sign up for a yoga class at the local gym and contribute to what has become a $6-billion dollar industry while you strike a downward-facing-dog-pose; or sip a relaxing drink like Chill or Slow Cow (these are anti-Red Bull remedies, and no, I am not making that up).

Or, you can learn from Deepak Chopra, who is arguably the chief guru of stress management in American culture. Chopra, who claims he himself never has stress, sells millions of books and other devices, all designed to help us relax. Take the Deepak Chopra Dream Weaver Light and Sound Mind Machine, for example. This $300 device is worn like a set of goggles and uses a kaleidoscope of dream-like images and sounds to help you chill out. No wonder Chopra feels no stress. Sitting on a dreamy pile of easy money will do that to a guy.

The truth is, however, that, despite the billions of dollars we spend on this stuff, *you just cannot buy peace*. In a world that feels out of control, no amount of time spent tripping out in the Dream Weaver will ultimately make us feel better. Once the goggles come off, it is back to the reality that we live in a world that we cannot conquer, no matter how much we spend.

The people to whom John wrote had every reason to be way more stressed than even we could imagine. While his audience is not clearly identified, the fledgling Christian churches of John's day were harassed and persecuted. People lost their livelihoods and their lives because of their association with the person and message of Jesus. Their pagan and Jewish neighbors ostracized them for declaring a crucified Messiah to be the Savior of the world. We could certainly excuse them if they simply turned to their faith in a Dream Weaver kind of private spirituality that might help them escape from the world.

But instead of rolling out the yoga mat, the early Christians thrived amid the stress and persecution. In its first few centuries, Christianity exploded in numbers and influence, and by the early fourth century Christianity was the dominant faith and worldview of the very empire which previously sought its destruction.

How did Christians conquer the world? The apostle John gives us a clue. John was no guru, but he was a witness to the life of Jesus. He shares how to live according to the pattern of Christ. For John, the way to peace did not involve swiping a credit card to get what we need; rather, it involved remembering the gift that God has already given us. "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God," says John (v. 1). If our ceaseless striving for security and solvency is the source of our stress, John reminds us that the one thing we really need is the one thing we can never buy or earn: adoption as children of God.

It is our faith in Jesus as God's Son, and not our endless striving, that makes us part of God’s family. Every child of God who loves the parent, then, also loves the rest of God’s children (v. 2). If isolation and overwork are the causes of much of our stress, John reminds us that God brings us together by giving us the gift of Jesus Christ and offering us a whole new community in which we can both give and receive the love God shares with us.

It is out of that love, then, that God gives us guidance about how to conquer the world and the stress that comes with it. "When we love God and obey his commandments," says John, it becomes the way in which we love the other children of God. Obedience to God's commandments sounds like another burden about which to be stressed, but John emphasizes that *this obedience is what sets us free from worry and stress*. John says that the commandments of God are not "burdensome," but that it is through our obedience to God, in response to God's love, that God's children, in faith, "conquer the world" (v. 4).

In a world in which a fire hose of information bombards us constantly, obedience to God is the secret to a life of freedom. When we experience the gift of God's love and grace, it becomes the gift around which we orient our lives. We focus on what we have, rather than what we do not have. We focus on the present, rather than worrying about the future. We know that our future is secure in Christ.

So many of the de-stressing devices that people buy today are all about escaping from the world. Take the Ostrich Pillow, which fits over the head, leaving just a small opening for the mouth and nose, and puts the wearer into a head-in-the-sand kind of posture on a table while a busy airport bustles around him. The Bible encourages us to look up and see the world, not as a place from which to escape, but as a place to be claimed in victory. "Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?" (v. 5). When we believe that Jesus has already conquered the world, we have nothing to fear from it! No one can sell you that kind of peace!

Paul echoes John when he reminds the Roman church that nothing, not even the stress-inducing specters of hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, or the threat of violence can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Indeed, Paul says, "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:37). Peace is possible because the battle is already won. Jesus himself declares it: "I have said this to you, so that in me you will have peace. In the world, you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" (John 16:33).

Each of us deals with stress, but stress need not be debilitating. A massage is nice, yoga is good, and we need opportunities to be quiet and meditate. Ultimately, however, real stress relief comes from knowing that God loves us with an everlasting love, and that God has already conquered the world. We already have the gift of peace, and it is free of charge!

Prayer: Loving God, grant me peace of mind and calm my troubled heart. My soul is like a turbulent sea. I cannot seem to find my balance, so I stumble and worry constantly. Give me the strength and clarity of mind to find my purpose and walk the path you lay out for me. I trust your Love God and know that you will heal this stress. Just as the sun rises each day against the dark of night, bring me clarity with the light of God. For I am a child of God and in your Holy name I pray. Amen.

**Sources:**

* Clark, Taylor. "It's not the job market." *Slate Website*. January 31, 2011. slate.com. Retrieved November 22, 2014.
* Horovitz, Bruce. "All stressed out? Businesses will sell you some peace." *USA Today Website*. August 5, 2013. usatoday.com. Retrieved October 26, 2014.
* "Stress is killing you." *The American Institute of Stress Website*. stress.org. Retrieved November 22, 2014.

**Buying Peace**

Sunday, May 9, 2021 1 John 5:1-6

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Feeling stressed? Congratulations! You are a typical American. Over the last several decades, the United States has become the world champion in the stress category. According to the American Institute of Stress, stress-related illnesses cost the American economy $300 billion in medical bills and lost productivity every year. Forty-four percent of Americans feel more stress than they did five years ago, and one in five people experience "extreme stress," which includes symptoms like heart palpitations, shaking, and depression. Three out of every four visits to the doctor are for stress-related ailments.

The numbers are shocking, especially given the fact that we live in a country that should have the least about which to be stressed. We are relatively safe. We have a higher standard of living than most countries. We have better access to medical care than most people. And yet many countries, where basics like food, security, and clean water are in short supply, report *lower* levels of stress than those of us who seem to have it all.

Theories abound as to why our stress is worse than so many others. Some say it is the economy and work-related stress. Others say our loss of community is to blame, as people spend more time with their eyes focused on screens than the faces of family and friends. Related to this is the mind-numbing amount of information we receive daily that causes us to fear threats that are not even related to us. Put those together with the general American aversion to any negative feeling and you get a stress-induced cocktail of anxiety.

So, how do you beat the specter of stress? Well, the classic American answer is *to buy your way out of it*. In fact, there is a whole industry that is focused on de-stressing your life while emptying your wallet. The opportunities seem endless: purchase an expensive massage chair or get a quick massage at a kiosk by Forever 21 (which reminds you that you'll never be 21 again, perhaps negating the massage effect...);