

Stress: a 'social disease' that can put a big strain on family life



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SIT DOWN for this one—it's coming. Not from me but from my budding 11-year-old. It's bad enough my dentist found ten cavities and one cap on my left back second molar had to be replaced. It's bad enough that my doctor feels I need an exercise program and should be taking vitamin supplements. And, it's bad enough I have been accused in the past of being a participating member of the rat race of our society. But now the worst attack of all—last week my daughter Elizabeth confronted me face to face and like a second-year resident in family practice medicine informs me I have a social disease.

Immediately thinking my laboratory report came in the morning mail and she peeked inside, I started to blow my stack. As the steam seemed to dissipate and the air got clearer, Elizabeth informed me she didn't open up the mail this morning

and, in fact, she was quick to reinforce a discussion we had about two months on this very subject concerning each member of the family opening his or her mail personally.

Angrily pursuing the issue I said, "How can you say such a thing about your father?" Elizabeth responded: "It's very simple daddy. I have been following you around very carefully the last three months for a special school project and there is no doubt in my mind you have a social disease." Have you ever felt guilty about something you never did? Welcome to the club!

The rest of the conversation clearly did not invite any criticism on my part. Rather, was just what I needed to put some additional perspective into my life and get back on the track of living life less hectically.

During the three months of private detective work, Elizabeth kept

accurate records of how I did my work and moved about. She clocked how I rushed around the garden and mowed the lawn, how I rushed to get to appointments on time, how I would stay up late evenings thinking and working on writing projects, and how, generally, my life seemed to be operating like a twisted rubber band.

Elizabeth concluded that my rushing about and trying to get chores accomplished quickly so we could have a lot of time together as a family, was probably wearing out my body; you see, I made a commitment to her and the family many years ago that the family time was precious and had priority—this commitment I have kept. But I have been finding myself rushing around to get all my work done, thus, encouraging stress and strain. If I continued such a pace not only could I develop medical problems like ulcers, heart disease and a nervous breakdown, but I guess all my efforts to have a terrific family life would go down the drain and I could very well end up a problem to the family.

Stress and strain must be reckoned with if we are to live a healthy and happy life. It is important to do an analysis of our lives on a regular

basis to determine where the stresses and strains may be and how we may overcome the adversities. We know the stress and strains in our lives: single parent homes, lack of community support services, child abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, economic instabilities (inflation, stagflation and recession), employment injustices, and legislative conflict and inequities in the laws of our land, just to name a few. These on top of the self-imposed requirements of rushing around like a chicken with its head cut off are really setting up systems of behaviour in our society that are shooting holes in the family and wearing away the substance and integrity it has enjoyed.

Fortunately, I was able to realize the points of stress and strain in my life once again and take immediate steps to correct my behaviour. With the help of Elizabeth (hoping she would include this information in her project), we sat down and mapped out a weekly schedule of work that would allow things to be done in a more relaxed fashion. I also looked at my priorities of work and decided to zero in on only a few things each week. Elizabeth and I agreed to think of work not as something that needs to get done but

as something we can enjoy doing and even sharing. I'm glad the family is around.

As I was edging the lawn in the front of the house, who should appear but the mailman. We chattered for a while as we often do one or two mornings a week and I was given the family mail. Having said goodbye to our "merry mailman," I looked over the three-inch thick pack of magazines, advertisements and letters, and spotted the laboratory report from my doctor. I couldn't bear to open it myself.

I frantically called for my relaxation therapist, Elizabeth, gave her the letter and said, "Here, you read it." She opened it, smiled, laughed, ran in the house and showed my wife, she started to laugh, they both came outside (all in 28 seconds), and Elizabeth said, "Congratulations dad—you have a social disease. Dr. Bernstein says you have a mild case of ulcers. Relax, eat well and you will be good as new."

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