

Leading Ideas



| 4 Practices to Help Prevent Clergy Burnout

By Matt Bloom And Kim Bloom On July 12, 2017

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Matt and Kim Bloom, principal researchers with the Flourishing in Ministry research initiative, explain why clergy are at risk of burnout. Their research has found that four types of “recovery experiences” are effective in avoiding burnout.

Burnout is real and it has real consequences. There's a great deal of research to suggest that burnout not only undermines performance, but is very detrimental to the physical and mental health of clergy and other ministry leaders.

Why are clergy at risk?

There are a number of reasons pastors are at risk of burnout. One reason is they pour themselves out into their work and often don't know when to say “enough.” There's always something more to do. There's always another need to meet. So, there's a tendency to continue to invest past the time that they need to step back and rest. There are also pressures from the congregation. People don't understand that pastors have real lives. And so, demands tend to come consistently and constantly.

All this means many pastors are always ready to work, even when they're not at work. So, they don't have an opportunity to step back, rest, and relax. Even when they're at home, they're poised as if they expect the next call or email to come through.

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What are warning signs of burnout?

One component of burnout is emotional exhaustion — the feeling that you don't have feelings, that you're flat all the time. A second component is physical exhaustion — not being able to find any energy. And a third component is a growing sense of cynicism, bitterness, or jadedness, as if you no longer care about the things you used to care about. And those three components build up over time.

The importance of recovery experiences in preventing burnout

Regular “recovery experiences” are fundamentally important to maintaining wellbeing and avoiding burnout. Our research suggests that four types of recovery experiences are important.

1. Physical relaxation. There needs to be some time every day when you are completely physically relaxed, when you’re being a total couch potato, when your muscles have no tension in them. And although it’s hard to know exactly how much physical relaxation is required, we’d suggest at least 15 minutes daily.

2. Detachment. Think of detachment as just forgetting about work. It isn’t in your mind. It isn’t even in the back of your mind. You’re thinking about something that you enjoy, something that’s pleasant. Mental detachment means that work is not a part of your thought process. We think pastors need to experience a period of detachment every day — a minimum of 15 minutes.

3. Restorative niches. We’ve coined the term “restorative niche” to describe some activity that you really enjoy, but that also requires some level of skill or mastery. Your restorative niche might be walking, or knitting, or some sports activity. Like a hobby, a restorative niche is something you want to do, but it isn’t just something that would be nice to do if you have the time. A restorative niche is an important activity, something you need to do.

There is something about enjoying something that takes both positive concentration and effort that allows you to be absorbed in the experience in a positive way. Some might describe it as a flow experience. Athletes talk about being in the zone. Our research and other research says these types of experiences are restorative for both physical and mental wellbeing. We need to build them into our lives — ideally once a week, but at a minimum, once every two weeks.

4. Spiritual disciplines. Our research finds that certain kinds of spiritual disciplines are important for avoiding burnout. But the tricky part for ministry leaders is understanding when a spiritual discipline is personally restorative and when it is actually part of their work. When pastors are reading Scripture to prepare for a sermon or a teaching, it’s good and important for their work, but not something that is going to help them avoid burnout or foster their wellbeing.

We are finding that the most important spiritual practices for avoiding burnout are ones that involve mindfulness or contemplation — those moments when you can relax and clear your mind, and concentrate on something positive, calm, inspirational, or awe-inspiring. Our research and a huge body of research in neuroscience, medicine and the social sciences tells us that the daily practice of mindfulness or contemplative activities is fundamental to wellbeing. Even five minutes can be helpful.

How can you make time for these practices?

Pastors’ lives are already extremely busy and full. So, how do you fit these things in? We recommend that you ask yourself, “What does a typical day look like for me?” Try to identify those pockets of time where you can fit in some meditation, or take a moment to relax, or create an opportunity for detachment. There may be quiet spaces in a day when some of these activities can fit into the current flow of life. Start by looking and finding those moments that already exist. Then build on those moments to create even more space.

It can also be important to meet with the leadership of the church to explain the importance of setting aside time for your personal well-being. And clergy friends play a role in encouraging one another and validating the importance of taking time for yourself.

These findings are drawn from research conducted by the [Flourishing in Ministry](#) research initiative focused on the wellbeing of clergy and their families.

Related Resources:

- [Flourishing in Ministry: Emerging Research Insights on the Well-Being of Pastors](#) (PDF)
- [3 Questions to Preserve Energy and Passion in Ministry](#) by Heather Bradley and Miriam Bamberger Grogan
- [The Myth of Balance](#) by Karoline M. Lewis

About Author

Matt Bloom

Matt Bloom is an associate professor at the Mendoza College of Business at Notre Dame University. He is the principal investigator of the [Wellbeing at Work](#) program (wellbeing.nd.edu) which studies flourishing among clergy and other caring

professions.

Kim Bloom

Kim Bloom is Senior Research Associate with the Wellbeing at Work research initiative at the University of Notre Dame which explores what makes work a positive and enriching experience for clergy and others in caring professions. Kim is a certified spiritual director, a hospice volunteer, and a local pastor in the United Methodist Church.

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