

Protecting Your Emotional Health in the Ministry

Ministry leadership can take a heavy emotional toll on us. I hope that is not a surprising statement to you. Unfortunately, some of us have bought into an offshoot of the prosperity gospel that says if you are spiritual enough and have enough faith, then you should not experience such challenges in your calling. You will be a super-hero minister who is untouchable by such mundane concerns.

Like the rest of the prosperity gospel, this is unbiblical nonsense. Ministry leadership comes with a load of stress that can wear you down.

I am not a psychologist or a counselor, so I do not claim professional expertise when it comes to emotional health. What I have are experiences and observations. As a ministry leader who is in a position to observe other ministry leaders, I have become aware of certain signs of emotional unhealthiness in myself and others. We all experience these on occasion, but when they become constant companions we need to take notice. Watch out when any of these become regular feelings or behaviors in your ministry.

1. Impatience in dealing with people.
2. Frustration / feeling stymied and unfulfilled.
3. Simmering anger under the surface with occasional outbursts.
4. Lack of interest and motivation in the core activities of your ministry.
5. Letting responsibilities slip and deadlines pass by.
6. Neglecting other healthy habits such as exercise, medical checkups, learning, rest, etc.
7. Weight gain and other physical indicators of stress.
8. Coveting the situation of another ministry leader which seems “perfect” compared to yours.

The best time to address emotional health, of course, is before an emotional crisis. Here are some healthy habits to build into your lifestyle as a ministry leader. These will promote and protect emotional health through the difficulties of ministry.

1. *Rest*. I heard Rick Warren once give this simple plan for rest in the ministry: “Divert daily, withdraw weekly, and abandon annually.” I.e., build something into your daily routine that refreshes you, take a real day off each week, and use your vacation time to actually get away from your ministry context and responsibilities. By the way, if you struggle with the theology and practice of rest, the book to read is [The Art of Rest](#) by Adam Mabry.

2. *Spiritual disciplines*. It is easy for these to become stale. I find that I need an occasional change in how I read and meditate on Scripture, pray, and worship. When I start approaching these as tasks (something I *have* to do) rather than as opportunities to enjoy the presence of the Lord (something I *get* to do), it is time for a reset. Change it up. Adjust when and how you spend time with the Lord. Let it be fresh again!

3. *Recreation*. This means refreshment by means of some agreeable activity. What do you enjoy doing that leaves you feeling better (re-created) for having done it? Do it! It does not have to be complicated or expensive. Simple activities like a walk or reading a book for fun or watching a movie can bring regular refreshment into your life.

4. *Friendships and social interactions*. Emotionally unhealthy people tend to isolate themselves. Ministry leaders with long, productive tenures tend to have a network of healthy friendships outside of their immediate ministry context. Are you spending time with people who refresh you?

5. *Managing devices*. Our digital devices are wonderful tools for ministry. They are also tyrants that eat up our time and keep us in work mode too much. You must decide what your boundaries are for using the tool and minimizing the tyrant. If you do not set your boundaries, other people will do it for you based on their desires, not your best interests.

6. *Defining priorities and responsibilities*. If you try to do too many things, your emotional health will suffer. You will put too much pressure on yourself, especially if you are naturally a people-pleaser. So, distinguish between the things you must do and do well and the things that are optional. Make sure your time is allocated accordingly. It is okay to say no to things that are not your responsibility.

7. *Retreats and sabbaticals*. A retreat is not a conference or seminar. It is a time of stepping away from your ministry context for rest and renewal. A sabbatical is an extended period of retreat that also includes professional development. A good sabbatical results in a reinvigorated minister and ministry. Take advantage of retreat and sabbatical opportunities when they come your way. If you have convinced yourself you are too busy or important for such things, then you probably believe other falsehoods, too!

Finally, if you are at the point of crisis, do not keep doing the same things and expect the situation to get better. Step back and get help. Talk to a trusted colleague or mentor. Make that appointment with an experienced professional Christian counselor. See your doctor regarding possible physiological contributors. Neglect is a bad strategy for restoring your emotional health. It is not a sign of weakness to get help; it is a sign of strength and resilience.

Brothers and sisters who give leadership to Christ's church, do not ignore the emotional toll that ministry leadership can take. Watch for symptoms, develop healthy practices, and take the necessary steps for your own well-being and for the health of your ministry over the long haul.