

Preventing Burnout in Ministry—A Health & Wellness Approach by David P. Mann*

I became a Christian in the early 1970s, and during that time there was a saying that seemed to capture the fervor of new commitment: “I’d rather burn out than rust out for God.” This seemed like a wonderful rally cry for those who desired to follow the Lord closely with all of the zeal we could muster rather than simply being a person who claimed the title without putting into practice the things necessary for the Christian life (see James 3:22-25). As with most clichés, there seemed to be another message within the message that I’ve reflected on over time. What has stood out to me is that either way the common theme is *out* (whether by burning *out* or rusting *out*). What is missing is the call to a balanced life wherein one will neither burn out nor rust out as we serve Him.

Over the years that I have served in the pastorate, in chaplaincy, and in outpatient clinical counseling ministry, I have seen Christian leaders whose passion for the Lord and his work lose their zeal and come to a place wherein they are questioning both their walk with Him and their call to ministry. They have never been close to rusting out but have most definitely come to a place where they have either burned out or, as I’ve been known to say a time or two, have become very “crispy around the edges.” In the worst case scenarios, these leaders have even fallen into moral difficulties that have cost them their ministries.

But how can this happen? To answer this question we’ll need to gain a brief understanding of the term “burnout” as well as its application to Christian ministry. We’ll also take a look at how one cannot only prevent burnout but also achieve a healthy, balanced life through giving attention to a wellness model of living.

Burnout Defined

The phenomenon of burnout was present long before Dr. Herbert Freudenberger coined the phrase in 1974 to describe behaviors he observed among staff members of human service agencies. Working with people and programs is draining work whether it is in clinical or ministry settings and

* David P. Mann (Ph.D., University of Akron; LPCC-S), is Associate Professor of Counseling at ATS.

Preventing Burnout in Ministry: A Health and Wellness Approach

caring individuals can become prone to experiencing burnout (James & Gilliland, 2005).

Burnout has been defined as “exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). When dealing with burnout, people feel as if they are trying to muster enough energy not to keep their heads above water, so to speak, but rather to *keep just one nostril above water!*

Symptoms of Burnout

The experience of burnout is one that involves all levels of our being—physical, behavioral, emotional, interpersonal, attitudinal, and spiritual. *Physically* persons may experience chronic exhaustion, muscular tension, susceptibility to physical illnesses such as colds, and a host of other symptoms. I’ve shared in a number of settings that our bodies can give us indications that we need to attend to the stresses of our lives *if* we would but listen. Instead of choosing to not “burn the candle” at both ends, we look for how we might *acquire more wax!* Some of the *behaviors* that accompany burnout include the loss of creativity and enjoyment that was once present, frequent changing or quitting ministry positions, vacillating between over-involvement and detachment, and errors in judgment. *Emotionally* one can experience depression, anxiety and panic attacks, feelings of meaninglessness and emptiness, mood swings, irritability, and even thoughts of suicide as a means of escape. *Interpersonal* symptoms include the inability to cope with minor interpersonal problems (such as constructive criticism), marital problems, distance or enmeshment with others (i.e., personal boundary problems), and withdrawal from friends and family. *Attitudes* are affected by burnout and can be evidenced by cynicism, perfectionism, boredom, pessimism, callousness, complaints about time and money, and veiled hostility in humor (which may be evidenced in joking statements such as “I love the ministry, it’s the people I hate”). *Spiritual* symptoms can include a loss of meaning and purpose, feeling as if one has lost their faith or calling by God, detachment from others of the faith, lack of desire to practice spiritual disciplines such as prayer and scripture reading, and even an “I alone am left Lord” approach to ministry (see 1 Kings 19:10). (James & Gilliland, 2005; Greenstone & Leviton, 2002).

Alligators and Assessment

Someone once said, “It’s hard to concentrate on draining the swamp when you’re up to your neck in alligators” (Anonymous). That is a fairly accurate depiction of people experiencing burnout. It is difficult to see where

we've gotten off-track when we are struggling to deal with all the "alligators" of our lives but it is necessary to make an assessment of where we are currently so that we'll be able to chart out a healthier path for the future.

I recently taught a pastoral counseling class for students preparing for pastoral and other Christian leadership roles. One of my course assignments was that students take a minimum of a half day retreat and write a short paper reflecting on the experience. My purpose? I believe that it is important to begin practices early that can be repeated throughout a lifetime of ministry to encourage health and wellness and avoid problems such as burnout. The feedback received from the class on this project has shown me that it is necessary to stop on occasion, invite the Lord into those times of retreat, and in conjunction with Him take a look at the various areas of our lives to be refreshed and to realign priorities.

In the Gospel of Mark we read the following: "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: 'Everyone is looking for you!'" (1:35-37). We are ever learning from our Lord and ever discovering things about ourselves as we read scripture. In this passage I believe we can see clearly that Jesus spent regular times apart from others and the busyness of ministry to spend time with the Father. I believe we also see in this passage an approach to life (as evidenced by the disciples' response) that many in ministry can find themselves practicing—a propensity toward being driven by the urgent (i.e., perceived needs of ministry) at the expense of the necessary (i.e., ordering our inner world in time of prayer and solitude).

The beginning point for avoiding burnout, then, is a thoughtful assessment of what constitutes health and wellness and what areas we find ourselves needing to address. To begin this assessment, we'll need some understanding of what health and wellness are.

Health and Wellness Defined

Health is defined as "the condition of being sound in body, mind, or spirit" as well as a "flourishing condition" and *wellness* being "the quality or state of being in good health especially as an actively sought goal" (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). This flourishing state of soundness in body, mind, and spirit as an actively sought goal seems to coincide with Jesus' call to the weary and burdened in Matthew 11:28-29 to take on His approach to living that leads to the abundant living spoken of in John 10:10 ("I am come that they

might have life, *and have it to the full*"¹). From a Christian worldview, we might further describe health and wellness as akin to achieving *maturity* in our lives.

Christian maturity involves accomplishing that to which God has uniquely called each of us. The Biblical word for mature is *telios*, which is translated *perfect* in the King James Version and *mature* in most recent versions. A thing is *teleios*, if it realizes the purpose for which it was planned; a person is *perfect* if he or she realizes the purpose for which he or she was created and sent into the world. So then, a person will be *teleios* if they fulfill the purpose for which they were created (Benner, 1985; Barclay, 1975).

What Constitutes a Mature Life of Health and Wellness?

I don't recall where I first heard it, but someone once challenged pastors and Christian leaders to lead by example with the following statement: "If it's a mist in the pulpit, it's a fog in the pew." To achieve the kind of life that gives evidence of health and wellness, we must gain an understanding of what creates such a life and be intentional about practicing the principles that bring it into being. To come to such an understanding, it is best to think in terms of balancing the major dimensions of our lives: intellectual, physical, emotional, occupational, social, and spiritual.

Intellectual

The major dimensions of our lives intersect and interact with each other but for the sake of discussion here, I will describe them individually. The *intellectual* dimension of our lives involves what we might commonly refer to as what happens between our ears—our thought life. The Bible speaks quite often about the importance of this particular dimension. One example is found in Ephesians 4:23 where the vital link between putting off the old self and putting on the new can be found in the renewal of our minds. Philippians 4:8-9 challenges us to take control of what we think upon with the result being a positive impact upon our lives. These and a number of other scripture passages encourage us to give attention to what we think about and meditate on. It is also important to challenge our minds by developing a lifelong learning mentality wherein we learn because we are curious about life and have a desire to grow. One safeguard against burnout is developing this area of life by reading for relaxation, taking a new class, going to seminars, and nurturing curiosity about all kinds of things (e.g., nature, art, science). Another safeguard against burnout is to challenge the type of thinking that predisposes one to feeling overwhelmed. Many of the things that we tell ourselves that have the words *should* or *ought* in

them are generally going to be unrealistic expectations that we have of ourselves (and others) that create frustration as we fail time and again to meet these ideals.

Physical

The *physical* dimension is the one most prone to feeling like I am meddling. The reason for this? Many of us struggle with a bit more body mass than we might like to admit. We might even joke a bit about that fact that we're not being overweight, we're just height-impaired for our size. The down side of living in a land of plenty that has a pace at near the speed of light is that we get much busyness but little time to plan for proper nutrition and reasonable exercise. Connected to the *shoulds* and *oughts* mentioned above, we need to get away from unrealistic expectations (the stuff of which New Year's Resolutions are made) and develop some healthy living principles that we can live with for a lifetime. Over the past year or so I have made some of these changes and am feeling the benefit of them. My annual visit to the doctor had a new twist to our past conversations on the extra pounds I was carrying. The word "diabetes" came up in predicting the outcome of sustaining the same lifestyle I had been accustomed to. Through making changes in diet and exercise, our conversation was much more positive at the next annual visit. Caring for our bodies is spoken of in Scripture more than once and pointing these out here might seem like an induced guilt trip which is the last thing that would be needed. I encourage you to find little ways to change that will accumulate over time into being more healthy physically. I also encourage you to connect strengths with weaknesses to accomplish your goals. For example, I regularly have morning devotions (that involve the reading of Scripture and some devotional material and prayer) but rarely had an exercise routine. I seem to stay more focused in my prayer time when not sitting perfectly still so now after reading, I walk on my treadmill and pray. Another way to connect more than one dimension would be to walk with someone else regularly or join a sports team (this connects the physical with the social dimensions). The bottom line is that proper rest, exercise, and diet safeguards the body from built up stress and by doing so increases one's ability to ward off burnout.

Emotional

The *emotional* dimension involves our inner world of emotions and the things that factor into positive and negative feelings. Interconnected with our thought life, we need to be careful how we talk to ourselves about life. In other words, our emotions are strongly influenced by what we think. As noted above, when we think of positive things, we have a sense of peace and general

contentment. On the other hand, if we choose to live in what I refer to as the “what if neighborhood,” we will be filled with anxiety. The “what if neighborhood” is simply this: persons who tend to think about everything based on what *could* happen to them or others (i.e., “what if...”) will mentally work out all the scenarios in their minds so as to have a plan *just in case* one of these negative situations arise. This might seem like a plausible plan for being ready for all events, however, what this really does is cause the person the emotional stress and strain associated with a myriad of situations that most likely *will never happen!* There is great benefit in developing a positive attitude toward life and in taking care of this important dimension. Taking care of the emotional dimension of our lives includes developing a healthy sense of humor, accepting life as it is not as one thinks it should be, learning to forgive oneself and others for failings so as not to develop unrelenting guilt, shame, and resentment, and developing an interpretation of life’s events that helps to foster growth (see James 1:2-3 and 2 Corinthians 4:8-12; 12:7-10).

Occupational

Often overlooked is the *occupational* dimension of developing a healthy lifestyle. This dimension deals with finding satisfaction and a sense of worth in one’s work without basing one’s sense of worth on one’s work. It is a balancing act to be sure. When we are talking about professions such as pastoral ministry the waters can become murkier yet as it is very *easy to confuse one’s work for God with one’s walk with God*. When this happens, the pastor’s devotional time can become an extension of his or her sermon preparation time and by so doing can rob them of much needed personal, spiritual renewal. Workaholism can be just as much a part of the pastorate as it is in corporate sectors of society. We need, therefore, to be careful when working inordinate amounts of hours at the church not to assume we will receive a “get out of stress free” card since it is “for the Lord.” Part of staying healthy in the occupational realm is learning to say one of the most powerful little words around—“no”—and find that the world does not come crumbling down as a result of it. Avoiding burnout necessitates that we develop an approach to work that is healthy and fits with the other dimensions. One suggestion for developing a healthy approach to work is taking control of one’s calendar so as to be sure the significant people (family & friends) and things (exercise, rest, outside interests) are given needed time. Discovering one’s best and worst times of the day for particular activities/projects and scheduling around this is another suggestion. For example, if you are the most mentally sharp in the beginning of the day, plan for the most brain-intensive tasks to be accomplished then and save the less taxing

activities for later in the day if possible. Taking breaks from work by getting away from one's work space for a bit can create space within the day to breathe. If you are prone to eating your lunch at your desk or work station so you don't lose any time on projects, try doing something different that gets you away mentally and physically (e.g., take lunch to a break room; go out for lunch; go for a walk).

Social

The *social* dimension involves developing relationships with others that are meaningful and mutually beneficial. We have been created to be in relationship with God and others and so budgeting our time wisely to be able to connect with others is vital for our health. I will note, however, that the *amount* of time needed with others varies greatly between those who lean toward introversion and those from the extraverted camp. For introverted persons, being in interpersonal situations tends to drain their emotional "batteries" whereas for extraverted people, it seems the more time spent with others, the better! Different is just different as it applies to the introversion-extraversion continuum and each one needs to find what is most restorative to them. The social dimension can also be enhanced by interacting with people who are very different from oneself such as those from other cultures, ages, and lifestyles. Developing relationships with others who have similar interests is also very valuable. In my first pastorate I discovered the tremendous value of developing friendships outside of my normal circle. I enjoyed playing racquetball and so I joined a local YMCA where I met up with others who enjoyed playing the game as well. I was not their pastor, I was fellow racquetball player and friend. The relationships I developed over time with these folks helped balance out my life especially when I would take life a bit too seriously (and felt the stress of doing so). This is also another example of the interaction between dimensions—in this case, the social and physical.

Spiritual

Nurturing the *spiritual* dimension of health and wellness involves practices that create space for us to meet with God and be transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ. The classical spiritual disciplines (Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* delineates a number of these) can position us to have such encounters with God and create the opportunity for change. One of the corporate disciplines, worship, can involve both the spiritual and social dimensions as we gather with others in the pursuit of nurturing this dimension. We must be careful not to confuse the busyness of doing spiritual activities with

Preventing Burnout in Ministry: A Health and Wellness Approach

being in His presence for renewal. Spending time in God's presence in personal prayer can be a source of refreshing from life's stresses and a means of sharing our concerns with Him. Meditating upon the Scriptures can also serve to not only buffer us from the stresses of life, but also to foster change in our attitudes toward these stressors.

Conclusion

Burnout is a phenomenon to which persons who are passionate about their work/ministry can become vulnerable if they are not careful. Symptoms of burnout can manifest themselves on multiple levels of our lives so we need a prevention approach that balances intellectual, physical, emotional, occupational, social, and spiritual dimensions.

References

- Barclay, W. (1975). *The gospel of Matthew, Vol.1*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.
- Benner, D.G. (Ed.) (1985). *Baker encyclopedia of psychology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.
- Greenstone, J.L., & Leviton, S.C. (2002). *Elements of crisis intervention: Crises and how to respond to them, 2nd ed.* Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- James, R.K., & Gilliland, B.E. (2005). *Crisis intervention strategies, 5th Ed.* Pacific Grove, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.