried to navigate how to teach in this environment. I utilized many of the ideas in the coming chapters for myself, sometimes unsuccessfully, but I kept moving forward one day at a time.

Relationship Stress

Our relationships are another huge contributor to stress. Particularly, our relationship with our families can cause a great

deal of stress. Although I have not been fortunate enough to be a parent, I have worked with children most of my life. I appreciate how much strain can occur as a parent or as a caregiver of children. When caring for, teaching, or parenting kids, they can stretch our patience into a frazzle in a hurry.

Being in a relationship with someone can also be a huge source of stress when we let it. Whether that person is a friend, child, spouse, significant other, family member, or acquaintance, interactions with other people can be some of the most stressful.

Many of us experienced increased strain during lockdown with family members day in and day out. How did you handle lockdown? I am guessing it was a challenge if you lived with others. On the other hand, if you live alone, you might have found it difficult not to have daily face-to-face contact with others. Lockdown stressed out many people.

Not being in a relationship can also cause worry and unhappiness, if we let it. Because I was single for over 25 years, I know the heartache of not having a significant other with whom to share life. I will say there was plenty of humor in the online dating and personal ads world which I will cover in chapter 3. I also found plenty of ways to be joyful as a single woman for many years. Having a life partner has been a blessing, but I was also productive and led a happy life when I was single.

I realize there are many other ways in which you might experience stress in your life. The first step is to acknowledge from where that stress is coming. Then you can begin to change how you deal with it. One of my favorite quotes which is attributed to many people including Henry Ford is, “If you always do what you’ve always done; you’ll always get what you’ve always gotten.” In other words, if you want to lessen your stress, you must do something to change your ways or situation. If you hope to change what is happening in your life,

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you have to take the steps to do so because when nothing changes, nothing changes.



Stress is everywhere.

2

WHAT IS STRESS, ANYWAY?

Recently, I dreamed that I was a passenger on a bus with several other people. We traveled a familiar route near my childhood home. I had many suitcases and a can of paint and planned to exit, but I missed my stop. I told the driver I wanted to get off at the next stop as she smiled at me. When we reached the next stop a few blocks later, the driver stopped the bus for me. I began unloading my luggage down the steps onto the curb. I realized I needed a second trip onto the bus to retrieve the rest of my belongings. When I went back for more items and my can of paint, more passengers entered the bus behind me. I realized it was going to be difficult to exit the bus again. As I tried to get past everyone, the paint spilled and splattered on several of the other passengers. The driver started moving the bus down the road before I could get off.

“Stop the bus! Stop the bus!” I shouted, but the driver would not stop.

When I woke up in the midst of my screaming, I realized my dream revealed that I was on the stress bus because I was anxious and overwhelmed during that week. The luggage was the stress I carried around. The spilled paint spread my stress and anxiety to others. More people got on the bus because they were stressed and could not leave the stress bus.

What is causing you the most stress today? When we identify the causes of our anxiety, we take the first step in keeping our heads above water and rowing back toward shore. Then, we might be able to prevent those stressors or keep them from escalating.

Stress and Your Body

What does all this stress do to your body and brain? Stress in our lives can overwhelm us and suffuse our bodies and brains with psychological and physiological consequences. Stress was first mentioned in 1936 by Dr. Hans Selye.⁵ He defined stress as, “The non-specific response to any demand for change.” Another definition from the National Institute of Mental Health,⁶ reads, “How the brain and body respond to any demand.” A third definition that I find useful from Palmer & Cooper⁷ says, “Stress occurs when pressure exceeds your perceived ability to cope.” If we perceive something as worrying, our bodies will be stressed even if someone else does not become anxious in the same situation.

The systems of the body continually try to keep us in a stable equilibrium or state of internal balance. This state is called homeostasis. In acute or short-term stress, the body reacts with the “fight or flight” response. Fight or flight was first studied and researched by Walter Bradford Cannon in 1915.⁸ This response is a good thing in emergencies when our sympathetic adrenal system engages and changes with the release of hormones. These secreted stress hormones boost our energy to get out of danger or perform a heroic task in an emergency. An example of this might be when a person lifts a heavy object or carries someone to safety during a crisis.

Specifically, our bodies release the stress hormones adrenalin and cortisol when we are anxious. This increases blood pressure, blood sugar, and can suppress the immune system. A series of other physiological responses follow. These include decreased blood flow to major muscle groups,

increased heart rate, digestive issues, and constriction of blood vessels. They can even temporarily affect our vision and hearing.

Usually, after the perceived threat has passed, our bodies recover and return to the non-stressed homeostasis state. However, if our bodies are in constant flight or fight response from being overly stressed, or we have experienced trauma and have not dealt with it, long-term health issues can occur. These issues might be heart disease, weight gain, especially belly fat, anxiety, depression and disrupted sleep. If we do not learn how to manage our distress effectively, long-term health consequences are almost certain.

Measuring Stress Levels

Anxiety levels may be a challenge to measure as often stress is a subjective perception of what is traumatic to each person. One tool that might be helpful in determining stress levels is The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) first utilized in a 1983 study.⁹ “The PSS can be used to determine whether ‘appraised’ stress is an etiological or risk factor in behavioral disorders or disease.” This tool can help examine the role that stress levels play in disease and behavioral disorders.

Another way to measure the stress is to complete the life-events scale. These inventories ask respondents to numerically rank how they feel about a variety of current life events such as socializing, money, family situations and health issues. Although it is difficult to statistically quantify stress in your life, you probably feel the effects of strain when it occurs.

Several things cause me perceived psychological stress. Like many people, I am afraid of heights and even have a hard time peering over a balcony. When I am up high, my brain perceives the situation as worrisome and responds physiologically. My blood pressure rises and pulse rate increases. I believe this fear of heights began when I was a child when one of my brothers coerced me into riding my bicycle

down a steep incline. I was never hurt badly when I rode down the huge “devil’s hill” in our neighborhood, but my perception was altered when he gave me a gentle shove before I was ready to venture down on my own. This experience, along with other stressful experiences being up high, began my discomfort with being in high places. Now, when I do activities, such as riding on a ski lift, jumping off a diving board, or driving a car on a road with impressive drop-offs, I am uncomfortable and worried even though the people who are with me might be having a wonderful and relaxing time. When possible, I avoid high places but can tolerate them especially if I know my reward will be to ski down a mountain slope. I try not to let my perception of the stressor take over and cause me unhealthy anxiety. Moreover, I refuse to let it keep me from pursuing the fun that might occur after being in a high place.

How Do You Deal With Stress?

As I discussed in the last chapter, we all have situations in our lives that cause us much tension beyond the psychological stressors. At times, we might deal with stress in healthy ways that work for us. We might take a walk, work on a hobby, or talk to a friend. But at other times, we might do unhealthy things to deal with anxiety. We might drink too much alcohol, smoke, shop, spend too much time surfing the internet, play video games, check out emotionally, or eat too much junk food. If you find yourself doing these unhealthy things more often than working through your stressors in healthy ways and your life becomes unmanageable, you can get help. You might try to find out more about addiction in a 12-step group. Further, please consider talking with a counselor or clergy at a church.

I admit that if I am not careful to follow my own principles, I might eat unhealthy foods, worry about things, or surf on social media sites to help me relieve distress in my life. I am not advocating that checking our social media accounts

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within reason, having concerns about our challenges, having an adult beverage or eating some chips once in a while is wrong. Rather, it's when we do these things in excess to avoid dealing with stress that is unhealthy. If you haven't found ways to deal with your anxiety, you likely risk many physical issues and other long-term health issues.

Think about things that might cause you perceived distress and how you react. Do you let these situations or things prevent you from getting out of the water and back into the boat? How do you react when you have had a stressful day or encounter stress over a period of time? Do you make unhealthy choices because of the way you are coping with anxiety?

Years ago, my young niece Andrea responded in the only way a preschooler could when her dad came home from a stressful day and announced that he had experienced a "hair on fire day." He often uses this statement when he has had a difficult and stressful day. Little Andrea immediately asked her dad if he had stopped, dropped, and rolled. Children are very literal at times, but this suggestion did have value beyond the laugh it gave my family.

Perhaps if my brother had stopped what he was doing to take a deep breath and get away from the stressor that was causing his "hair on fire" day, he could have eased the tension. He might have dropped what he was doing and realized how he was responding to the stress. Then, he could have tried an intervention such as deep breathing or taking a walk. Or, he could have just rolled with the "fire" with humor, prayer, or finding someone to help deal with the situation. All of these ideas would have been ways my brother could have managed his stressful day. We all experience those "hair on fire" days. Thus, we need to develop useful stress management techniques to ensure we can manage the acute stress before it becomes a chronic stress situation.

Stress and Resilience

A study at the Mayo Clinic¹⁰ evaluated the association of resilience with lower stress and improved mental health with nearly 2,000 corporate executives and business professionals. The study concluded that those participants who exhibited higher resilience in the workplace environment were associated with “better mental health, reduced stress, and greater well-being. An increasingly recognized protective factor against stress is resilience. Resilience is defined as one’s ability to bounce back from adversity and view adversity as an opportunity for growth.” This study makes a lot of sense when you consider people who have endured significant stress and hardship in their lives yet lived well into their senior years. Those individuals likely were resilient and able to cope with stress more effectively.

Consider Louis Zamperini who was featured in the book and movie, *Unbroken*¹¹. He was an Olympic runner in the 1936 Olympics and then a bombardier before his plane went down in the Pacific Ocean where he survived for 47 days lost at sea. He was eventually captured by the Japanese and terribly mistreated as a prisoner of war for two years. Zamperini was a known Olympic runner to his captors and often singled out and tortured daily. Yet, he persevered until the war ended in 1945. Immediately after the war, he had a difficult time dealing with all the experiences he endured in the war and turned to an alcohol addiction. However, he persevered and eventually found his Christian faith and a 12-step program which freed him from his alcoholism. He lived to be 97 years old. I believe this was partially due to his resilience and partially because of the faith he found in God after the war.

There are many other resilient individuals who have learned how to deal with stress and have lived long and healthy lives. Are you a resilient individual? I believe that I have exhibited resilience at times to overcome some of the challenges and stressors in my life. I have never faced anything

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close to Louis Zamperini, but I have had my share of stress and learned to persevere through these challenges while developing useful techniques to live a healthy life.

The L.E.A.R.N. Principles

Through my many trials, I have discovered the ideas that will help you reduce and manage your stress and improve your overall well-being. These are the L.E.A.R.N. principles. Each of the letters provides a strategy to help you keep your head above water and get you back on dry land with a sense of peace and serenity. These five principles will provide you with essential tools to keep your anxiety and distress under control while you live a healthy, active, and joy-filled life in a stressed-filled world.

L-AUGH

E-XERCISE

A-TTITUDE OF GRATITUDE & GIVING BACK

R-ELAX, R-EFLECT, R-ECHARGE

N-UTRITION

Endnotes

Chapter 1

¹ (American Psychological Association)

² (Czeisler, 2020)

³ (Rath, 2004)

⁴ (Gallup, 2014)

Chapter 2

⁵ (Tan, 2018)

⁶ (Institute of Mental Health, n.d.)

⁷ (Palmer, 2007)

⁸ (Cannon, 1915)

⁹ (Cohen, 1983)

¹⁰ (Kermott, 2019)

¹¹ (Hildenbrand, 2010)

Chapter 3