

# **Stress in the Mormon Medical Marriage**

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## A Wife's Perspective

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I appreciate this invitation to present this to you because it's given me a chance to think. At first when they asked me I thought, "Oh, this is

the wrong person to ask." I don't ever remember consciously being aware that I was in a stressful situation. I knew things were unpleasant

sometimes, but I didn't ever equate that with really being under stress. But after receiving your invitation, I thought about all the things that had

gone on in my life. I analyzed it and compared it to the experience of other LDS doctors' wives. Someone told me that if you can identify the problems, you've got it half licked. I wish I'd done some of this thinking a little sooner and maybe I would have done a better job as a wife of a medical doctor in the Church. At any rate they tell me that you're never through, so I guess this will help me to continue and endure to the end. It will be necessary to be quite personal because I can only draw on my own experience. I'm not a social worker nor a psychologist nor a marriage counselor. All I am is a mother of ten, a wife of a very successful doctor, and a faithful Latter-day Saint. So I hope that these attributes will be enough to give you some ideas. I hope it will be helpful to you also to realize that there are others in the world who have experienced stress and have lived to tell the tale. I'd like to discuss the Mormon medical marriage in five facets of stress. After mentioning these five facets of our unique relationships, I will share my experience and the experience of a few others.

#### Five Facets of Stress

##### *Marriage*

The first facet is marriage itself. When two individuals with different backgrounds, different home environments, different goals, different personalities, and different habits meet, fall in love, and get married, there's bound to be a little stress. There's stress in the adjustment to each other. There's a lot of physical adjustment that can be quite stressful, not just the usual sexual adjustment but also other physical adjustments. I remember that it took me more than a month to get used to sleeping with somebody else. And when I finally got used to it, my husband was in medical practice and was gone and then I couldn't get used to sleeping alone. I still have a

hard time sleeping alone when he's away. There are all kinds of different habits that have to be adjusted to. Russell is a very organized and tidy person. I didn't have that habit going into our marriage and that was a stressful point—I think more to him than to me. I'm a night person. I like to stay up late at night and do things. He is a very early morning person who loves to get things done early in the morning. There are many adjustments of this type in a partnership. Many times it is very hard to communicate when there is an adjustment problem. The lack of communication is probably one of the biggest problems in any partnership. The handling of family money can be stressful. I think statistics have proven that this is a major problem in marriage and a great stress on the marriage partnership.

##### *Children*

The second facet is our children. A few couples can't have children, which is a very stressful thing. Some have a few more than they had planned on. Pregnancy and the changing balance of hormones in a woman can be very stressful. After the baby comes, you worry about the health of the baby, and the feeling of inadequacy in taking care of this little one is sometimes overwhelming. I remember very well my first baby. We were living in Minneapolis. I got to be the very first one to try out the rooming-in plan at the university hospital. I had my baby in a little isolette by the side of me. I remember I was so thrilled that as soon as the baby was born I called my mother, as she planned to come and take care of me when I got home from the hospital. So she hopped on the very first plane she could get to Minneapolis. Then we found out that in this hospital it was a tradition to keep you there for at least one week. They were very conservative. So my mother was there waiting for me. I was in the hospital

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and wondering what she was doing. I was trying to do everything I had been asked to do in order to be the best kind of mother possible. About two days before I was to go home, the resident pediatrician came into my room and said to me, "Well, Dantzel [he was from Salt Lake and I knew him personally also], I guess you're not as good as your Mormon pioneers."

And I looked at him and said, "What do you mean?"

"Well, we've weighed this baby before she eats and after she eats, and she is not getting one thing from you. We've got to put her on the bottle."

To other mothers this may not have been a problem because they may never have wanted to nurse their babies. But I wanted to be like my mother and my ancestors and do the best thing for my baby.

Well, I never felt so frustrated, so let down. That was a stressful moment in my life. I could hardly wait for him to get out of the room before I handled that situation in a way that I think women often would—by bursting into tears. I was really shocked and this feeling of disappointment flooded over me.

Other aspects of child rearing come to mind: sibling rivalry, toilet

training, schooling, wanting your child to succeed, teenage worries, dating, and marriage. I think the biggest stress factor in raising children is the constancy of care. The work of a mother is never done. You can go from sunup to sundown, and it's never done.

#### *Personal Progress*

The third facet is personal progress—or lack of it. Every person has a need to feel that he or she is achieving success. Physical, intellectual, and spiritual fulfillment is a very basic need. Everyone has a need to feel like his or her talent has been used and developed. It is very stressful when we feel we have not reached the goals we set for ourselves in life. Many times in the life of a Mormon doctor's wife, these goals are pushed into the background, and resentment can fester. However, some become over-balanced in the other direction and strive so hard for themselves that they become too concerned about themselves and don't take care of the other important things. So it can work both ways.

#### *The Medical Marriage*

The fourth facet is being married to a doctor. Being a doctor of medicine in this country has been a greatly respected profession. Many girls think to be a wife of a doctor is the ultimate dream. You have probably known people who intensely desired marriage to a physician because that was a choice position in life. It carries much prestige. If you marry a physician, you have a good chance of being well taken care of financially, though it does take a lot of money for a person to get through medical school and begin training. Some men and women actually choose this profession for money. I'd like to think that not too many do it exclusively for money but for the feeling of accomplishment and for

the service that can be rendered to mankind. Most are highly motivated to learn the science and to help others. So being married to a physician is something that most women would feel would be a great honor. But sometimes the table is turned, and being married to a physician can be one of the stress points of marriage.

While traveling in China with my husband, I noticed that the Chinese doctors there seemed to be fine men. During the cultural revolution they were not allowed to practice medicine. They were sent out to the farms to sweep the barns and to do manual labor. There were no doctors; there were no professional schools. One couldn't go to school and get an advanced degree. The government wanted to "equalize" everybody. These physicians are finally getting back to the practice of medicine. They have found themselves so far behind the rest of the world that they're striving hard to catch up. We've been to China twice and have rarely been invited to meet the wives of the doctors or to go to their homes to see how they live or even to meet their children (except in the case where one of the children was a doctor working on the staff).

Generally, Chinese doctors receive about the same wage as farmers. Actually, the farmers are maybe getting a little bit more now because the government is encouraging a little private enterprise. Farmers can sell their spare produce on the streets. So they may get more money than the doctors.

In our country doctors are exalted and very well respected. They work hard, but they are remunerated according to their efforts and their patients look at them with awe much of the time. Many patients feel that doctors know nearly everything and are always right. What they prescribe for the patient and their recommendations are for the most part followed. I

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have been told this is called the "king syndrome." Their world at the office and operating room is all sterile and tidy and well organized. And they're used to having everyone, nurses, office people, and patients follow their instructions. The wife needs to take the "king syndrome" into account. If he's the king what does that make her? The answer should be the queen, but sometimes that's not true.

It's especially stressful to the wife when she hears colleagues of her husband divorcing the wife and marrying the nurse or the office girl. Have you ever had a close friend confide in you that she was madly in love with her obstetrician? You hear about it all the time. And this can be a stressful situation to a wife.

The amount of time he is away from home can be frustrating at times. His work away from home is interesting, and he is deeply involved with the personal life of others. He is growing in knowledge and is finding fulfillment. He is totally wrapped up in what he is doing, and the time spent in his profession is necessarily great. So the time at home is less.

#### *The Church*

The fifth facet is the Church. Being a member of The Church of

Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has never been a stress point for me, but I can see where it could be with some people. The stress can come from two opposite positions. I think it is a great stress if your husband is so wrapped up in his profession that he doesn't have time for Church. On the other hand it can be stressful when he is taken away from you and from home for one more reason. It's just that much more time he is spending outside the home in order to carry out his priesthood responsibilities. I remember that during those training years my husband often could not even get to Church unless complex arrangements involving several people could be made. I went to Church alone or with my babies when he was on duty. When Russell was stationed at Walter Reed Army Hospital in the army during the Korean War, he was called to be in the bishopric. From that time on I sat alone most of the time in Church. When we moved back to Salt Lake he was called to the same position again—another counselor in the bishopric. Then he was called to the stake high council, then to be stake president of the Bonneville Stake, and then to be general president of the Sunday School of the Church, and then a Regional Representative, and finally he was called to be an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. For me there are surely more pluses than minuses being the wife of an active priesthood bearer.

#### Four Ways of Handling Stress

I'd like to describe four ways of handling stress. This is very difficult for me because I have never realized I was having any problems. I always knew I'd never been promised a rose garden, or if I had, I knew I should expect a few thorns in the way. If you pick the roses you're bound to get a few pricks sooner or later. If you put on protective gloves before you pick the roses, it's not going to hurt quite so much, and the job can

be done quicker with little or no trauma. So let me share with you the four protecting principles that have helped me along the way in this rose garden.

#### *The Example of Others*

First of all there is the example of others. We really are a product of our environment; what we see others do has a great influence on us. And it really helps if we can use the good examples and not the bad. I was raised in a very loving family by parents who loved each other and had a very good marriage. It was also quite a strict atmosphere. We were never allowed to quarrel with other children, and we were quickly separated and sent to different rooms until it all blew over. So I never could tolerate quarreling in our own home either. It was just something I'd grown up with. I know that goes against the child psychologists who say you have to expect quarreling and fighting. But the nonfighting way has worked for me, so I don't think all that the psychologists say is true. I don't remember hearing my parents ever having a difference of opinion. We were never allowed to talk back to our parents or even to voice an opposite opinion. That might sound very strict to you, but that's the way I grew up.

When I came into the marriage partnership, I thought that was just the way life was. When anything would come up in the way of different opinions, I handled it with silence and restraint. It was more important for me to have peace than to have my own way at that very moment. That is not to say that I never had my own way, but I've learned from example that you can catch more flies with honey than vinegar.

I hasten to add, lest you get the idea that we never talked to each other, that we have great communication in our marriage. We've made a point of making sure we have time alone together to talk. If

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communication is important in your marriage, you'll find the time to do it. My husband always invited me to go with him when he went on his trips. He traveled a lot, and I occasionally went with him. During those times, sitting together in an airplane side by side, we had a lot of time to talk and visit and make plans.

Russell often said the time he could privately talk with me was when the dinner dishes needed to be washed. The girls often suddenly had a lot to do; they always forgot they had to do practicing, or they had to curl their hair or make telephone calls or whatever. So we did have our times together.

When my husband is home, he is home. We have his quality time with us. His mind is on us when he is home. I think that's very important and very helpful to battle this stress problem. I'm sure he learned this from his parents and his upbringing because his mother and father were that way. His parents were always devoted to their children and to each other.

There is an interesting story I read about David O. McKay. You always hear how he and his wife had the perfect marriage. Sister McKay said she remembered so well the time when her husband was first sent off to do his Church assignment. It was two weeks after their first baby had been born, and he got up from

the dinner table, gave her a kiss, and left. She sat at the table and just about started to cry. She wondered how he would dare walk off and leave her. The baby was only two weeks old and the dishes were still on the table, and she said she felt awful. But then she remembered what her parents had taught her. In essence, they said, "Don't cry before you're hurt and don't cry over spilt milk." Sister McKay then asked, "Well if I can't cry before and I can't cry after, when can I cry?" And they said, "Don't." Remembering her parents counsel she just sighed and went ahead and did what she had to do.

### *The Arts*

Second, music, art, and creative pursuits have been a great glove of protection to help me get by the sharp thorns in life. By creating, you help satisfy your personal needs for progress. Having children is an important part of creation. It is something you were endowed to do, and it is a fulfilling achievement that everyone needs so much.

I find sewing rewarding. I especially like to make quilts. Music has been a great lift in my life. It is also something I can do with my children. You can teach your children to sing. You can sing to them. You can teach them to play and to listen to music. It's an activity that is mutually fun. It has been a great help to me, and it certainly takes up a lot of time when I'm alone when my husband is away.

I've been a member of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir for the last 17 years. It's been an outlet that has helped to get away from home and have a special time of my own to do what I like to do. And I think every woman needs something like this. The following is a letter they read to the choir just last Sunday. You might identify with it. It shows how this music has helped this woman in her life.

"Dear Bros. Ottley, Cundick, Kinard, and Choir: I realize your extensive world travels have brought you before many great dignitaries, leaders, person of fame, and even royalty. I am none of those. I am, however, a Latter-day Saint woman, a wife and mother of five young children. And I was fortunate enough to attend your second Kansas City, Missouri, performance. May I share with you for just a moment the impact you had on me? It had been a challenging week and between some difficult home repairs, Cub Scout day camp aftermath, and nursery leader preparation, I was letting things get to me by Friday morning. Then I walked into our big family playroom, the one with the new, only six-month-old carpeting in it, and lifted up the iron some little hands had just laid down and turned on. There in the middle of the room, burned all the way through to the padding was a large, ugly, iron-shaped hole. I just sat down and cried and harshly scolded all the children, even the one year old. That night as you sang 'Love at Home,' I remembered the hurt look in the little children's eyes. And I thought of how really unimportant the carpet was compared to the eternal principles of love and forgiveness. Yes, through your universal language of music you spoke to me of one of the most important truths. You spoke to me of eternal perspective and I thank you. Sincerely."

How can you not really gain satisfaction from a letter like this or the experience of singing this beautiful music that you hope will touch the lives of people all over the world?

I also have been able to fulfill another ambition, and that was to be a school teacher. I always wanted to be a school teacher. I was able, even though I got married, to finish my last year of college, and I taught school for two years. I knew I would have that to fall back on if everything else failed.

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### *The Church*

The third protective principle is the Church. I am convinced that if we would use every help the Church has to offer in every phase of our lives, we would be aided in every problem that comes our way. The Church can be our glove of protection against the thorns of life. If the two great commandments, love the Lord and love your neighbor, were kept, what problems could we have? By living and keeping his commandments we show our love for the Lord, and if we keep his commandments it will help in our relationship with our children and our husbands.

What a great comfort it has always been for me to know that even though Russell has been away from home and the children more than most medical and Church people, he has been and is now and always will be keeping the commandments of our Heavenly Father. He has helped me through a lot of rough problems. I didn't ever have to worry about him and his nurse or I didn't have to worry about his relationship with his patients or those kinds of things other doctors' wives sometimes have a problem with. I remember one time Russell went with a doctor to a medical convention. The doctor asked him to please leave the room because he had a girl come in to stay. This was one of our close

friends that we were in medical residency training with. And my husband came home shocked. I was shocked. But the reason he was shocked was because he was keeping the commandments of our Heavenly Father. I've never had to worry or wonder about Russell; I've never been unhappy about his going to his priesthood meetings and to conferences where they talked about loving and respecting and honoring wives and children. I rejoiced that he was going to learn those principles. I've rejoiced in his learning the scriptures. It takes time but it has helped him become closer to the Lord and has made him a better husband, father, and doctor.

#### *Attitude*

The fourth glove of protection is attitude. I've come to the conclusion that I can't change other people. I can't change my husband; I can't change my children; I certainly can't change the medical profession; and I can't change the Church. But I can change me, and I can change my attitude toward everything that happens in my life. I chose to be a wife and a mother, which to me is the greatest role in life. It's not easy. It is very demanding. I believe that what the Lord has told us in the scriptures is true. We will find our own lives if we lose it in the service of others.

The words of the following song to me describe the perfect attitude to have at home:

"Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace. Where there is hatred let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith. Where there is despair, hope. Where there is sadness, joy. Oh, Divine Master, [and this is the important part] grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is then that we are born to eternal life."

Isn't that beautiful? It puts it all

in a nutshell.

#### **Summary**

My husband has written his journal and made it into a little book, and he asked me to write a little overview about him. So I thought maybe I'd just give a little excerpt to let you see how I feel about my relationship with Russell in this medical and Church marriage.

Russell has given special attention to his spiritual development as well as his doctoring. We were young when we were married. We were determined to be married in the LDS temple, and we vowed to keep our Heavenly Father's commandments. There has never been a time that we did not strive to keep his commandments and this commitment. There never was a time when the law of tithing was not observed totally. There never was a time when the Word of Wisdom was cast aside. There never was a time when the child of our Heavenly Father was not welcomed into our home. There never was a time that Russell complained or said one derogatory remark about a leader of the Church. I may have to qualify this to say that one time when we were living in Minneapolis he and Keith Engar thought that perhaps the Sunday School there could be a little bit more efficient. As far as I know he never said that to anyone except to Amy and me. And shortly after that the Sunday School was reorganized with Russell and Keith at the helm. There never was a time when a Church calling was refused or when Russell asked to be released from a Church calling. Because of these things (and this is the important part), our Heavenly Father has poured out his blessings upon us, not only spiritually, but temporally as well. There has never been a dull moment in our lives together. Often I've heard people say, "I'm so bored with the old routine." "My husband

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never wants to move." "He never takes me anywhere." "He sits in front of the television." "I wish there were something exciting in my life." Have you ever heard this before? This attitude is very foreign to me and difficult to understand. I was born and reared in the small town of Perry, Utah. It was a wonderful life, but my experiences were confined to school in Brigham City, college in Salt Lake, and one trip to Yellowstone Park. Since my change of name from White to Nelson, however, my life has become one of constant adventure and action. We have lived in seven different homes. Our children have been born in four different states. We've traveled in the USA, including most of the states, and we have visited 63 different countries. It has been a wonderful life together and continues to be so. What a special life we have had. It has not been devoid of problems, but on the whole it has been rich and fulfilling. We have been blessed to have ten beautiful healthy children who have been a constant joy and with whom we have learned and loved. As of this writing, we have 22 grandchildren. We are thrilled to watch them grow, and we're looking forward to more. My hope for the future is to be able to enjoy sharing more adventures with my sweetheart and companion, a life that grows continually in love and harmony toward eternity. **!**