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ARTICLE

Burnout: How to Manage It and How to Prevent It

Advice from church leaders on staying energized

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We've all experienced it—burnout. Sometimes it creeps up on us. Sometimes we embrace it as the consequence of our exceptional work ethic. Sometimes it's just difficult to avoid when life events coincide beyond our control. No matter how or why we experience it, burnout doesn't have to become *just part of the job*.

To help you manage and prevent burnout, we've asked a few of our contributors for advice. Avoiding burnout takes intention. We hope what they have shared helps you become intentional in preventing burnout and staying energized.

Joel Comiskey, Cell Church Coach and Consultant, joelcomiskeygroup.com

I overworked one spring to the point of exhaustion. I didn't faithfully keep my day off, didn't take care of my body, and eventually caught bronchitis. I had a teaching commitment at the time that I couldn't cancel. I remember the sleepless nights wheezing and coughing, knowing that I had to teach the next day. As I look back at those exhausting days, I now realize that I tried to cram way too much work into a limited time period and ended up imbalanced. In my desire to fulfill certain goals, I didn't keep my regular day off, so my family time suffered, and I didn't spend quality time with the Lord. I learned that I must maintain certain priorities in my life if I want to succeed over the long haul. And great leadership starts with life and balance.

Spending daily time with Jesus: If leaders are going to be effective and fruitful, they must first take care of themselves spiritually. I'm convinced that the most vital aid comes from spending quality time in God's presence each day. I believe, in fact, that the most important discipline of the Christian life is spending daily time in his presence.

Resting one day per week: God made the human body to run effectively for only six days out of the week—not seven. Genesis 2:2–3 declares, “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.” After those six days, we just naturally run out of gas. If we go against God's norms, we'll eventually pay a costly price. I don't believe any of us are so indispensable that we can neglect our own bodies and souls by not taking a day off.

Long-haul Leadership: Effective leaders minister from the overflow of their lives, rather than talent, technique, or persuasion. But it does require careful cultivation of time with God, time of rest, and time with those who are most intimate. And of course, the goal is for Jesus to receive the glory as leaders remain in him and bear fruit in the present and in the future.

Lisa Crenshaw, Associate Pastor, Victory Church, Audubon, PA

I've been in some sort of ministry leadership for about three decades now and most of the time I love what I do! There are a few rhythms I've established that seem to keep me motivated, happy, and productive as I lead small group ministry for our church.

The first is regular personal contact with our LifeGroup leaders. Over a four-month period, I connect personally by phone or in-person with each leader to see how he or she is doing and to pray with him or her. The relational connection allows me to see what Jesus is doing in their lives and I am reminded why I do this!

Secondly, I tend to be a bit driven. I decided to allow myself some slack when it comes to ministry work. This means I take clear days off. I take my vacations, and during COVID, if I am mentally worn out at 4 pm, or sometimes by noon, I call it a day. There is always one more person to contact or one more task to complete in ministry, but it will all get done. This is helpful because I now step back without guilt.

Thirdly, I find time spent with other ministry leaders either in-person, over the phone, or even through podcasts and blogs, helps me see things from a new perspective and keeps me moving forward in ministry.

Allen White, Small Groups Ministry Coach, allenwhite.org

Practicing the Daily Office

For a few years now, I take a break from my work twice a day to reconnect with God in a brief prayer time. Drawing from Pete Scazzero's teaching in [Emotionally Healthy Spirituality](#), I pause for about 10 minutes—once in the morning and once midafternoon. In these ten minutes, I practice silence for a few minutes, read a short passage of Scripture and/or a short devotional, ponder a question, then end my time with silence. I don't usually pray about specific things. I just focus on my time with God.

Some people misunderstand silence. This is not transcendental meditation. By being silent and quieting my mind, I am saying that God doesn't need me to think about anything, do anything, solve any problem, or formulate a strategy. I can spend those moments with my Abba Father with no expectations or demands.

What I've found is that this time intentionally reconnects the work I'm doing with the work God is doing in me. I've also discovered that this practice gives me peace and makes me steady even during rocky times of my life. As pastors, our work is consequential. It's easy to charge into the work. But, doing the work of God without the power of God leads to burnout.

Brad Himes, founder of [The Groups Conference](#)

Burnout can come in many forms, at different times, and from a variety of directions; however, I find that being proximate to others is key to navigate these challenges.

First and foremost, I get proximate to Jesus. I find great strength when returning to the gospels as I revisit how Jesus handled the challenges he faced throughout his time on earth. I look to see how he responded to others, his prayers to his Father, and how he processed the barriers ahead of him.

Next, I get proximate to those close to me, the ones who know me best. These are people who I greatly trust and are willing to speak truth into my life even when it is hard. By knowing both my strengths and weaknesses, they can offer specific guidance in unique ways that connect to me.

Finally, I get proximate to those who I may only know through books, lectures, or other forms of media. I make it a habit to seek out understanding from others who have faced great challenges and reflect on the lessons they share. These role models include people alive and deceased, as I've learned I can be mentored through the writings of leaders past and present. In the end, remember not to journey through times of stress and burnout alone. That is a lie the enemy wants us to believe. Instead, lean into your relationship with God and with others.

Ben Reed, Adult Ministry Pastor, Mission Community Church, Gilbert, AZ

An excerpt from [Keeping Your Eye in the Right Spot](#)

I've found myself growing weary and fainthearted recently. With piles of emails awaiting me, kids at home doing school, and ongoing commitments 3-4 nights/week, I've felt pretty scorched at the edges. The way I know I'm growing weary is not that I get physically tired...it's that I get physically short on patience. Everything becomes an interruption, and people get in the way of what I'm trying to do. I've heard it said that one of the best ways to check your heart and test whether you're growing in spiritual maturity or not is to look at your closest relationships and ask yourself, "Am I growing more patient and loving? Or less?"

Instead of looking at Jesus, my eyes drifted to the work that I still needed to do. The emails, meetings, and events. The homework, tests, and projects.

When I keep my eyes on Jesus, it gives me the freedom to be ruthlessly present with whoever and whatever is in front of me. Because as I keep my eyes on Jesus, it helps me to not grow weary or fainthearted, impatient and frustrated with those around me. I grow weary when I think things depend on me. Keeping my eyes on Jesus allows me to trust that the work will still be there when I return. That Jesus will build his church, and that he doesn't "need" me (though he chooses to use each of us). This doesn't exempt me from doing work. In fact, it empowers me, realizing that I've got the King of the universe working in and through me.

Peace only happens in my life when I surrender to the Prince of Peace.

The moment I put my eyes squarely on my work, the more weary and fainthearted I become. I have to trust Jesus is going to take care of that as long as I keep my eyes on him and keep moving forward."

Check out Ben's full blog post [here](#).

David Myles, Life Groups & Leader Development Pastor, New Hope Church, New Hope, MN

One of the things I have found helpful is what a leader/mentor shared with me early in ministry. It is having a Personal Retreat Day (or PRD). This is not a catch-up day, but simply a day to spend time alone with the Lord. It's taking Jesus up on his invitation in Mark 6:31, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest while." It's a time to get away from the routine and busyness of life and have reflection. There always seems to be much to get done, so taking a whole day strengthens and stretches our faith and trust muscles. PRDs may seem inconsequential, but when you miss them (as I have) you feel the impact.

Here are a few keys points to consider when planning your PRD:

Location: Find a location off-site from church and home. Yes, it would seem like you can just shut the world out wherever you normally work from, but it doesn't work that way. You see everything that needs to be done and you don't disengage from "go" or "on" mode.

Location suggestions include:

- Ask another pastor if you can campout at their church in a classroom
- Ask to use someone's home or cabin
- Go to a monastery or convent with a retreat center
- Go camping

Schedule: I suggest scheduling it into your calendar with light planning. Then be okay with allowing the Lord to change your plans. There have been times where I just fell asleep. In the beginning, I was hard on myself, but realized the Lord was giving me Elijah's discipline of rest and eating—I needed it.

Retreat Day:

Part 1: Read a whole chunk of Scripture and just let it feed your soul and relationship with the Lord and not prepping for a message, teaching, or life group lesson.

Part 2: Review the previous month and look ahead to the next. Socrates stated, "the unexamined life is not worth living". Psalm 90:12 says, "teach us to number our days that we might gain a heart of wisdom." Though this seems like work, there is a reason, which leads us to...

Part 3: Put together a monthly calendar to share prayer requests with your monthly prayer team. It has been encouraging when I've not done this (i.e., skipped PRDs) and received an email from one of my family intercessors saying they miss having it to prayer for me.

Part 4: Have an extended time of prayer using prayer books as helps. I will tell you; this time always goes so much quicker than you imagine or want. It has been here, with the Lord adjusting my perspective, attitude, insight that I have prayed, listened, sat in solitude and silence and had him refresh, renew, love, and heal my tired soul. As I write this, I long for this time, and keeping it real, wonder why I'm not always consistent or even have rescheduled them.

Worship: The other part that helps me with burnout is worship, which I combine with my PRDs. It is good to sing, there is victory in our praise. Singing Tasha Cobbs', "Not by might, not by power, by your Spirit God, send your Spirit God!" lifts my soul and centers me on the Triune God we know, love, and serve. Worship is something that has brought the African American community and myself through many trials, tribulations and the like, and for me it continues today. As I look at the events transpiring in our nation and world; and the church's response and reaction, I have to (or should say, "get to") go to the Rock of my Salvation.

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