



Encouraging Words with DARLENE SALA

Stressed Out

On a recent flight I couldn't help glancing at the book my seatmate was reading. My eye caught the chapter title: "Lower Your Tolerance of Stress." I thought about that for a minute, and then I smiled to myself. On the stress thermometer of life, if I had any lower tolerance of stress, I'd have stress just getting up in the morning! I'm sure the author meant, "Lower Your *Level* of Stress." But the choice of words gave me a good chuckle.

I, for one, have come to accept that life now moves at such a fast pace that stress can't be totally avoided. But now it's official: science has discovered that stress physically affects your body's chromosomes and makes you old. What happens, researchers learned, is that constant stress causes the tiny caps on the cells' chromosomes that govern cell regeneration to get smaller—telomeres [*TEAL*-o-meers], they're called. When a cell's telomeres get too short, the cell stops dividing and eventually dies.

Researchers found that the greater people perceived their stress to be, the shorter their telomeres and the "older" their cells. And those who didn't perceive their lives as stressful? Stress didn't age them nearly as much, says Dr. Thomas Peris, director of the project. "It isn't the amount of stress that matters but how you manage it."ⁱ

The study cited real-life examples of people living well into their 80s and 90s who had successfully coped with stress by a number of ways: sports, games, humor, optimism, a sense of purpose, close friendships, music, finding meaning in life, and prayer.

When I read that list, I couldn't help thinking what Paul said to the Philippians: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things....And the God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:8-9). Yes, a close relationship with the Lord is the best stress-buster we have!

ⁱ Sarah Mahoney, "10 Secrets of a Good, Long Life" *AARP* Magazine, July & August 2005, 66.