

Gaining Perspective and Recognizing Burnout

How are you doing? This simple yet complex question can yield amazing insight into how pastors are thinking and feeling right now. Denny Howard, director of counseling and coaching for Full Strength Network, a non-denominational Christian clergy family serving ministry, has spoken with more than 60 pastors over the last few weeks. Having counseled more than 6,000 pastors over 20 years, he wanted to hear directly from church leaders about how they were feeling and what they needed.

You're Not Alone

The majority of pastors Howard spoke with are disquieted in some way. Everything is more complicated in this time of coronavirus. Giving may be down, congregants or their family may be getting sick, and leading people from afar takes more time and energy. "It's okay to be a little bit weary and tired from that," said Howard.

Many of the pastors he spoke with feel like they aren't worthy of their position right now. "I think many experienced a reduced capacity to be who God has called them to be," said Howard. This can lead to disappointment and stress. Whatever the challenges or opportunities you have to connect and engage in new ways, it's also important to be aware of the mental and emotional toll the current situation can have.

Recognizing Stress Types

There's no doubt that this is a stressful time. "This is a complicated time and pastors need to pay attention to how they're doing," said Howard. Many of the daily aspects of pastoring are being done differently, which can lead to stress.

Howard describes three types of stress that pastors may be experiencing: potent, persistent, and perceptual.

Potent, or acute, stress is a reaction to a sudden and unexpected event. Pastors tend to recover quickly from this type of stress because it's recognizable and there will be people from the congregation who make contact to check on you and pray for you.

Persistent, or chronic, stress is the daily stress that slowly wears away at you. It's like a dripping faucet on a block of granite. The persistent dripping will eventually wear a hole in the stone. You can't eliminate every chronic stress, but there are ways to limit its effect on you.

Perceptual stress is the perception that pastors have of themselves that they must act a certain way, which current circumstances may discourage. You may be avoiding giving hugs, holding hands and praying with people, or having the interactions that you'd like to have.

Setting Realistic Expectations and Preventing Burnout

Setting reasonable and realistic expectations can help fight the effects of some stress. You may need to change your expectations about how you're going to shepherd during this time. First, it's important to consider if the expectations you have of yourself, your leaders, or your congregants are reasonable and realistic for this current time. Are your expectations creating a series of disappointments? This can be a warning sign that burnout may be in your future. "Burnout isn't caused by working hard. It's caused by unmet or unrealistic expectations," said Howard

Setting realistic expectations not only helps you meet your goals, but it can lead to increased fulfillment in your ministry. Howard offers some strategies that may help. Start by reflecting on what seemed disappointing to you today. Then ask the following questions:

1. What was the expectation that led to the disappointment?
2. Was that a reasonable expectation given the current circumstances?
3. Was that a realistic expectation given the current circumstances?

As an example, many pastors are recording or livestreaming their sermons every week in front of an empty sanctuary. This can be uncomfortable and unnatural, but are you feeling pressure to preach with the same energy as if the sanctuary were full of people? Is your expectation that you're going to be as good, if not better, than before coronavirus? Stop and ask yourself: Is that reasonable? Is that realistic?

Just remember, if your expectation isn't reasonable or realistic, it may be wise to modify your expectation. "When you do this, the potential for burnout goes down," said Howard.

Keeping Track of Your Progress

Setting realistic expectations is an ongoing process. While it may be a technique you implement during this time, it's a good habit to continue long-term. The free Ministry Pulse app from Full Strength Network is one tool that can help. For about three minutes every day, you can use the journal feature to keep track of how you felt about the day. This helps you spot trends or stay on track with your goals. Learn more at fullstrength.org and ministrypulse.org.

The next time you feel disappointed, ask yourself if your expectations were realistic and reasonable given the circumstance. Keeping track of your progress with this strategy can help prevent burnout.

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*The information provided in this article is intended to be helpful, but it does not constitute legal advice and is not a substitute for the advice from a licensed attorney in your area. We strongly encourage you to regularly consult with a local attorney as part of your risk management program.