

Voices: Emotional self-care in the ministry

November 20, 2023

NOTE: This is the fourth article in a six-part series.

In this series on self-care, we have explored physical and intellectual self-care. Here, we will look at emotional self-care. How are you doing emotionally?

Sources of emotional strain

As I reflect on the nature of ministry, it seems there are several sources of emotional strain, including the following.

- **You have a life.** Some seem to think ministers are not real people. However, in addition to the demands of ministry, you and I have the regular, emotional demands of everyday life, just like our parishioners.

We may or may not do a good job of attending to those demands, but before we can deal with the emotional demands of our roles, we have to be honest that life happens to us, too.

- **You have a background and a past.** You and I have tendencies to respond to certain triggers and situations in certain ways, including our emotional responses and the actions and words that flow from those responses.

Whether conscious or subconscious, we have old messages and thought patterns in our minds, hurts and difficult experiences in our past, weaknesses or vulnerabilities we want to protect, and other struggles.

- **The broad spectrum of our work.** Ministry involves walking with people in the realities of their lives, including celebrations, struggles and crises. Each of these people has whatever event they are dealing with at the time, while we are running the gamut as we come alongside, relate to and care for people in a broad range of life situations.

You might disciple someone, counsel a struggling couple, visit someone with a terminal illness, attend a birthday party or graduation, and prepare for a funeral all in one day. What a roller coaster.

- **The basic nature of our work.** Relationships, difficult people and disappointments common to our work can be significant sources of emotional strain, as can the pace of our work, the expectations of self and others, and what we have been taught about doing ministry and measures of success.

- **An unhealthy approach to life and ministry.** For some pastors and other ministers, our mental models of ministry, our values and priorities, our motives, the real and imagined demands of our work, and other factors lead us to adopt an unhealthy approach to life and ministry.

The challenges of emotional difficulty

The Bible addresses emotions and factors related to them. Repentance, surrender, sanctification, growth and the work of the Holy Spirit are to develop in us kindness, humility, joy, compassion, gentleness, love, tenderheartedness, patience, self-control, peace, peacefulness, and peacableness among other qualities.

There also should be an elimination of things like bitterness, anger, wrath, malice, anxiety, worry, ungodly fear, short temper, as well as condemning, harsh and bitter spirits toward others, and more.

As you think about your own tendencies, internal wiring and experience-produced reactions to people and situations, it may be some of these issues are more difficult for you than others.

My point is not to condemn us for feeling some of these negative things or to make you think you have to strive for the positive ones. Rather, I want to point out the need to partner with the Lord to line up our emotional self with the council of Scripture.

In my own observations of ministry contexts, some emotional responses I have seen produce negative results are fear, anxiety, anger, resentment, envy and defensiveness.

Making an overall comment about emotional well-being in ministers, a friend in ministry put it this way: “For most people in the ministry, it seems our challenge is to slow down and look in the mirror long enough to identify our own emotional need, and then call it what it is. We are so busy with other people’s lives and the never-ending ministry ‘stuff’ that we don’t know there is a need until we implode with an affair or an addiction, or we explode with anger that hurts those around us, or we quit (resign or commit suicide).”

Some suggestions for cultivating emotional well-being

Clearly, an article is not a full treatment of the subject. I encourage you to get professional help when you need it and before you reach a crisis point. Even so, here are some basic suggestions.

- **Cultivate self-awareness.** To be emotionally healthy, we need self-awareness. So, we need to cultivate it, and we may need the help of trusted others who can help us see things we don’t see about our self and our

emotional responses.

- **Utilize healthy boundaries.** Create space for rest, refreshing, spiritual nourishment and the elements of life that make for healthy balance and emotional well-being. This includes managing expectations, evaluating motives and setting biblical and responsible priorities.

- **Do not ignore red flags.** What is going on? Are you becoming numb? Are you impatient, easily angered, over or under emotional? Are you straying into sinful and risky or irresponsible behavior or thought patterns?

Pay attention to indicators and deal with your well-being sooner than later.

- **Be honest.** One thing I love about the Psalms is they teach us it is OK to be honest with our self and God as we express our emotions. Use these Scriptures to help you express yourself to God, and also let them remind you it is OK to feel and to express those feelings, so long as you do not dwell in destructive emotions or allow them to lead you to sin.

- **Address right being as well as right doing.** Sometimes, we get so focused on doing the right things in ministry we neglect the foundation of our own being, and this creates problems.

- **Cultivate deep spiritual connection with the Lord.** I will deal more with this topic in the next article, but emotional and spiritual well-being are intricately linked.

Questions for reflection

1. How emotionally fragile or stable are you?
2. Who can help you take an honest look at your emotional well-being and the responses to situations and people that might help you evaluate your well-being?

3. How often do you find yourself reacting to people and situations in a manner that does not honor the Lord or further his kingdom?
4. How emotionally resilient are you?
5. Are you beginning to become numb or withdrawn from others emotionally, or have inappropriate emotional responses to situations and people?
6. Are you beginning to engage in unbiblical, risky or sinful actions or thought patterns, and what is behind this?
7. What steps can you take this week to begin addressing your emotional well-being?

Ron Danley is the pastor of First Baptist Church in Jefferson and a personal coach. This article is adapted from his [blog series on self-care](#). The views expressed are those of the author.