

Reasons for Burnout

Increase in Clergy Burnout

The numbers of clergy experiencing burnout and depression has increased for a number of reasons.

Most faith communities face financial stresses. Staff reductions have forced many faith leaders to take on more duties. Many clergy feel pressured to raise money and run capital campaigns which leaves less time for performing their pastoral responsibilities. Seminary graduates are leaving school with more personal debt than previous generations.

With more duties, many clergy report being overwhelmed with more work and responsibilities. The workload and lack of support can lead to feelings of isolation, burnout and depression.

Because of the stigma surrounding mental illness, clergy often self-medicate instead of reaching out for help when feeling anxious, overwhelmed or stressed out.

Pastor Burnout by the Numbers

"Members of the clergy now suffer from obesity, hypertension and depression at rates higher than most Americans. In the last decade, their use of antidepressants has risen, while their life expectancy has fallen. Many would change jobs if they could."

(New York Times, August 1, 2010)

- 13% of active pastors are divorced.
- 33% felt burned out within their first five years of ministry.
- 40% of pastors and 47% of spouses are suffering from burnout, frantic schedules, and/or unrealistic expectations.
- 45% of pastors say that they've experienced depression or burnout to the extent that they needed to take a leave of absence from ministry.
- 50% feel unable to meet the needs of the job.
- 57% would leave the pastorate if they had somewhere else to go or some other vocation they could do.
- 70% don't have any close friends.
- 80% believe that pastoral ministry affects their families negatively.
- 90% work more than 50 hours a week.
- 1,500 pastors leave their ministries each month due to burnout, conflict, or moral failure.
- Doctors, lawyers and clergy have the most problems with drug abuse, alcoholism and suicide.

1. The 24/7 mentality. Many pastors can't "turn off" work in their mind. Even on their days off, they are waiting for that next telephone call or next crisis. Thus, they never relax.

2. Conflict. Conflict is not the problem but how conflict is handled. If congregational conflict and criticisms are ongoing, pastors wear down. They eventually burn out.

3. Expectations. No pastor can meet all the expectations of church members. But many try and they burn out as a result.

4. Unwillingness to let go. Many clergy are reluctant to ask others to help.

5. No friends. Many pastors fail to develop meaningful friendships, people with whom they can "let their hair down." Without such outlets, burnout is more likely.

6. Not suited for some tasks. This issue is similar to trying to meet everyone's expectations. First, such attempts are physically impossible. Second, pastors are not equipped to do everything well. But many try and many fail.

7. No life outside the church. A large number of pastors have no meaningful hobbies or recreational activities outside the church.

What Clergy Can Do

One of the most difficult challenges facing clergy is setting healthy boundaries. Each of the reasons for burnout listed above relate in some way to clergy burnout. It is important to be aware of the contributing factors that affect one's own spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical well-being.

Join a clergy group to get feedback when dealing with a stressful situation and to find support.

Exercise and a healthy diet are often neglected especially because of time constraints and the potlucks or food readily available at congregational events.

Develop relationships for yourself, your spouse and your family independent of the congregation.

Take Sabbath time to stay grounded in your spiritual life. Create a sacred space in your office and/or home.

Clergy can be affected when dealing with the trauma of others. Self-awareness of vulnerabilities can help with the impact of secondary trauma.

It is important to seek help to process post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) symptoms and address addictions or other means of self-medication.

What Congregations Can Do

Feeling overwhelmed by stress takes a toll on the body leading to a number of physical and emotional symptoms. Congregational leaders need to be alert to the warning signs of stress. Share your concerns with others.

- Make sure your clergyperson is taking time off for Sabbath and vacation.
- Don't schedule meetings every night of the week.
- Give pastors time to spend with their families.
- Welcome new pastors and their families.
- Be an emotional support for your faith leaders instead of just expecting it from them.
- Handle conflicts in a loving, caring manner.
- Encourage pastors to foster friendships outside the faith community.
- Respect the privacy for the clergy family.

I don't think a lot of the folks in the pews realize or think of their clergyperson as a human who has the same vulnerabilities as all of us.

Kelly Wittich

Clergy Self-Care



How Clergy and Congregations Can Prevent Burnout and Support Healthy Living

Mental Health Ministries
www.MentalHealthMinistries.net