

Fighting the Good Fight: Facing Life's Battles Through Faith and Neuroscience

*Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which
you were called... 1 Timothy 6:12 ESV*

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Battling Life's Challenges

- Life is filled with many challenges – fears, anxieties, temptations, grief, conflicts, and sin that can pull us away from the life God has called us to live.
 - The goal is not to avoid these battles but confront them with faith, wisdom, and the resources God has provided for us.
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Understanding Stress

- Stress – an internal or external pressure that we experience, affecting our mind and body and requiring a coping response
 - *Internal*: negative thoughts, doubts, worries, fears, shame, guilt
 - *External*: conflicts that occur in our daily life
 - Stress can be acute (minor or short term) to chronic (prolonged and excessive that can affect physical and mental well-being).
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Understanding Trauma

- Trauma – a negative event in our lives that can impact how we evaluate and react in response to the distressful situation
 - Acute trauma: a single and sudden event (e.g., car accident)
 - Chronic trauma: a prolonged or repeated exposure to a distressful event (e.g., abuse)
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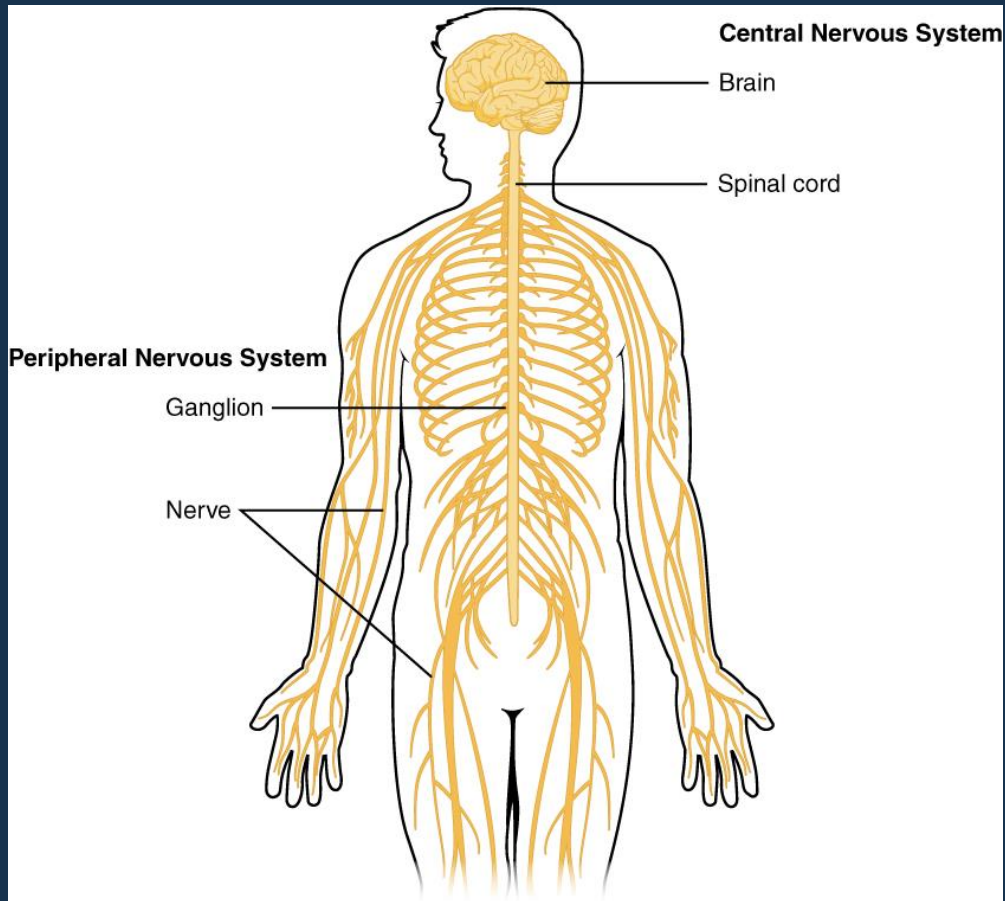
Forms of Trauma

- Adverse childhood experiences (abuse and neglect)
 - Living with a loved one with addictions
 - Experiencing a catastrophic event
 - Loss of a loved one
 - Domestic violence
 - Sexual abuse
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Stress and Trauma

- Everyone experiences stress and trauma in different ways.
 - These experiences can affect how our nervous system handles our past, present, and future.
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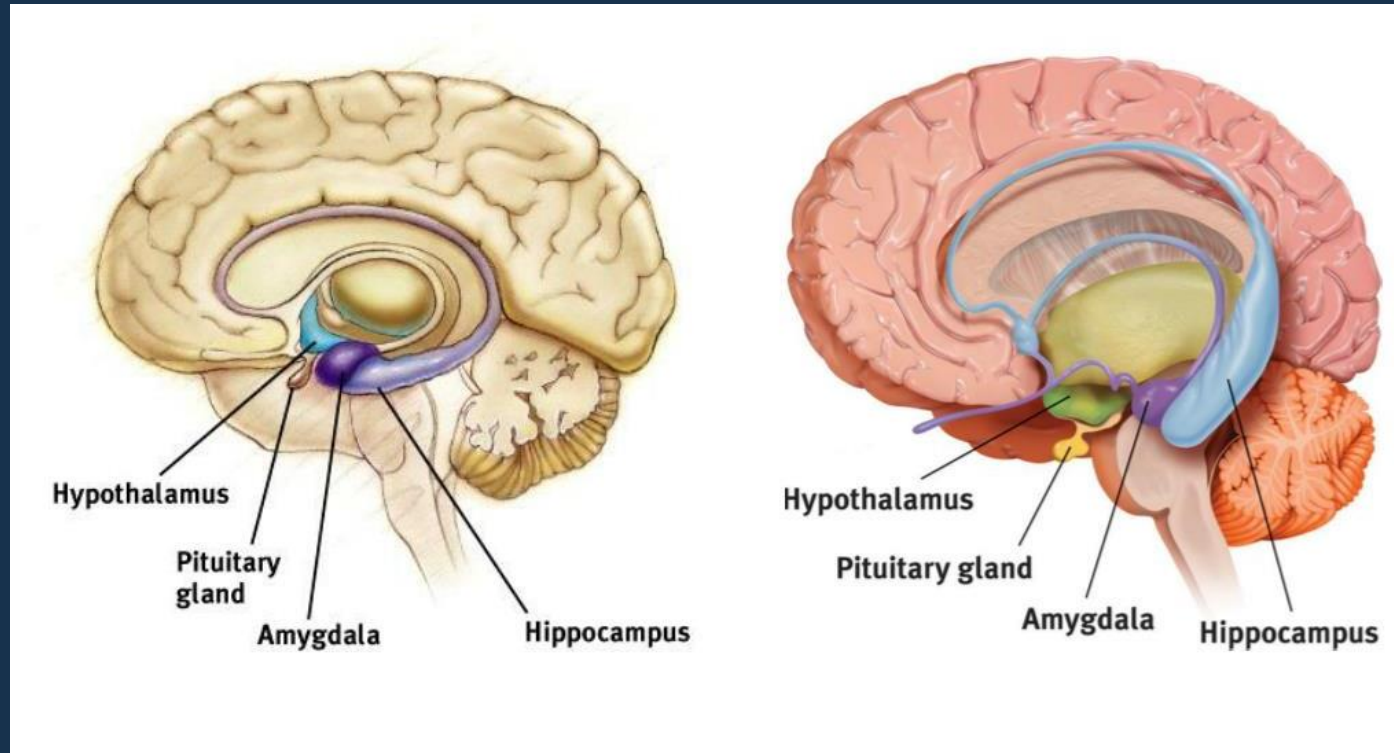
The Nervous System



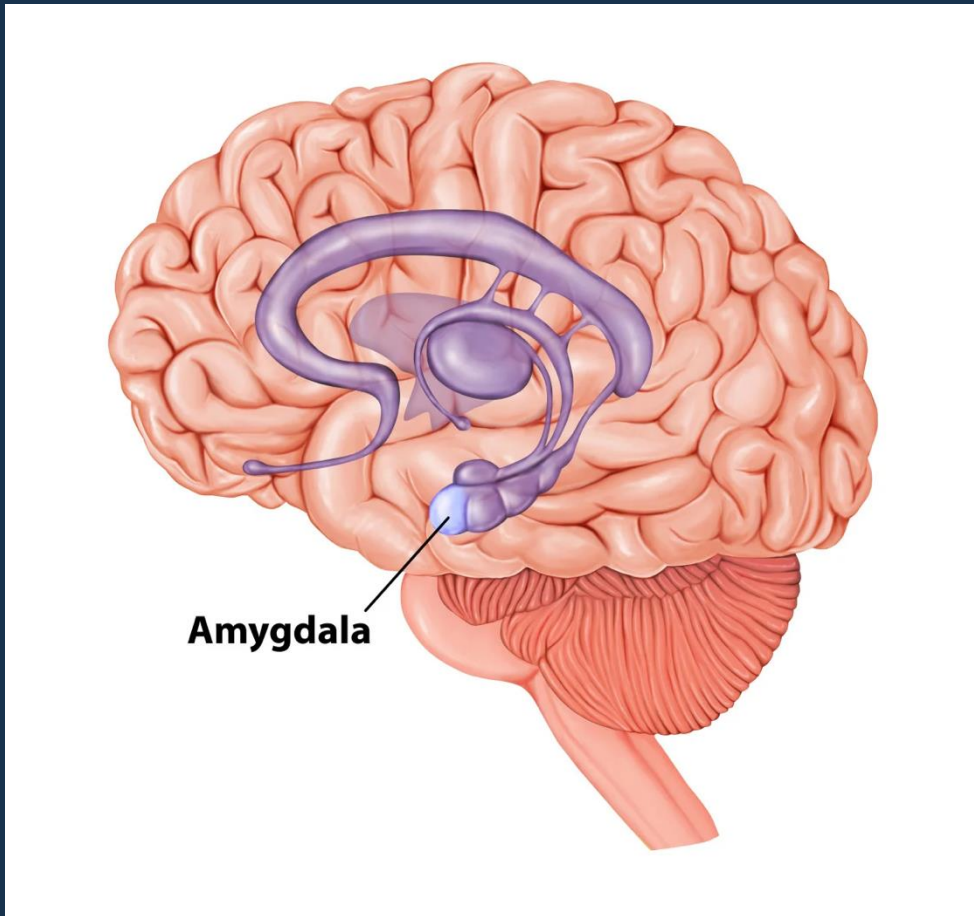
- The brain, spinal cord, and nerves interact with each other to regulate your thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and bodily functions.
- When we are not mindful of our body's reactions to stress and trauma, our nervous system can become dysregulated (i.e., over activated or shut down).

Limbic System

- Structures of the brain that are involved in emotion regulation and motivation
- An active role in stress and trauma



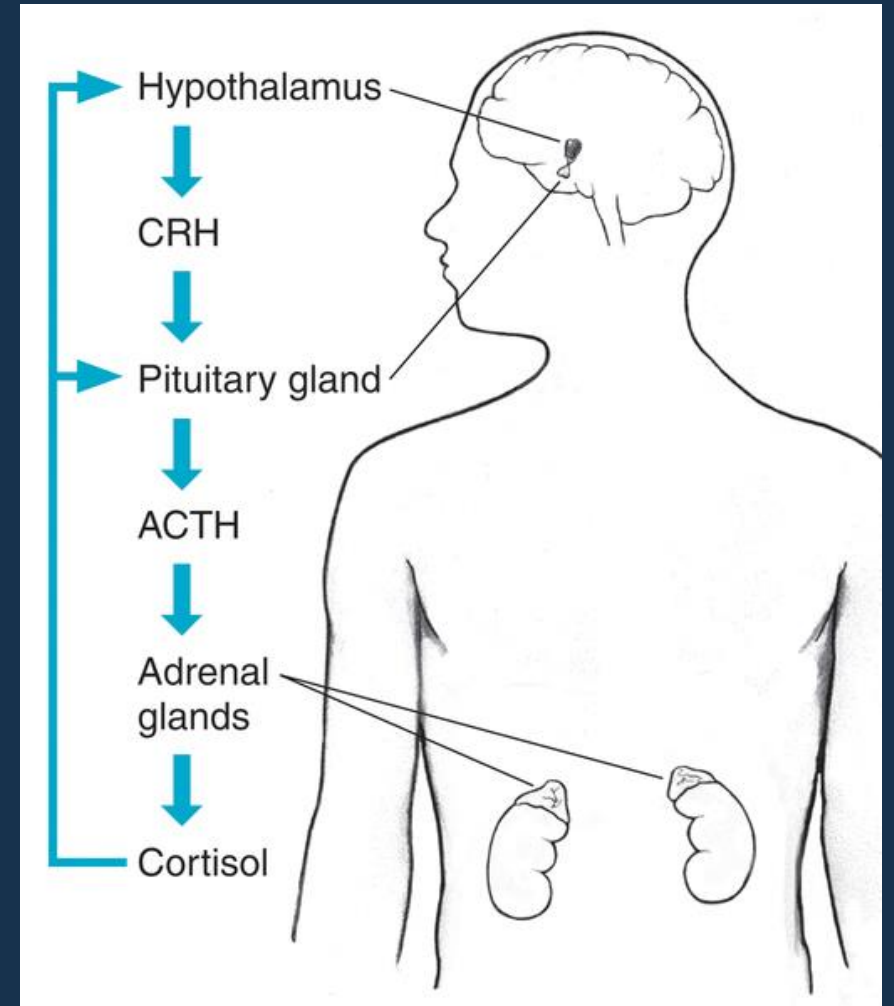
Amygdala



- An emotional response to a threat
- Responses to the body:
 - Fight – attack to confront the threat
 - Flee – run away or remove from the threat
 - Freeze – staying still until the threat passes
 - Fawn – appease to reduce the risk of the threat

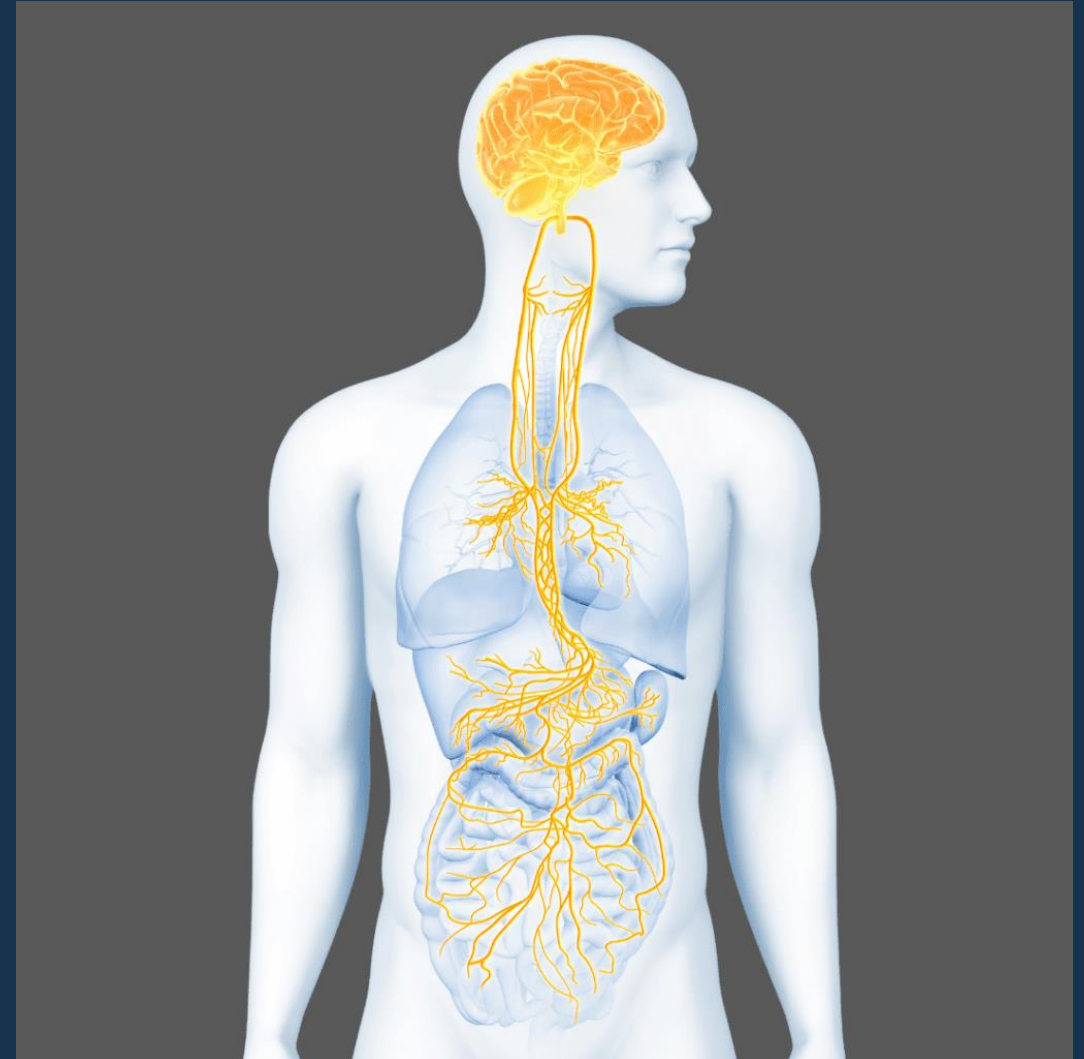
Hypothalamus – Pituitary – Adrenal (HPA) Axis

- *Hypothalamus* – responsible for autonomic nervous system (e.g., body temperature, hunger, mood) and hormones; activates the pituitary gland
- *Pituitary Gland* – regulates the endocrine system (hormones); send signals to adrenal glands
- *Adrenal Glands* – located above the kidneys; releases cortisol (stress hormones) into the body

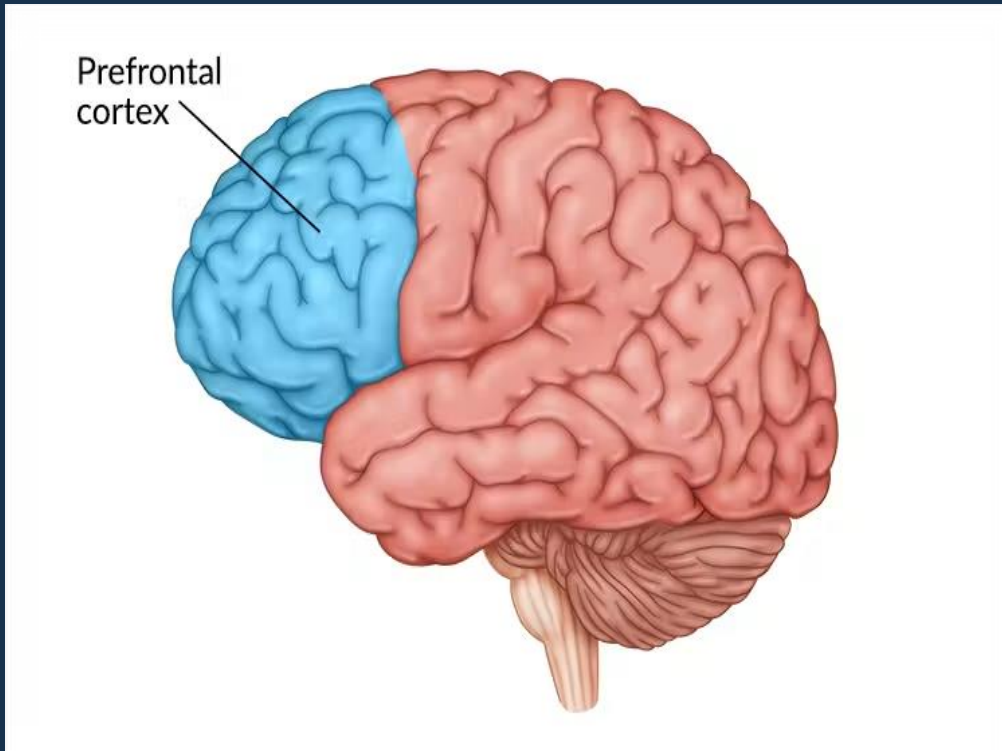


Vagus Nerve

- Longest cranial nerve connected to the brainstem
- Part of the parasympathetic (“rest and digest”) nervous system, responsible for regulating the body (e.g., heart rate, breathing, digestion)
- Stress and trauma dysregulate the vagus nerve



Prefrontal Cortex



- The thinking center of the brain (e.g., attention, self-control, perspective taking, planning, emotion regulation, and decision-making)
- Underactive during stress and trauma
- Responsible for thinking clearly, feeling connected to self and others, and having self-awareness

When Coping Becomes the Battle

- When stress and trauma become overwhelming, some may direct themselves towards unhealthy coping strategies.
 - These strategies may temporarily numb an emotion, fill a void, or satisfy a craving or urge but are short lived and counteract a healthy change.
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When Coping Becomes the Battle

- Some forms of unhealthy coping responses:
 - Avoidance
 - Aggression
 - Excessive use of technology
 - Gambling
 - Over focus on social media
 - Overeating
 - Pornography use
 - Substance use
 - Self injury
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Healthy Coping Strategies

*No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. **1 Corinthians 10:13 ESV***

What are some ways of escape or healthy coping strategies that God has given us?

Are we able to rewire our nervous system to make a healthy change?

Healthy Coping Strategies

- Seeking community and / or professional support
 - Worship – singing can stimulate the vagus nerve to calm our nervous system
 - Meditate on scripture and praying
 - Exercise – releases a hormone called endorphins that can calm the nervous system
 - Give gratitude – it puts our focus away from our problems
 - Apply mindfulness techniques, such as recognizing our breathing patterns under stress and being present with uncomfortable emotions
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Strategies for Handling Stress and Trauma

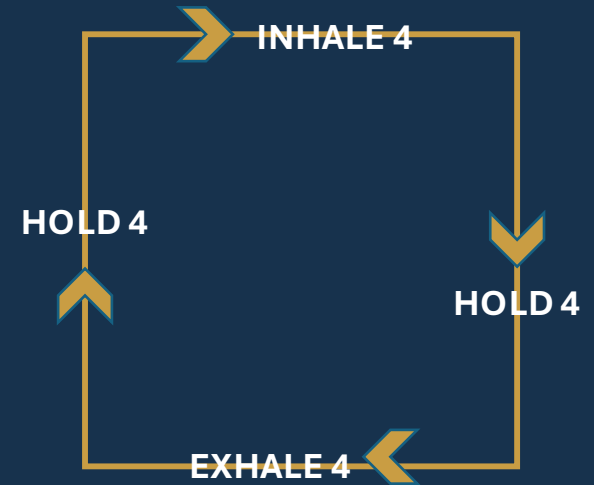
Faith and neuroscience point toward active, practiced responses.

1. **Pause:** slow breathing; create space before acting
 2. **Notice:** name the emotion, thought, urge, and body response
 3. **Ground:** reconnect with the present
 4. **Pray:** bring fear, temptation, grief, and uncertainty before God
 5. **Connect:** talk with trusted men (fellow brothers), family, pastor, mentor, or clinician
 6. **Act:** choose the next value-consistent step – not the easiest escape
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Box Breathing Technique

- **Inhale:** Breathe deeply through the nose for 4 seconds.
- **Hold:** Hold your breath for 4 seconds
- **Exhale:** Exhale slowly and fully through the mouth for seconds.
- **Hold:** Hold your breath again for 4 seconds.

Source: Mastering Box Breathing – A Simple Technique to Relieve Stress (Duke Health, 2024)



Fight the Good Fight

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
Psalm 46:1 ESV

Know the battle.

Notice the response.

Use the tools.

Stay connected.

Keep the faith.

You were never meant to fight alone!

Self Reflection

- What battle is taking the most energy from you right now?
 - How does stress usually show up in your body, thoughts, or behavior?
 - What is your default escape when you feel overwhelmed?
 - Who are the men you can call before the battle gets worse?
 - What is one faith-centered response you can practice this week?
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