

# ORDERING YOUR PRIVATE WORLD

By, Gordon McDonald

## Chapter 7

### Recapturing My Time

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The young pastor and I were to resume our conversation some days later. In the interim I began gathering thoughts about what I had learned over the past few years that had helped me begin getting my own life together in this area. What had I learned through the experience of failure, and what had I learned in talking with others in the same way that this young man was coming to talk with me?

The more I looked at the lessons learned, the more I realized how important it is to gain control of time as early in life as possible. Putting them down on paper, I discovered that there were only a few basic principles. But until those were mastered, the time issue would always be big and potentially discouraging. What I found myself writing down in preparation for my next conversation was something I came to call “MacDonald’s Laws of Unseized Time.” Here is what I collected.

#### MACDONALD’S LAWS OF UNSEIZED TIME

##### LAW #1: UNSEIZED TIME FLOWS TOWARD MY WEAKNESSES

Because I had not adequately defined a sense of mission in the early days of my work, and because I had not been ruthless enough with my weaknesses, I found that I normally invested inordinately large amounts of time doing things I was not good at, while the tasks I should have been able to do with excellence and effectiveness were preempted.

I know many Christian leaders who will candidly admit that they spend up to 80 percent of their time doing things at which they are second-best. For example, my strongest gift is in the areas of preaching and teaching. While I am a reasonably good administrator, that is certainly not the best arrow in my pastoral quiver.

So why did I spend almost 75 percent of my available time trying to administrate and relatively little time studying and preparing to preach good sermons when I was younger? Because unseized time will flow in the direction of one’s relative weakness. Since I knew I could preach an acceptable sermon with a minimum of preparation, I was actually doing less than my best in the pulpit. That is what happens when one does not evaluate this matter and do something drastic about it.

I finally did something drastic. I had the aid of a few sensitive laymen who cared enough to help me face what was happening and show me how I might be wasting my potential. With their help I made a decision to delegate the administration of our congregation’s ministry to a competent administrative pastor. It was not easy at first because I still wanted to have a word on every decision, to express an opinion on every subject. I had to back off and leave that in his hands. But it worked! And when I was able to fully trust our administrative pastor (which I found easy to do), I was able to redirect a great amount of energy into things that, God willing, I am most likely to do well.

I can almost hear someone say, “That’s fine if the money is available to hire someone to fill in my weaknesses.” And perhaps in some cases the only help these comments may offer is to make us realize why we are frustrated when time seems to escape us. But I must add that it may be more possible than we realize to find creative ways to share tasks with others. First, we must

sit ourselves down and consider: who is best at doing what? This applies in the home, in the office, in the church.

## **LAW #2: UNSEIZED TIME COMES UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF DOMINANT PEOPLE IN MY WORLD**

A famous “spiritual law” states the “God loves you and has a plan for your life.” Men and women who do not have control of their time discover that the same can be said about dominating people.

Because they have not set up their own time budgets, people succumbing to this law find that others enter their worlds and force agendas and priorities upon them. As a young pastor I discovered that because my time was not fully organized, I was at the mercy of anyone who had a notion to visit, took me to coffee, or wanted my attendance at a committee meeting. Since my calendar was disorganized, how could I say no? Especially when, as a young man, I was eager to please people.

Not only was I deprived of my best time due to this lack of organization, but my family was often cheated out of precious hours that I should have given them. And so it continued: strong people in my world controlled my time better than I did because I had not taken the initiative to command the time before they got to me.

## **LAW #3: UNSEIZED TIME SURRENDERS TO THE DEMANDS OF ALL EMERGENCIES**

Charles Hummel in a small and classic booklet says it best: we are governed by the tyranny of the urgent. Those of us with any sort of responsibility for leadership in vocation, in the home, or in our faith will find ourselves continually surrounded by events that cry out for immediate attention.

One recent summer, when our associate pastor and I were both on vacation, our minister of Christian education took a phone call from a church member who wanted me to preside at the funeral of a distant relative of his. When told that I was away for the month, he asked for my associate and was disappointed to discover that he was also gone. He was offered the services of one of the other pastors on the staff, but he refused, saying, No, I won't go any lower than number two.”

His thinking was the sort that creates urgent situations for leaders. Everyone would like the attention of the number-one person. Every committee and board would like the number-one person to attend their meetings, even if they do not always wish to hear his opinions. Most people in any sort of trouble would like the immediate response of the number-one leader.

One Saturday afternoon the phone rang in our home, and when I answered, the woman's voice at the other end of the line sounded quite upset. “I've got to see you right away, she said. When I learned her name, I quickly realized that I had never met this person before and that she had rarely visited our church.

“What is the reason that we have to visit right now?” I asked. It was an important question, one of several I've learned through experience to ask. Had this been many years ago when I was young, I would have responded immediately to her sense of emergency and arranged to meet her in ten minutes at my office, even if I had previously hoped to be with the family or involved with study.

“My marriage is breaking up,” she responded.

I then asked, “When did you become aware that it was going to break up?”

She answered, “Last Tuesday.”

I asked another question. “How long do you think the process of breaking up has been going on?” Her next comment was unforgettable.

“Oh, it’s been coming for five years.”

I managed to muffle my real reaction and said, “Since you’ve seen this coming for almost five years, and since you knew it was going to happen since last Tuesday, why is it important to visit with me right at this moment? I need to know that.”

She answered, “Oh, I had some free time this afternoon and just thought it might be a good time to get together with you.”

Law number three would usually mean that I would have given in to her desire to see me immediately. But by this point in my life, most of my time was accounted for; so I said, “I can understand why you think you have a serious problem. Now I’m going to be very candid with you. I have to preach three times tomorrow morning, and frankly my mind is preoccupied with that responsibility. Since you’ve been living with this situation for several years now, and since you’ve had several days to think about your situation, I’m going to propose that you call me on Monday morning when we can arrange a time where my mind is in much better shape. I want to be able to give you the utmost in concentration. But that’s probably not possible this afternoon. How does that sound?”

She thought it was a terrific idea and could see why I would suggest that sort of plan. Both of us hung up reasonably happy. She, knowing she would eventually get to talk to me; me, because I had reserved my time for the matter that was most important on that Saturday afternoon. A seemingly urgent thing had not broken through the time budget. Not everything that cries the loudest is the most urgent thing.

In his spiritual autobiography, *While It Is Yet Day*, Elton Trueblood writes:

A public man, though he is necessarily available at many times, must learn to hide. If he is always available, he is not worth enough when he is available. I once wrote a chapter in the Cincinnati Union Station, but that was itself a form of hiding because nobody knew who the man with the writing pad was. Consequently nobody approached me during five wonderful hours until the departure of the next train to Richmond. *We must use the time which we have because even at best there is never enough.* (Italics added)

#### **LAW #4: UNSEIZED TIME GETS INVESTED IN THINGS THAT GAIN PUBLIC ACCLAMATION**

In other words, we are more likely to give our unbudgeted time to events that will bring the most immediate and greatest praise.

When my wife and I were first married, we found that we could attract a lot of invitations to banquets and meetings of various sorts if we were willing to sing solos and duets. It was nice to receive warm applause and gain the popularity. But the performance of music was not our call or our priority. Preaching and pastoral care were. Unfortunately, young preachers were not in great demand, and the temptation was to do exactly what made people want us.

We had to make a critical decision. Would we involve our time in doing what people most liked for us to do? Or would we buckle down and give our attention to what was most important: learning the ways of preaching and counseling. Fortunately, we chose to avoid the seduction of the former and embrace the latter.

We have had to make choices like that throughout our married life. And more than once I have made the wrong choice. There was a time when it seemed successful to fly across the country to speak at a banquet. But it was a poor use of time. The old comment “A sermon is something I’d go across the country to preach but not across the street to hear” is too close to the

truth to be comfortable. It once seemed glamorous to be at the head table of some politician's prayer breakfast or to be interviewed on a Christian radio program, but it may not have been a high priority use of time.

Thus, the laws of unseized time come back to haunt the disorganized person again and again, until he decides to gain the initiative before everyone and every event does it for him.

## **How Time Is Recaptured**

In gathering material for the upcoming conversation with the young pastor, I looked back on my own experience, trying to identify the principles that, when implemented, brought some order into my private world. And when I thought hard about the process that I had come through, I found that I was able to come up with three ways of successfully laying siege on time.

### **I MUST KNOW MY RHYTHMS OF MAXIMUM EFFECTIVENESS**

A careful study of my work habits has revealed to me an important insight. There are various tasks I accomplish best at certain times and under certain conditions.

For example, I do not study effectively for my Sunday preaching during the early days of the week. Two hours of study on Monday are relatively worthless, while one hour on Thursday or Friday is almost priceless. I simply concentrate better. On the other hand, I am at my best with people in the early days of a week when the tension of anticipated preaching has not yet grabbed my mind. I tend to diminish in effectiveness with people later in the week when I become preoccupied with Sunday's pulpit experience.

I can fine-tune that observation even further. What study time I do take is best taken early in the morning, when I have reasonable amounts of unbroken solitude. And "people time" for me is best taken in the afternoon, when I feel reflective and insightful.

Learning about my rhythms has taught me to reserve study time for the last half of the week and to plan time with people and committees as much as possible in the first part of the week. In this way, my time budget reflects and uses the rhythms of my life.

I have also taken notice of the fact that I am a morning person. I can rise early and be quite alert if I have gone to bed at a reasonable hour the night before. So it is important to me to maintain a fairly standard bedtime. We enforced that principle with our children when they were young. I don't know why it never dawned upon us that a standard bedtime as much as possible was probably a wise thing for us as adults. And when I finally saw this, I tried to go to bed at the same time each night.

After reading an article by a specialist on the subject of sleep, I began to experiment to find out how much sleep I needed. The writer suggested that one can determine his sleep requirements by setting his alarm for a certain hour and rising at that time for three mornings in a row. Then the alarm should be set ten minutes earlier for the next three days. By so continuing in three-day increments, setting the alarm back ten minutes in each period, one will finally come to a natural fatigue point, where throughout the following day he does not feel properly rested. I tried it, found I could rise much earlier than I had thought, and it added almost two full hours – valuable hours – onto my day.

So there are weekly rhythms, daily rhythms, and annual rhythms. I found that there were certain months of the year when I was apt to face abnormal emotional fatigue, times when part of me wanted to run from people and from responsibility. I had to face up to that.

On the other hand, I saw that there were times in the year when I had to be relatively stronger as a Christian leader because many people around me were living with too much fatigue

and pressure. The months of February and March are times like that, when all of us in New England fight the effects of a long winter and tend toward irritability and a critical spirit. I have learned to prepare myself to be an extra special encouragement to others during those times. And when spring comes and people feel revitalized, then I can enjoy my own private time of letdown. Knowing those things were likely to happen was a great help to me. I could plan for them.

I have learned that the summer months are a fine time for extra reading and for spiritually preparing myself for coming year. But during January through March, for reasons I have just mentioned, I plan to be with people much of the time, because the counseling schedule is likely to jump dramatically. All of my books have been written in the summer months; there is no way they could have been done in winter.

Knowing my rhythms, I am not surprised when I feel inwardly empty after a period of heavy speaking and teaching. I cannot live day after day above the emotional line without coming to a moment when I must dip just a bit beneath the line of emotional normalcy to regather strength that has been lost. Thus it is wise not to make important decisions on a Monday after a day of preaching several sermons. And if I have pushed hard day after day during a holiday season, it is wise for me to plan a short letdown period when it is all over.

There was once a time when I had not yet learned to take notice of my personal rhythms. I remember coming to a particular day when everything seemed to suddenly cave in. I had officiated at two very sad funerals in one week; I had had insufficient rest for ten days. During that time I had read an upsetting book and had not maintained my spiritual disciplines at all. My family time had been disordered for several days, and a part of my work was at a point of frustration. So I should not have been surprised when, on a Saturday afternoon in the midst of a small personal crisis, I suddenly began to weep. Tears flowed that I was unable to stop for almost three hours.

Although I was nowhere near a breakdown in the classic sense, I learned from that painful experience how important it is to keep track of pressures and stresses, and how to know when and how I operate best doing certain tasks. I did not want that to happen again, and it hasn't. I was too frightened from that experience ever to allow myself to get so emotionally in debt again. My time had to be better budgeted than that.

I can now appreciate a part of a letter that William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, once received from his wife when he was on an extensive trip. She wrote:

Your Tuesday's notes arrived safe, and I was rejoiced to hear of the continued prosperity of the work, though sorry you were so worn out; I fear the effect of all this excitement and exertion upon your health, and though I would not hinder your usefulness, I would caution you against an injudicious prodigality of your strength.

Remember a long life of steady, consistent, holy labour will produce twice as much fruit as one shortened and destroyed by spasmodic and extravagant exertions; be careful and sparing of your strength when and where exertion is unnecessary.

## **I MUST HAVE GOOD CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING HOW TO USE MY TIME**

Years ago my father wisely shared with me that one of the great tests of human character is found in making critical choices of selection and rejection amidst all of the opportunities that lurk in life's path. "Your challenge," he told me, "will not be in separating out the good from the bad, but in grabbing the best out of all the possible good." He was absolutely correct. I did

indeed have to learn, sometimes the hard way, that I had to say no to things I really wanted to do in order to say yes to the very best things.

Heeding that counsel has meant saying an occasional no to dinner parties and sporting events on Saturday night so that I could be fresh mentally and physically on Sunday morning. It has meant saying no to certain speaking dates when I really wanted to say yes.

Sometimes I find such choices hard to make, simply because I like people to approve of me. When a person learns to say no to good things, he runs the risk of making enemies and gaining critics; and who needs more of those? So I find it hard to say no.

I have discovered that most people whose lives are centered on forms of leadership have the same problem. But if we are to command our time, we will have to bite the bullet and say a firm but courteous no to opportunities that are good but not the best.

Once again that demands, as it did in the ministry of our Lord, a sense of our mission. What are we called to do? What do we do best with our time? What are the necessities without which we cannot get along? Everything else has to be considered negotiable: discretionary, not necessary.

*I love the words C.S. Lewis wrote in Letters to an American Lady about the importance of these choices:*

Don't be too easily convinced that God really wants you to do all sort of work you needn't do. Each must do his duty "in that state of life to which God has called him." Remember that a belief in the virtues of doing for doing's sake is characteristically feminine, characteristically American, and characteristically modern: so that three veils may divide you from the correct view! There can be intemperance in work just as in drink. What feels like zeal may be only fidgets or even the flattering of one's self importance... By doing what "one's station and its duties" does not demand, one can make oneself less fit for the duties it does demand and so commit some injustice. Just you give Mary a little chance as well as Martha.

## **I SEIZE THE TIME AND COMMAND IT WHEN I BUDGET IT FAR IN ADVANCE**

This last principle is the most important; here is where the battle is won or lost.

I have learned the hard way that the principal elements of my time budget have to be in the calendar eight weeks in advance of the date. Eight weeks!

If this is August, then I am already beginning to think through October. And what goes into the calendar? Those non-negotiable aspects of my private world: my spiritual disciplines, my mental disciplines, my Sabbath rest, and of course my commitments to family and special friendships. Then a second tier of priorities will enter the calendar: the schedule of the main work to which I committed – sermon study, writing, leadership development, and discipling.

As much as possible all of this is placed in the calendar may, many weeks in advance of the target week, because as I get closer to that week I discover that people move in to make demands upon the available time. Some of them will have legitimate demands, and it is to be hoped there will be space for them.

But others will have demands that are not appropriate. They will request an evening that I have scheduled for the family. Or they will want an hour in a morning reserved the study. How much better my private world is when I allow that work to *flow around* the priorities and into available slots than when things are the other way around.

It occurred to me one day that my most important time allocations had something in common. They never screamed out immediately when ignored. I could neglect my spiritual

disciplines, for example, and God did not seem to shout loudly about it. I could make it just fine for a while. And when I did not allocate time for the family, Gail and the children were generally understanding and forgiving – often more so than certain church members who demanded instant response and attention. And when I set study aside as a priority, I could get away with it for a while. These things could be ignored for a while without adverse consequences. And that is why they were so often crowded out when I did not budget for them in advance. Other less important issues had a way of wedging them aside week after week. Tragically, if they are neglected too long, when family, rest, and spiritual disciplines are finally noticed it is often too late for adverse consequences to be avoided.

When our son, Mark, was in high school, he was a successful athlete; our teenaged daughter, Kristen, was an actress and musician. Both were in games and performances. It would have been easy to have missed those events had I not penciled the dates into the calendar weeks and weeks in advance. My secretary always kept the game schedules in the office calendar, for example, and knew full well not to expect me to commit to anything that would violate those times.

When someone would ask me to meet with him on the afternoon of a game, I was liable to take out my calendar and stroke my chin thoughtfully saying, “I’m sorry, I’m unable to do it that day; I already have a commitment. How about this as an alternative?” I rarely had a problem. The key was in planning and budgeting, weeks in advance.

What are your non-negotiables? I discover that most of us who complain that we are disorganized simply do not know the answer. As a result, the important functions that will make the supreme difference in our effectiveness miss getting into the calendar until it is too late. The consequence? Disorganization and frustration; the non-essentials crowd into the date book before the necessities do. And that is painful over the long run.

The other day a man caught up with me and asked if we could have an early morning breakfast on a certain day. “How early?” I asked.

“You’re an early riser,” he said. “Why not six?”

I looked at my calendar and said, “I’m sorry, I’ve already got a commitment for that hour; how about seven?” He agreed on seven rather quickly but looked quite surprised that my calendar might reflect plans for that early in the morning.

I did have a commitment for six that morning. In fact it started earlier than that. It was a commitment to God. He was first on the calendar that day where he belongs every day. And it is not the sort of commitment one compromises. Not if one wants to seize time and keep it under control. It is the start of an organized day, an organized life, and an organized private world.

# Life-style Balance Assessment

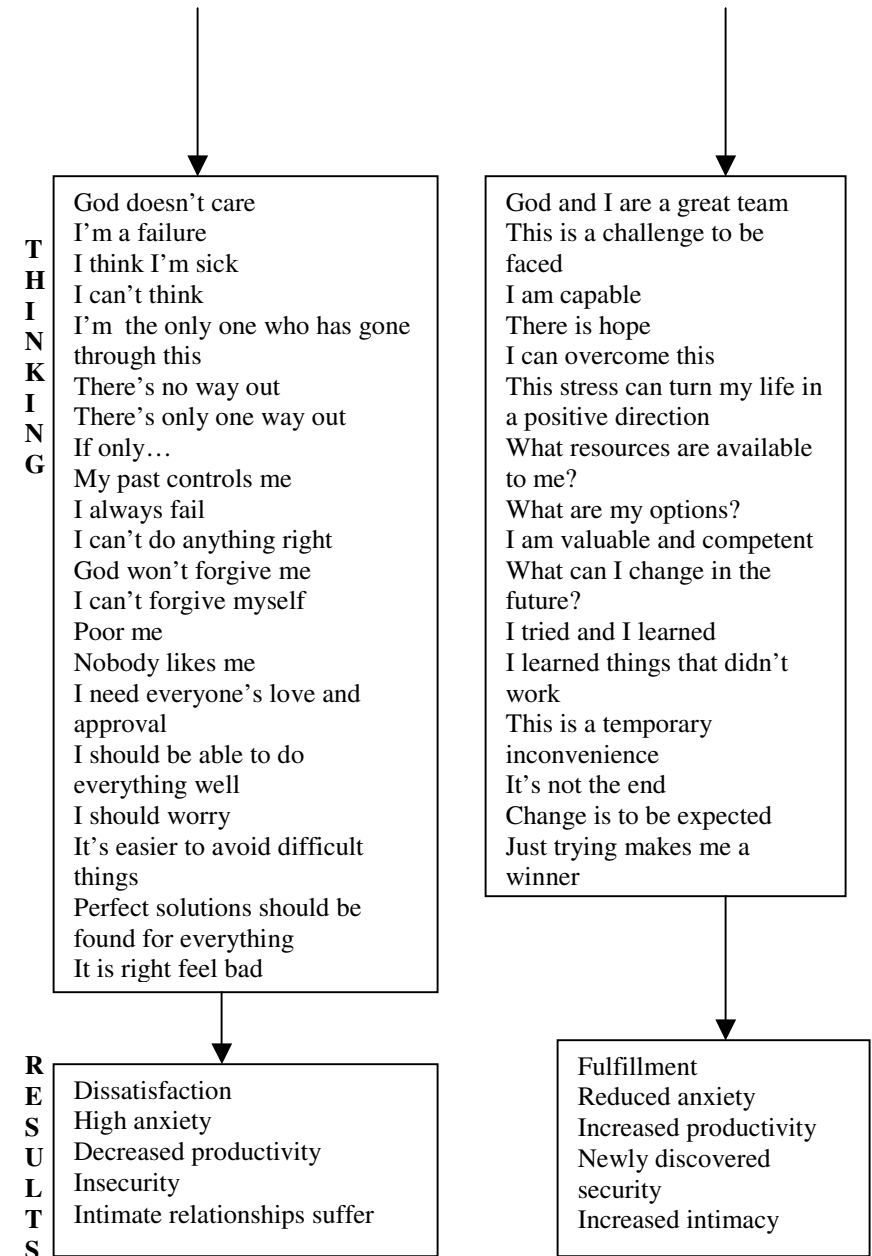
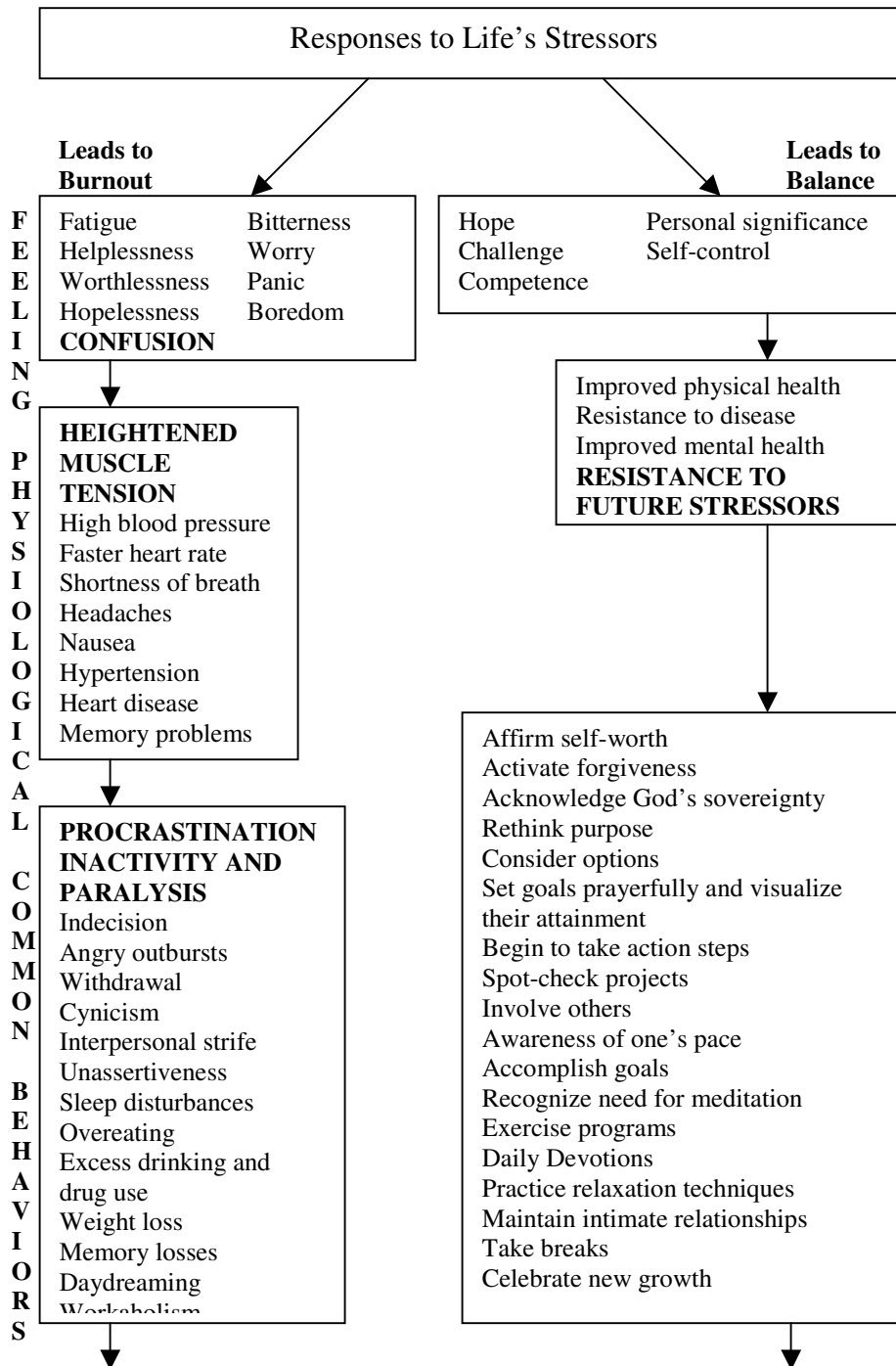
Goal: A Balanced life-style.

Life-style	Out of Control	Moving away from Balance	Moving toward Balance	Balanced
1. I take time for myself.				
<b>2. I ALLOW FOR PERIODS OF RELAXATION.</b>				
3. When I am tired I rest.				
4. I develop new interests and hobbies.				
5. I take time for my appearance.				
6. I take time for meditation, devotions, and prayer.				
7. I maintain healthy eating habits.				
8. I maintain a healthy weight.				
9. I maintain and develop my sense of humor.				
10. I take time to plan.				
11. I take time for a date night.				
12. I am self aware.				
<b>13. I AM PHYSICALLY HEALTHY.</b>				
14. I take time to work on my marriage.				
15. I spend time with my children.				
16. I maintain old relationships.				
17. I take time to develop new relationships.				
18. I have a support group.				

Goal: A Balanced life-style. <b>Life-style</b>	Out of Control	Moving away from Balance	Moving toward Balance	Balanced
19. I deal with interpersonal conflict.				
20. Forgiving is a high priority.				
21. I make my deadlines.				
22. I take time for my ministry.				
23. Facing my anger is a high priority.				
24. I need others' approval.				
25. I live in the present rather than in the past.				
26. I acknowledge my mistakes and see them as necessary for my growth.				
27. I have a healthy sex life.				
28. I take one day off a week.				
29. I feel as if I am in control of my time.				
30. I feel as if I'm adapting to the changes brought on by my age.				
31. I feel as if I'm adapting to those unexpected life crises.				
32. I can assertively express my needs and beliefs.				
33. I am learning to face my fears.				
34. I feel I am a person of worth and value.				
35. I am in control of my finances.				
36. I feel spiritually nourished by my relationship with God.				

\* *Less Stress*, by David & Janet Congo. Worksheet V (1). Regal Books, copyright 1985.





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