



Strategies for Pastoral Resilience

Sarah Ann Bixler and Hyacinth Stevens

Faith leaders sometimes reach a point of feeling that their energy is burning out. Their sense of connection to God, themselves, and others is waning. We might imagine Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Salome in this position in Mark 16, when they go to visit Jesus' burial site. Were they depleted of energy, perhaps feeling hopeless, disconnected from themselves or God? Yet in the midst of this, they did the one thing they knew to do—enact the spiritual practice of anointing Jesus' body. And as they were faithful in this practice, they found Jesus waiting there to meet them.

WHAT IS BURNOUT?

Burnout occurs when people experience chronic emotional and physical exhaustion, plus a growing sense of depersonalization in their work—feeling distanced from themselves and those they minister to.¹ Pastors experiencing burnout have reduced work effectiveness, difficulty making decisions, decreased creativity, and more difficulty adjusting to changes. Over time, burnout can have serious physical and psychological effects.

When we are in the midst of a crisis, when we are stretched to our emotional, psychological, and spiritual limits, we can easily become fatigued and overwhelmed and feel burned out. Pastors are already more susceptible than the general population to burnout because of being in a caregiving profession. If not addressed, burnout can lead to more serious reactions that jeopardize pastors' long-term health and wholeness.

Studies suggest that spending five minutes a day in a contemplative spiritual practice can help resist burnout and build resilience.

RESILIENCE

To be resilient implies not only surviving and coping but thriving in times of adversity. It involves maintaining one's ability to live with hope and joy. Resilience also means to bend; it is an engineering term. It is rooted not in a previously known strength but rather in a sustaining grace that draws us into nimbleness amid adversity without breaking. The circumstances surrounding and testing our resilience may alter us and create a pathway for transformed living and thinking. We are not deformed by our experiences but instead are transformed.

The season in our life that requires resilience can also be identified as “journey space” traveling into the unknown.

- Consider creating some *personal journey questions* as you navigate your experience, such as, Where is the hope? What has become clear? What is not clear? What is the path forward?
- An aspect of thriving in adversity is *trusting God in our challenge* (Isaiah 43:19); the parts of us that are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14) are ignited, and our capacity is expanded to continue in purpose, practice, and destiny despite difficulties.

According to clinical psychologist Karen Carr, personal resilience is “staying fixed on a higher purpose, motivated by the love of God, our neighbor and the world, and supported by friends. Strength is built when we believe and receive God's unconditional love deeply and [as well as God's] promise never to abandon us as we day by day follow Jesus, listening to Him even as the Holy Spirit Comforts, Counsels, and Guides.”²



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1. Matt Bloom, “Flourishing in Ministry: Clergy, Ministry Life and Wellbeing,” Flourishing in Ministry Project (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2017).

2. “Personal Resilience,” in *Trauma and Resilience: A Handbook*, ed. Charlie Shaeffer and Frauke C. Schaeffer (n.p.: Condeo Press, 2012), 93.

- *Joining or starting a care network with ministerial colleagues* can be helpful. During times of gathering, invite people to share personal best practices that support emotional resiliency.

Using resources like the Spiritual Resilience Checklist from *Trauma and Resilience: A Handbook* (Condeo Press, 2012; available online at www.TraumaResilience.com) is an excellent way for ministerial colleagues to support each other.

- A *body scan* is a five-minute spiritual practice that can help you build resilience and resist burnout. Begin with slow, deep breaths that remind you of the sustaining breath of God. Focus your attention on each part of your body, one at a time, moving from toes to head and back down again. Close your practice by bringing your attention back to your breath, releasing any tension you noticed in your body and giving thanks for God's presence around and within you.

As we pay attention to our bodies, we may notice tension or that we are breathing in quick or irregular patterns. Another strategy for resilience is to calm and relax our bodies and minds by taking control over our breathing until our exhales are longer than our inhales. Try breathing out for five seconds and in for three. This literally calms our sympathetic nervous system, which is aroused in states of effort and stress.

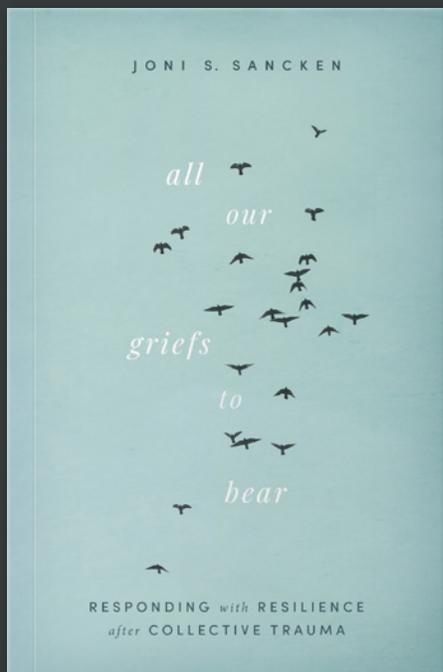
Renewal is possible as we are faithful to those spiritual practices that anchor us. Spiritual practices can help us build resilience that carries us through times of crisis and fear.



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