



Geelong Catholic Deanery

# PARISH HEALTH PROMOTION

## A Deanery Health Ministry Project

Edited by Leonie Rastas with permission from author Rowland Croucher Home Page: <http://melbourne.dialix.oz.au/~rowlandc/>

### STRESS AND BURNOUT

#### FIRST, THE BAD NEWS

- 'Stress now contributes to 90% of all diseases. Half of all visits to doctors are stress-related'. 'Anxiety reduction' may now be the largest single business in the Western world.
- 'Research 25 years ago showed clergy dealing with stress better than most professionals. Since 1980, studies in the U.S. describe an alarming spread of burnout in the profession. For example, Jerdon found three out of four parish ministers (sample: 11,500) reported severe stress causing 'anguish, worry, bewilderment, anger, depression, fear, and alienation'.

**Why is pastoral ministry so stressful?** The reasons may be as numerous and unique as there are pastors. However, recent research is unanimous in citing the following problem areas: the disparity between (somewhat idealistic) expectations and hard reality; lack of clearly defined boundaries - tasks are never done; workaholism ('bed-at-the-church' syndrome); the Peter Principle - feeling of incompetence in leading an army of volunteers; conflict in being a leader and servant at the same time ('line-support contamination'); intangibility - how do I know I'm getting somewhere?; confusion of role identity with self image - ; time management problems ; paucity of 'perks'; multiplicity of roles; inability to produce 'win-win' conflict resolutions; difficulty in managing interruptions; preoccupation with 'playing it safe' to avoid enraging powerful parishioners; 'administration overload' - too much energy expended in areas of low reward; loneliness - the pastor is less likely to have a close friend than any other person in the community.

#### STRESS

Stress and burnout are not the same (see box). Hans Selye defines stress in terms of the response your body makes to any demand on it. There is 'good stress' (eustress) - associated with feelings of joy, fulfilment, achievement - and 'bad stress' (distress), which is prolonged or too-frequent stress.

#### DISTRESS: SYMPTOMS & CAUSES

Your body is designed to give warning signals of stress overload, which may include insomnia or disturbed sleep, digestive problems, headaches, low energy, chronic tiredness, psychosomatic illnesses, muscle tension, teeth grinding, high blood pressure, etc. Arch Hart again: 'Stress is 'hurry sickness'. The symptoms are often seen by the victim as obstacles to performance and success that he or she merely wants to get rid of. Seldom does the disease of over-stress slow the victim down - not

until the final blow is struck and the ulcer, stroke or heart attack occurs.'

#### Stressors come to Christian leaders in four categories.

- (1) Bio-ecological factors related to poor diet (too much caffeine, refined white sugar, processed flour, salt etc.) and poor exercise habits. They also include noise and air pollution.
- (2) Vocational factors include career uncertainty; role ambiguity (a lack of clearly defined and mutually-agreed ministry functions); role conflict (between church expectations and personal or family needs); role overload (too many real or imagined expectations); lack of opportunities to 'derole' and be yourself, for a change; loneliness (95% of Australian pastors do not have a spiritual director); time management frustrations - and many more.
- (3) Psychological factors relate principally to the great life-change stressors - from the most stressful (such as the loss of a spouse), through divorce, death of a close family member, personal injury or illness, all the way to getting ready for Christmas or being handed a speeding fine!
- (4) Spiritual causes of stress may include temptations of all kinds (despair if your church isn't growing, jealousy of the success of others, anxiety over financial problems, anger - 'close to a professional vice in the contemporary ministry' says Henri Nouwen - and any other way the devil can get at us). Even prayer can be stressful according to one study!

#### BURNOUT

Burnout is emotional exhaustion, '*compassion fatigue*' (Hart). So even less-competitive Type B Christians can suffer burnout. And the most conscientious people-helpers are most vulnerable. Researchers like Maslach, Freudenberger and others from 1977 onwards gave the name '*burn-out*' to the special stressors associated with social and interpersonal pressures. Dr. Arch Hart says burnout symptoms may include demoralization (belief you are not longer effective as a pastor); depersonalization (treating yourself and others in an impersonal way); detachment (withdrawing from responsibilities); distancing (avoidance of social and interpersonal contacts); and defeatism (a feeling of being 'beaten'). Christina Maslach, who described burnout as 'a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion marked by physical depletion and chronic fatigue, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, and by development of a negative self-concept and negative attitudes towards work, life and other people', offers the following signs:

- (1) **Decreased energy - 'keeping up the speed' becomes increasingly difficult;**
- (2) **feeling of failure in vocation;**
- (3) **reduced sense of reward in return for pouring so much of self into the job or project;**

**(4) a sense of helplessness and inability to see a way out of problems; and**

**(5) cynicism and negativism about self, others, work and the world generally.**

Personality and attitudinal factors may increase the propensity to burnout eg.: the pressure to succeed; an authoritarian personality which may come across insensitively (or a too-sensitive person who can feel with others' hurts but who is vulnerable to criticism); inner-directed rage; under assertiveness - feeling victimized; carrying too much guilt about our humanness (an occupational hazard for clergy, so we develop facades for various occasions); inflexibility; and many more.

The essence of the problem, however, is the clash between expectations and reality. Clergy are often put on a pedestal - by others, and by themselves. Many of these expectations just can't be met. We try to please, but may either become too goal-oriented for our people, or else too accommodating to their spiritual 'slackness'. 'Strongly goal-oriented ministers will almost inevitably experience more frustration than process-oriented ones' (Hart). We are working with volunteers, many of whom aren't there when the work is unrewarding. And we're stuck with each other - pastors have not hired most of the lay people they work with.

And so if we're not careful, depending on our personality-type, we may become perfectionists, over-conscientious, develop one side of our ministry disproportionately, or maybe identify so closely with our calling that if it falls apart, we do too.

People-helpers have another hazard: in our counselling we're exposed almost exclusively to the negative sides of people's lives. So the pastoral leader ought to spend as much time with the strong as with the weak - for his own sake (they give him strength and support), for the leaders' sakes (they can be trained for ministry), and for the spiritual and emotional health of the whole church (there are more ministering persons available to help). Wasn't it A.B. Bruce who suggested Jesus spent more time with the disciples than with the crowds?

## PREVENTION AND CURE

Again, the people studying this phenomenon are becoming unanimous in their suggestions to Christian people-helpers:

**1. Find fresh spiritual disciplines.** A conference in California has the theme 'One Hundred Ways to Pray'. Well, find about three or four, and 'shut the door' as Jesus said (i.e. put in a telephone answering-machine), and learn the art of relaxing, contemplative prayer. Then, as the New Testament suggests, don't be surprised when trials come your way. Jesus promised us trouble! So, as psychotherapist M. Scott Peck points out in his brilliant book *The Road Less Travelled*, when you expect life to be difficult, it is much less difficult.

**2. Take regular time off.** You aren't called to work harder than your Creator. Develop a way of being 'through for the day' (at least most days). Take your full four weeks' annual leave in one stretch (and make alternative arrangements for weddings, etc.). Encourage your church to include two weeks' extra, all-expenses-paid study leave each year. On your day/s off, do something very different from what you do the other days. (Wednesday or Thursday is best for preachers - away from the adrenalin-arousing Sundays). Listen to Spurgeon: 'Repose is as needful to the mind as sleep to the body... If we do not rest, we shall break down. Even the earth must lie fallow and have her Sabbaths, and so must we'.

Jesus said, 'Come apart and rest awhile'. (If you don't rest awhile, you'll soon come apart!).

**3. Get proper exercise and sleep.** Exercise fairly vigorously 3-4 times a week. Walk, swim, play tennis; perspire and regularly breathe deeply. Allow adequate time for sleep. Dr. Hart again: 'Adrenal arousal reduces our need for sleep - but this is a trap; we ultimately pay the penalty. Most adults probably need 8-9 hours' a night!'

**4. Relax.** The relaxation response is the opposite of the fight/flight response. Just 20 minutes a day when we're free from the tyranny of 'things present' is enough to counteract the harmful effects of stress. Two ways to relax: tighten each set of muscles from your feet to your face, counting to five before relaxing them; or begin meditation by repeating a one-word or one-phrase prayer ('Maranatha', 'Lord have mercy'), repeat it slowly over and over and enjoy the 'other side of silence'.

**5. Join a small support/prayer group.** Ministry peers will better understand your needs; a cross-denominational group will enhance trust and provide other spirituality's. Then there's the classical discipline of 'spiritual direction' (or spiritual friendships). Who is Paul to your Timothy? Who teaches you to pray aright, as John the Baptist and Jesus taught their disciples? To whom do you confess your sins (James 5:16)? Luther said every priest ought to have such a 'father in God'. Congregations can help their pastor by praying more than they criticize him or her; having open communications re goals and expectations;

**6. Cognitive restructuring (i.e. changing one's thinking).** Take a personal audit. Reassess your goals; like your clothes, change them sometimes. Improve your self-attitudes. Learn a healthy assertiveness (e.g. by using the middle two letters of the alphabet - NO - sometimes, without apology). Know your gifts, and your limits. Face your fears; don't avoid them by pretence, or bury them in an addiction. Above all, avoid states of helplessness: take time to develop coping strategies for difficult situations. Learn not to make catastrophes out of ordinary events (increasing paranoia - 'they're out to get me' - is a sign of burnout). Be a growing person: if God has yet more light and truth to break forth from his Word, what new understandings have you experienced recently? Freudenberger suggests: 'Discard outmoded notions. Don't wear points of view just because you used to! Like old-fashioned clothes, they may become ill-fitting and ridiculous as time goes on'.

**7. Have fun! To belong to the kingdom you have to be like little children.** They aren't bothered about piles of correspondence or running the world. They get absorbed in things, even forgetting to run their own lives! So develop a few 'interesting interests': buy a bird-book and identify 100 native birds; collect stamps; play indoor cricket; give each of your kids an hour a week, where you do together what they suggest; build something; audit a course. But do something! And laugh sometimes! Did you know your body will not let you laugh and develop an ulcer at the same time? Remember, with humourist Kin Hubbard: ***'do not take life too seriously; you will never get out of it alive!'***

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If you or some one you know is showing signs of stress or burnout, share this information with them and encourage them to seek assistance to remedy the situation.

Counselling and or Spiritual Direction can assist in both prevention and cure and a list of local Spiritual directors is available from Deanery Office Ph 5229 0926 .

Counselling is available through Centrecare Catholic Family Services McKillop St Geelong Ph 5221 7055

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