

by Mike Walton

I get a lot of email that demonstrates what I call *Scouter Stress*. Stress is a response of the body to any demand made on it. *Scouter Stress* is how your body deals with the demands of being a volunteer or professional Scouter. Much of what you do to relieve this stress depends on your ability to resolve yourself in being the best Scouter you can be, and not to be totally consumed on being the next Norman Rockwell Scoutmaster.

See if you can place yourself in any of these situations; I know that I can:

- *Finding out a District- or Council-level meeting you're interested in occurs the same night as one of your "boring, mundane, or inactioned" unit meetings or committee meetings.*
- *Sighing heavily as you leave for your unit's weekly meeting, or before "the gang" arrives at your home for their meeting.*
- *Worrying constantly about whether or not you have "met all of the prerequisites" for your unit's participation in summer camp or a weekend camp...you spend hours on the phone.*
- *Fear of doing anything outside of the position you've had for years because you do not feel you are ready or capable of doing those things.*
- *Volunteering for almost every significant task that comes up within the District or Council. You know that if you or one of the others "in your circle" doesn't volunteer, it will not be done ... and the bottom line: it will impede the ability for the event to really work the way it's supposed to.*
- *When returning from a Scouting activity, the "high" you used to feel when you started (years ago), has been replaced by worry, doubt and resignation. "Oh well, another meeting is down."*
- *Pounding headaches toward the end of a day when you are scheduled to "do Scouting." Upset stomach, tight neck and shoulders, or eyestrain? Do you routinely experience any of these before, during or after unit activities?*

Coping with SCOUTER STRESS

- *You are concerned about doing everything the way it has been trained to you, or the way that it is portrayed in the Scouting literature. When you cannot get it done that way, you are consumed with worry and fear that "Scouting's not what I'm good at."*

All of these instances are taken from actual email sent to me since I've been online in 1989. There are lots of variations on those themes, but basically it comes down to four main issues that I'll discuss below:

"Do it By The Book. Period."

The first fear is "I'm not doing it the way the BSA, my Council, or the people who trained me says it must be done, so I could be ruining these boys' chances for Eagle, Arrow of Light, or some other honor if I don't do it exactly as written in the books."

Many Scouters have also expressed fears of their Commissioner or professional: "If he sees that I'm not doing things exactly as the book says, the unit can be taken away from me."

Yes, absolutely, if you are running a junior hate club, or a prostitution ring as your unit's program. You can bet the BSA will come down heavy with both feet and remove you from the BSA. The BSA has some rather definite rules; but, they're rules which are spelled out and

easy-to-understand for ALL of its units. We all know those rules: no criminal behavior, no gambling, no military-type activities, no gang-related activities. None of those activities fit in as part of the program of a Cub Scout Pack, Boy Scout Troop, or Exploring unit.

What we are NOT so clear on, and what the BSA's literature is very foggy on, are those questions concerning task organization and roles. Do you *have* to have an Assistant Senior Patrol Leader?? Do you *have* to have a Scribe, a Quartermaster, and a Librarian?

Be assured that if you are trying to emulate the basic program of the BSA, nobody should complain. If you are working the basics of the program with what you have, don't worry about if your program is stacking up to the standard. Instead, worry on whether or not those youth in your unit are enjoying the experience, if they are advancing, and if they are feeling that the time and energies expended are worthwhile. That's taking the program to them.

Just be consistent in what you do. That's the key, and that is what the program is patterned to work out.

"I Did It By the Book, But It Didn't Work. I Failed."

The second main source of Scouter Stress is the frustration which comes from trying to do things the way that the books suggest, or the way it was taught, or the way that others I've talked with say it should go... and failing.

Everyone fails. The beauty of Scouting is that nobody is going to dock any pay from you for your failure or the failure of your youth leaders. From the outside, who knows except you and your youth leaders, that you have failed? Don't give up on having your youth leaders to take responsibility for the Troop program and activities just because "it didn't work" the first month or first overnight trip.

Your youth leaders have to be in the HABIT of running the show, and not as "an experiment to see if you can do it." It's a *permanent change*. Once they see that you're not going to change your mind and take their roles back from them, they will see that it is truly up to them. They'll try harder... and that's what you are wanting to do: modify behavior to develop leadership.

Many times, we Scouters want to insure that everything is going to work the way its supposed to. We usually over-extend ourselves just trying to cover all bases.

Don't beat yourself up (or anyone else!) for the lack of a *perfect program*. It doesn't exist. In all of my years as a primary Scouter, I have yet to see it... not even during the training courses, which are *supposed* to be perfect!

We all try to make Scouting somehow become a "cookie cutter" program. All of our activities are like the little pre-formed animals and shapes that we use to sculpt the cookie dough. We use different sizes and shapes of cutters to maximize our usage of the program "dough." What's leftover is discarded, since nothing could be made of it. And what about our program? When our program doesn't fit into one of the pre-fab shapes or designs, we want to reshape the program or discard it since nothing could be made of it. We end up wasting resources and valuable time. That's wrong.

Even a small unit can reap the benefits from a good program. Do the best you can to carry out the established program. If for some reason it doesn't fit your "cutter," instead of reshaping, how about continuing onward with what you do have? The result may be that you've stumbled onto a new concept in delivering the program and the Promise of Scouting to youth... and you didn't even know it!

Who's Watching You?

The third stress is the fear of the outsiders and the other parts of the program. For a large number of Scouters, they are scared to do anything but their unit role, because "in order to be a District *whatchamacallit*, you have to really know your stuff and I've only been a Scoutmaster for two years!"; or "I don't have the background necessary to do a District or Council job. Give it to those others that have all of those things and badges and stuff..." For other Scouters, it's not so much the fear of the increased chances to work with others, as it is the fear that those others will strongly evaluate your program, your role in it and your youth's role.

We are an evaluative bunch. We evaluate everything: our work habits, our TV habits, the amount of gasoline we put in our cars and trucks, everything. Our schools give grades to our kids and we grade our schools on how well they perform. When they don't "make the grade," we're ready to change or put an ax to it.

Illustration: Gala Perry