

# BURNOUT HAPPENS

By Al Ells, M.C.



You are looking at a desperate man. He is in over his head. Overwhelmed, anxious, and unable to sleep, he is easily distracted from his work, which he dreads. His wife and children walk on eggshells around him. He is a pastor. This situation is not uncommon.

A 1998 Focus on the Family report found that 80 percent of pastors and 84 percent of pastors' wives are discouraged or dealing with depression. Shouldering responsibility from the congregation, elder board, and family, pastors often burn out from the pressure.

I will never forget when one such pastor called me in desperation, on the brink of quitting the ministry altogether. "I just can't hold it together anymore," he said. "I have a hard time praying and feeling passionate about preaching or ministering to others." His wife even held back sharing her concerns about him due to her own struggles with her responsibilities in ministry.

When the external pressures of ministry exceed one's internal coping resources, *burnout* happens. Psychologist Herbert Freudenberger, author of *The High Cost of Achievement*, and coiner of the term *burnout* defines it as "a state of fatigue or frustration brought about by devotion to a cause, a way of life, or relationship that failed to produce the expected reward."

Burnout is real and it is serious. Recognizing that will help to fight it. Galatians 6:9 says, "let us not become weary in doing good for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." I pray the following points will help you along.

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## 7 TIPS FOR AVOIDING BURNOUT

**YOU ARE AT RISK** | Many pastors fall victim to burnout because they do not think they are vulnerable to it. Burnout and depression are widespread in ministry because of the high expectation to perform. People expect more of clergy, and clergy expect more of themselves. This higher standard is scriptural (James 3:1, I Timothy 3 & 4), but our human nature tends to take it to an unhealthy level.

**GOD IS YOUR ULTIMATE BOSS (I Samuel 15:24)** | Do not try to be all things to all people all the time. Preaching the Word is a pastor's priority; popularity is not (Proverbs 29:25). Be kind and compassionate, not codependent. Christ never worried about tickling people's ears, because he was concentrating on the will of the Father. If you follow after His example, you may still have hard times, but they won't be self-inflicted.

**TWO WORDS: BALANCE AND BOUNDARIES** | A balanced life contains scheduled time for work, play, family, friends, prayer and personal care. Ministry leaders often max out their time with work, pushing everything else aside. Achieving balance means establishing boundaries in the following areas:

**Keep the office at the office.** If you have a home office, set up “office hours”. If this is too difficult, then just have one office at the church.

**Don't talk shop.** Many pastors' wives have ministries of their own, and have difficulty keeping them separate from their personal lives. A marriage needs cultivation to thrive, so do not neglect it.

**Study time is not the same as devotions (Isaiah 40:31; Exodus 33:7).** A pastor needs communion with the Lord on His own behalf. If prayer for your congregation or preparation for a Sunday message edges out personal meditation time, you risk growing out of touch with God.

**Play time is not ministry (Mark 6:31).** Pastors have a passion for saving the lost. However, you cannot effectively minister when you are fatigued. You are mismanaging both your personal and professional lives by running yourself ragged. So take time for yourself and do not feel guilty about it. God will renew your spirit and energy, enabling you to be a better pastor.

**Take time off.** Stress experts recommend weekly, quarterly and annual respites. Finishing well, or completing your ministry in grace, requires scheduled periods of refreshment and reflection away from ministry pressures.

**BE HEALTH CONSCIOUS (1 Corinthians 3:16)** | Burnout is not only an erosion of spirit but also sheer physical exhaustion. A healthy body wards off negative stress and increases your ability to deal with pressure. The resources are out there for living a healthier lifestyle, but your resolve will come from the Lord.

**DON'T GO IT ALONE (Psalms 25:18; 106:44; Proverbs 18:24; 27:10)** | The Fuller Institute of Church Growth reports that 70 percent of pastors do not have someone they consider a close friend. Develop friendships with others in ministry and go out of your way to maintain them. Isolation adds more stress and leads to burnout.

**BE AN OPEN BOOK (James 5:16, Proverbs 28:13)** | Secret areas of pain, problems or sin will cause a significant increase in stress. Secrets always carry the stress of shame until confessed. I knew of a pastor that confessed to visiting internet porn sites. Relief and accountability came with the sharing. Confession to another and embracing a plan of change will reduce stress even if the problem or sin is not yet conquered.

**FOCUS ON YOUR STRENGTHS (Exodus 18:17; Ephesians 4:11-12)** | A pastor cannot feasibly wear all the hats of ministry: leading worship, preaching, teaching, visiting new members, and calling on shut-ins. Pray for God to show you what you are mainly called and gifted to do. Then you can hone your strengths and delegate the rest. What a load off!

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