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### Pastoral Stress Management to Maximize Family Function

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# Pastoral stress management to maximize family function

In his book *The Hidden Link Between Adrenalin & Stress*, Archibald Hart describes, in startling detail, the harmful physiological and significant negative effects to one's religious experience when living on an adrenaline "high,"<sup>1</sup> including mistaking adrenaline arousal for true spirituality!<sup>2</sup>

There is critical-incident stress, chronic-overload stress, and individual vulnerability to stress. And there's family susceptibility to stress. Thus, more than just survive, pastors and their families need to find ways to thrive in spite of their inevitable exposure to these various forms of stress.

How, then, can we learn to deal with the harsh reality of stress?

## The beam analogy

Like air, stress is everywhere. It is around us and *in* us too. We cannot see it or touch it, but stress can overwhelm us. Like the ocean, stress ebbs and flows: one moment we can barely discern its power, the next it is a tempest that threatens to engulf us. Stress is a force that can undo individuals and undermine families.

Experts may argue over a precise definition of stress, but there is greater agreement about how it works. In the field of engineering, workers know the importance of realizing how much weight steel beams can bear; thus, one of the beams may be tested by exerting

increasing amounts of pressure upon it until it buckles. Then, by calculating the safety margin and ensuring that the beams are never loaded too near the breaking point, those beams can serve their intended purpose without danger of collapse.

We cannot as easily measure the stress tolerance of people; obviously, it is unethical to heap on them bigger and bigger burdens until they stagger and stumble, all just to see how much stress they can bear. But there is an indirect way to estimate the relative heaviness of various stressors. The respected Holmes and Rahe stress scale<sup>3</sup> identifies 43 stressful life events that, in combination, can overburden one to the point that physical illness is the probable result.<sup>4</sup>

Not everyone will break down if subjected to the same intense, high-stress events that can do others in. As with physical strength, people differ in terms of how resilient or stress resistant they are. And at different periods in life, even the most robust person may face times of greater vulnerability to stress; however, events such as the death of a loved one or a serious personal illness or accident will likely strain the coping resources of most people.

Also, a steel beam can bear a heavy sustained weight for a long time without weakening. But if the same beam were to be exposed to frequent

on-again, off-again pressures of even a lighter load, metal fatigue would set in over time and the beam would become unstable. Similarly, it is not necessarily one great emergency bravely faced that signals the strength of a person. What matters, in the end, is the ability of individuals to weather the bruising effects of the major sporadic crises that befall them and also withstand the cumulative effects of daily wear and tear.

So when we speak about pastoral stress management, we are talking about the combined weight of excessive episodic burdens, the ongoing exposure to intense everyday pressures, and the degree of vulnerability to stress of the pastor and each individual in the minister's family.

## Crisis preparedness

To accurately predict when we will be faced with personal calamities and reversals can be labeled as almost impossible, but there are some things that we can do to prepare.

First off, we need to face the facts. We sometimes play mind games with ourselves. We may think, *I'm a very good driver with an excellent driving record. Accidents happen only to other people. Or, I'm secure in my job and I'm confident that will not change. Or, When you take as good care of yourself as I do, you will not have any serious*

*health problems.* But the reality is that, even in the best regulated lives, bad things do happen and, thus, we must be prepared for any eventuality.

Some common sense steps include practicing emergency home evacuations, keeping important documents in a fireproof safe or bank's safety deposit box, ensuring that ample

list. Consider this stress reliever as really good for maintaining balance. However, the benefits of all things being accomplished during the week will be missed if the pastor has to react to whatever arises to demand one's attention. The top-priority items that typically require steady, deliberate action over time are frequently

may feel when giving a series of polite but resolute refusals to a pushy person will be offset by the satisfaction of knowing that you did not have to "rob Peter in order to pay Paul."

Another situation when you need to say No comes to the fore. This occurs when your to-do list is too long for the day or the established priorities some-

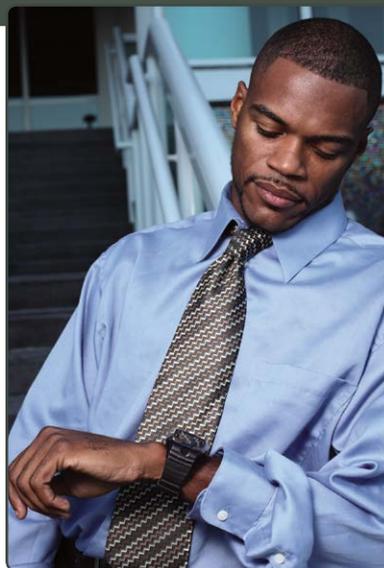
*Assign a decisive Yes for the most important things for the day, and, at day's end, a determined No to the uncompleted things at the bottom of the list, no matter how cherished they may be.*

rainy day funds are readily available, carrying emergency phone numbers in one's wallet or purse, and distributing among responsible family members your personal crisis-management plan. With these and other person-specific contingency arrangements in place, the impact of high-stress predicaments will be moderated for individuals and families.

### Overload pressures

There is always more work for the pastor to do than there are hours in the day. This calls for discipline. Scheduling is obviously essential and, while there are certain constants that you can count on, the events of the week should not be so tightly packed together that everything will come unstuck when the unexpected intrudes into carefully laid plans.

The second stress-taming skill is prioritization. At the week's end, the pastor should recognize the importance of savoring the satisfaction of having made good progress on the most important items on the to-do



displaced by distractions or matters of lesser importance that clamor for instant action.

Now, let us look at the third discipline. It is a matter of integrity to say No when to answer Yes would mean that previous commitments would have to be set aside. Some people want you to drop everything and attend to whatever may seem urgent to them but which does not classify as an actual emergency. The momentary stress you

how get scrambled. Some pastors find it so easy to play favorites when they have to decide which item on the list to work on next. The things that are easier to do, or are more enjoyable, tend to jockey themselves up to the top of the list. Assign a decisive Yes for the most important things for the day, and, at day's end, a determined No to the uncompleted things at the bottom of the list, no matter how cherished they may be. Then affirm yourself for what you accomplished and resist any regret over the unfinished tasks.

Right up there on the importance scale is sermon preparation that, on average, will likely take ten or more hours per week. If you like living on the edge, you can start work on your presentation the day or two before you are supposed to preach. However, scheduling complications may arise unexpectedly, and you may find yourself seriously stretched for time. That anxious foreboding that you will not be adequately prepared before you step into the pulpit can uncomfortably boost your stress. So, early in the

week, finish the heavy lifting you find essential for good sermon preparation.

Dealing with people—the pastor’s main job—is often very taxing, especially if several difficult individuals seem to take delight in making trouble. Add to this the never-ending flood of emails, phone calls (sometimes in the middle of the night), and committee challenges, and no wonder that many pastors survive only by living on adrenaline.

### Deep reserves

In addition to the immediate detrimental effects of being overstressed by everyday pressures, there are also long-term injurious consequences from overextending one’s self. Hans Selye describes what his research revealed about “adaptation energy”<sup>5</sup> that helps us through very rough times.

Some people inherit a large “fortune” of this force to deal with life’s stressors, others a lesser amount. But

the supply is limited for each individual and no way exists to replenish this reserve. “The stage of exhaustion, after a temporary demand upon the body, is reversible [by restful sleep and vacations], but the complete exhaustion of all stores of deep adaptation energy is not; as these reserves are depleted, senility and, finally, death ensue.”<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, in 1890, 17 years before Selye was born, the following words were published by Ellen G. White: “Those who make great exertions to accomplish just so much work in a given time, and continue to labor when their judgment tells them they should rest, are never gainers. They are living on borrowed capital. They are expending the vital force which they will need at a future time. And when the energy they have so recklessly used is demanded, they fail for want of it. The physical strength is gone, the mental powers fail. . . . Their time of need has come, but their physical resources are

exhausted. . . . God has provided us with constitutional force, which will be needed at different periods of our life. If we recklessly exhaust this force by continual overtaxation, we shall sometime be losers.. Our usefulness will be lessened, if not our life itself destroyed.”<sup>7</sup>

### Sensitivity to stress

This leads to a consideration of the pastor’s vulnerability to stress. Obviously, the more susceptible the person, the greater the need to take protective measures.

A good starting point would be to find out how much crisis stress you have been exposed to in the past 12 months; you can do this by taking the Holmes and Rahe stress scale test online.<sup>8</sup> If you find your level of accumulated stress is elevated because of out-of-the-ordinary events, such as a dramatic change in your financial state or gaining a new family member,



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you will need to be particularly careful to protect yourself from the adverse effects of stress in the upcoming year.

In addition to being alert to ward off unnecessary stress, you can strengthen your hardiness by giving decisive attention to your physical health. Adequate sleep, appropriate exercise, healthy nutrition, and revitalizing recreation are essential.

You must also recognize that it is not only external stress that one must monitor. There are toxic emotions that vex the spirit and drain the energies. “Grief, anxiety, discontent, remorse, guilt, distrust, all tend to break down the life forces and to invite decay and death. . . . Courage, hope, faith, sympathy, love, promote health and prolong life. A contented mind, a cheerful spirit, is health to the body and strength to the soul.”<sup>9</sup>

If you take a rough tally of the number of negative, self-critical thoughts that enter your consciousness in a day and compare that with the frequency of your uplifting, affirming thoughts, you will have a good indicator of the amount of self-imposed stress that can be reduced by right thinking.

## Family stress

Like the minister, families can experience stress; thus, it is important that the members of the family learn to shield themselves from damaging stressors.

As with individuals, family systems can also be producers of stress from within the family units. “The stress of living with one another still represents one of the greatest causes of distress.”<sup>10</sup> So writes the father of stress research, Hans Selye.<sup>11</sup> Though he was speaking broadly about human interactions, social workers and marriage-and-family clinicians can testify about the staggering turmoil generated when things go awry in families. And pastors know all too well that parishioners’ homes can be ravaged by interpersonal conflicts and chronic tension.

When seeking to manage stress in the pastor’s household or when counseling with people to help them deal well with distress, one needs to raise awareness about what causes stress in the family. Actually writing down *what* happens and *who* triggers the troubles can focus attention on what changes need to be made.

Usually the pastor will find it counterproductive to try to change the people; they are sure to resist. What needs adjustment are words and actions. Keep in mind that abrupt change is hard. Gradual change is easier. So, think in terms of reducing the frequency of certain stress-producing behaviors and increasing the occurrence of stress-relieving words and deeds. And remember to celebrate even the smallest improvements.

Time and again, counselors encounter very ordinary problems in families that flare up into blistering conflicts simply because the members lack basic communication and problem-solving skills. When these deficits are remedied, the overall stress levels can go down dramatically.

Young families that have never had the opportunity to learn how to get along well together can often benefit a great deal from observing how well-functioning families manage stress. The wisdom accumulated by older couples can be passed along so that the challenges faced by the inexperienced can be made more manageable.

Crucial to family harmony is the ability of its members to regulate their feelings. Selye states, “Among all the emotions, those that—more than any others—account for the absence or presence of harmful stress in human relations are feelings of gratitude and goodwill and their negative counterparts, hatred with the urge for revenge.”<sup>12</sup>

Translated into religious terms, we are well advised to “[c]ultivate thankfulness. Praise God for His wonderful

love in giving Christ to die for us. It never pays to think of our grievances. God calls upon us to think of His mercy and His matchless love, that we may be inspired with praise.”<sup>13</sup>

## Powerful antidote

While “the stress of living with one another still represents one of the greatest causes of distress,”<sup>14</sup> we find it is also true that “[m]any studies show that the primary factor in resilience is having caring and supportive relationships within and outside the family. Relationships that create love and trust, provide role models, and offer encouragement and reassurance help bolster a person’s resilience.”<sup>15</sup>

Pastors are strategically positioned to foster strong and healthy relationships and do the good and holy work of bringing brightness and blessing<sup>16</sup> into their own families and the families of church members who make up the family of God—characterized as having “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7, NKJV). 

1 Archibald D. Hart, *The Hidden Link Between Adrenalin & Stress* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986), 32ff.

2 *Ibid.*, 56ff.

3 Wikipedia contributors, “Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale,” *Wikipedia*, accessed Jan. 17, 2013, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holmes\\_and\\_Rahe\\_stress\\_scale](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holmes_and_Rahe_stress_scale).

4 “The Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale,” *Mind Tools*, accessed Jan. 17, 2013, [http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTCS\\_82.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTCS_82.htm).

5 Hans Selye, *Stress Without Distress*, Teach Yourself (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), 22–24.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Ellen G. White, *Christian Temperance and Bible Hygiene* (Battle Creek, MI: Good Health Pub. Co., 1890), 64, 65.

8 See “The Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale,” *Mind Tools*, [http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTCS\\_82.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTCS_82.htm).

9 Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1942), 241.

10 Selye, *Stress Without Distress*, 46.

11 Wikipedia contributors, “Hans Selye,” *Wikipedia*, accessed Jan. 17, 2013, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans\\_Selye](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_Selye).

12 Selye, *Stress Without Distress*, 48.

13 Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1920), 479.

14 Selye, *Stress Without Distress*, 48.

15 American Psychological Association, “Resilience Factors & Strategies,” in *The Road to Resilience*, accessed Jan. 17, 2013, <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx>.

16 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1901), 190.

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