

SESSION 7: ASSESSING COPING STRATEGIES

What do you do to soothe stress, frustration and/or grief? Is it working?



[FUN FACT:

Did you know that the singer in this scene is the real Leslie Douglass and that is her beautiful singing voice?

Her son Zach is equally talented and sings “Homework” over the scene of young Brooks playing football with his dad. Marilyn’s beautiful singing voice lives on—our daughter loves to sing and even Brooks is a great singer ☺

SHARE A PRAYER

Open the session with prayer requests and a prayer.

INTRODUCTIONS

Last week had a few steps to the homework: identifying which you could relate to most—anger, blame and/or regret—then imagining your life without it.

- Does anyone want to share what they learned from that activity?

Second, the homework asked you: *How and why was Jesus able to let go of anger and blame?*

- Does anyone want to share their response to that question?

Third, the homework asked you to genuinely try prayer when your mind wandered toward anger, blame or regret.

- Does anyone want to share if they tried that and how it went?

BEHIND THE SCENES

Like Brooks’ house in the movie, things looked good on the outside but were falling apart on the inside. His marriage was exhausted, his finances rocky, and his stamina wearing out. As Brooks would say, “*I was dancing as fast as I could,*” just trying to keep the balls in the air while things were falling down around him. In the movie, his first wife says, “*I’ve been with you all these years, and I’ve tried to help you fight these ghosts, but I just can’t do it anymore.*” Brooks’ past was seeping into his present. His coping strategies were unsustainable and faltering.

It’s easy to pick out obviously unhealthy coping strategies like drugs, alcohol, pain killers, and/or eating disorders, but what about the subtler ones that can seep into people’s minds, hearts, and bodies? With smart phones in every pocket, hundreds of TV channel choices, and constant entertainment opportunities, “escapism” has reached epidemic proportions. *How much time of every day is devoted to avoiding rather than facing life’s challenges?*

MOVIE CLIP - *Play Session 7: Assessing Coping Strategies*

As you watch this clip and think about other scenes in the movie, look for ways Brooks is trying to cope with and/or avoid situational and emotional challenges.

THINK-PAIR-SHARE QUESTIONS

Before discussing these questions as a group, take a minute to write your own responses (think), discuss them with a partner (pair) then join together for a group discussion (share).

- 1) Throughout the movie, what coping strategies does Brooks use (*in this clip and other scenes*)?

- 2) What are other common coping strategies people use to try to ease stress, anxiety, grief, or depression? List both positive, healthy strategies and negative, unhealthy strategies. Some strategies might fit under both categories.

HEALTHY COPING STRATEGIES	UNHEALTHY COPING STRATEGIES

- 3) When you feel stressed, discouraged or overwhelmed, what coping strategies do you use? Are these positive or negative strategies? (*This is confidential and does not need to be shared with your partner. If you don't want to write it down, please make a clear mental note of what you would write down.*)

- 4) How do your coping strategies affect you both positively and negatively? How might they affect others?

- 5) What are some additional or alternative coping strategies that might be good for your life?

FAITH WALK

Devising coping strategies is a natural way to try to defend ourselves against angst. When life feels overwhelming, it's instinctual to seek ways to soothe stress and alleviate pain or anxiety, especially if recovering from a recent loss or traumatic event.

Jesus and the disciples could definitely relate to angst and stressful situations. As they ministered together for three years, they faced exhaustion, hunger, uncertainty, and threats (both verbal and physical). There was little to no time for self-care as thousands of people followed them, desperately seeking their attention and assistance. At the height of their stress, how did Jesus and the disciples cope the night before his crucifixion?

Read Matthew 16:36-45.

- **What did Jesus do in this stressful situation?**

- **What did his disciples do?**

While sleeping seems like an innocent mistake, it is a form of avoidance. Avoidance is probably the #1 default coping strategy for most people.

- **What are ways people exhibit avoiding their stressors or conflicts?** Said another way, what are time-consumers in modern society that may alleviate stress but don't resolve the underlying stressors?

- **How do unhealthy coping strategies affect our relationship with God and others?**
Read Matthew 6:22-24. [*The last word, "money", can be interchangeable with any worldly stumbling block or addiction.*]

Jesus #1 coping strategy was consistent throughout his life on earth: **prayer**. Before his impending temptations from Satan in the wilderness—he sought solitude, prayed, and fasted (Luke 4:1-2). When overwhelmed by crowds of people—he prayed (Luke 5:16; Mark 1:35). When saddened by John the Baptist's death—he prayed (Matthew 14:23). When worried about his disciples—he prayed (Luke 22:32).

Why did Jesus pray? In addition to the fellowship and guidance he received from his Father, he was often praying for strength. In 1 Corinthians 10:13, we are given a promise that God will give us the strength necessary to withstand any temptations:

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

In this NIV translation, we are assured that not only is there a way out, but we "can stand up under it." We can be made strong enough to not just avoid or cower, but to actually STAND UP.

THINK-PAIR-SHARE

- **What are ways to stand up to different temptations?** Choose at least three of these scenarios that may apply to your life and propose possible solutions.
 - a) Your family watches hours of TV or Internet every evening. How could you *stand up* in that situation?
 - b) You and your spouse always have a drink or two on stressful days. How could you *stand up* in that situation?
 - c) You find yourself hooked on social media or Internet gossip. How could you *stand up* in that situation?
 - d) Gossiping or complaining really does help relieve your stress. How could you *stand up* in that situation?
 - e) You don't have time for exercise or preparing healthy meals. How could you *stand up* in that situation?
 - f) You don't have time for prayer. How could you *stand up* in that situation?
 - g) You're worried about someone in your life with unhealthy coping strategies. How could you *stand up* in that situation?
 - h) You're worried about your own unhealthy coping strategies. How could you *stand up* in that situation?

HOMEWORK

The first step to breaking a bad habit is self-awareness.

- Is there an unhealthy coping strategy affecting your life? (If yes, proceed to the next questions.)
- What is the primary emotion that evokes that coping strategy? (e.g., stress, anger) Or is it just an ongoing habit that's not triggered by an emotion?

The second step is self-management.

- What is a healthy coping strategy you think would be a better alternative?
- What is your plan for using that healthy alternative? (Be specific—add days, times, and triggers. [Examples: "This Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 6pm, I'm going to treadmill for 40 minutes." "Every evening this week, I'm going to walk the dogs after dinner instead of watch TV." "Every morning this week, I'm going to get up 20 minutes earlier for devotion time." "After a stressful day, I'm going to have a "mocktail" (non-alcoholic) or cup of tea instead of a cocktail."])

The third step is to monitor your progress.

- Use this chart to track your healthy and unhealthy coping strategies this week. Add additional healthy and unhealthy coping strategies that apply to your life in the first column blanks:

Begin this journal on whatever day tomorrow is (example: Weds.) and fill in answers for each day of the week.

	Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Weds.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.	TOTAL
<i>Sample</i>								9
HEALTHY COPING STRATEGIES:								
Took a walk								
Exercised 30+ min.								
Ate a delicious healthy meal								
Had meaningful prayer time								
UNHEALTHY COPING STRATEGIES:								
Ate too much								
Spent more than an hour of tech/TV time								
Gossiped and/or complained								

***IMPORTANT NOTE:** If you are fighting the urge to use a negative coping strategy, remove that possibility from your life. If it's a substance, throw it away, don't buy it, don't let it into your house, or into your world. If it's a negative relationship, try to remove yourself from the situation. If you need help, pray to God and join a support group that will nurture you. God often works through others (e.g., trained counselors and support groups) to join you in your fight back to health and well-being.

FROM BROOKS

What have you learned about healthy—and unhealthy—coping strategies? What do you do when overwhelmed by stress?

At different times in my life I've tried any number of things to cope with pain and difficulty. I've tried alcohol, workahol, and denial. I've gotten into bad relationships and even stayed in them because it was easier to stay than face the issues I'd have to deal with if I moved on. The list goes on. I've learned the difference between healthy/helpful coping strategies and unhealthy/unhelpful strategies the hard way.

What I try to do now is first separate myself from everything for a few minutes and pray. I ask God for wisdom and discernment in facing each of the issues. Then I start trying, usually with pen and paper, to identify and break down each thing that is causing stress into its individual components. Each component has a way to deal with it. But when I look at it this way, I find a way to work through each small piece instead of looking at all of it as one big, overwhelming and even impossible challenge. When I start doing this I find none of the elements or components are insurmountable. We can do most anything when we are willing to take it one small step at a time.

There are so many things we can do to try and cope with the challenges and struggles in our lives that are unhealthy. And they don't all seem unhealthy at first. When we try to sooth pain or stress with alcohol, drugs, or bad relationships, all we are doing is making the problem worse, and at best, putting off dealing with the real issues. The cause is still there. My tendency was more to bury myself in work and keep things moving at such a frantic pace that I never had a chance to stop and think. I destroyed a marriage, multiple friendships and dramatically harmed my own physical health by overdoing it with "positive" activities. Just having a friend, spouse or mate to talk to can be incredibly helpful. Having someone who loves you and is willing to help you work through those issues is important, as long as they are people who encourage positive and not negative coping activities.

But I have honestly found that prayer is the most useful place to start. By slowing down and letting God direct our thoughts and energies, good ideas, plans and resources seem to come to us.

FROM RICHARD – TESTED IN CONFLICT

By Richard B. Douglass, December 10, 1975



Temptation is a normal part of our daily experience. The original meaning of this word carried the idea of a man's having his courage and strength tested in armed combat. Temptations provide an opportunity to develop and demonstrate our inner strength. The famous preacher from a previous generation, Billy Sunday, once stated: "Temptation is the stuff of which Christians are made. If the devil never tempts you, you can't develop your resistance to sin."

Most people feel inadequate to face temptations. As one man stated it: "I can resist anything but temptation." We all have struggles with trying to live up to what our consciences and the Bible tell us is right. Some people simply give up and brush their moral failures aside by saying: "I am only human and simply cannot be expected to deal well with the pressures that are put on me by society and my own desires." Other people try very hard to be victorious and feel guilty when they fail.

Jesus provides the perfect example in demonstrating how people need to deal with their temptations. After the baptism of Jesus, the power of God's Spirit came on Jesus. He went into a desert and fasted for forty days. While Jesus was in a greatly weakened physical condition, the devil threw the full weight of his powers at Jesus. First, he tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread. The hunger pain Jesus was experiencing made the need for bread a consuming passion. Jesus quoted a text from the Old Testament and refused to perform this miracle. He established that his spiritual mission was more important than food. Most people have been convinced that physical needs always take precedence over spiritual and moral values. Jesus reversed the order of these priorities.

Three of Jesus' temptations are listed specifically. This gives us one each of the three types of the temptations the Bible tells us people have. These are "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life." The second temptation to Jesus was an offer for all the kingdoms in the world to be his if he would worshipped Satan. Either mentally or physically, he was transported to a mountain peak where he could see several empires. The eyes became the entrance way for a forceful temptation.

The final temptation of Jesus was to jump from the pinnacle of the temple and be caught by angels. This would publicly demonstrate his powers and get him an immediate following. This appeal to pride was rejected with another quote from scripture. In each case Jesus refused to compromise his mission in the world and countered the temptation with a biblical teaching.

The lesson from the experience of Jesus was obvious to the early Christians. It proved that any man who is controlled by the Spirit of God and armed with the word of God can overcome any temptation, even when he is at his weakest. Our temptations are too much for us to handle in our own abilities and strength. God's word and Spirit can fortify even the weakest person and make him strong enough to face "the trial of armed combat against our spiritual opposition" and become victorious over temptation.

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