



Preventing Burnout:
Building Healthy Rhythms of Rest and Self-Care



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What is Burnout?

It is common to hear someone use the phrase, “I’m burnt out,” but what does that actually mean? According to a growing body of research, burnout is a state of emotional, mental, physical, and often spiritual exhaustion brought on by prolonged stress. In addition to feeling stretched too thin by many competing demands, burnout often involves cynicism, feelings of depression, disillusionment, and discouragement.

According to Herbert Freudenberg (1975) burnout is defined as:

- 1. emotional exhaustion:** the fatigue that comes from caring too much, for too long
- 2. depersonalization:** the depletion of empathy, caring, and compassion
- 3. decreased sense of accomplishment:** an unconquerable sense of futility, feeling that nothing you do makes any difference

Burnout has been recognized as an “occupational hazard” for various people-oriented direct service professions, such as human services, education, and health care. The therapeutic or supportive relationships that such providers develop with the people they serve requires an ongoing and intense level of personal and emotional contact. Although such relationships can be rewarding and engaging, they can also be quite stressful. Pastors, clergy, and ministry leaders fall into this category.

In these direct service settings, the prevailing norms are to put others’ needs first, to work long hours and do whatever it takes to meet people’s needs, and to go the extra mile. Moreover, the organizational environments for these jobs are shaped by various social, political, and economic factors (such as funding cutbacks, policy restrictions, or even the political landscape), which result in work settings that are high in demands and low in resources. For pastors there are never-ending needs and endless opportunities to support congregants, start new ministries, and reach new people. Isolation can also come into play –many leaders do not feel they can share their struggles with those under their care. For many leaders and ministers, their roles are often volunteer and are in addition to work and other life responsibilities.

This is the perfect recipe for burnout!

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Factors Contributing to Burnout

While anyone with an over-extended schedule and prolonged stress is at risk for burnout, there are certain factors that increase this risk. These include:

- **Lack of control.** An inability to influence decisions that affect your role, such as your schedule, assignments, or workload, as well as a lack of the resources needed to perform tasks can increase the risk of burnout.
- **Unclear job expectations.** A lack of clarity about the degree of authority you have or the expectations of your supervisor or others heighten stress and anxiety.
- **Dysfunctional workplace dynamics.** Being treated in a disrespectful or demeaning manner, navigating angry outbursts, microaggressions, a critical supervisor or co-worker, and feeling undermined or micromanaged can contribute to job stress.
- **Extremes of activity.** It takes extra energy to remain focused and engaged when a job switches between being monotonous or chaotic.
- **Lack of social support.** Feeling isolated at work, in ministry, or in your personal life reduces a person's buffer against stress and burnout.
- **Work-life imbalance.** If work takes up so much time and effort that a person doesn't have the bandwidth to spend time with family and friends, rest, and engage in activities they enjoy, they are likely to burn out quickly.



Identifying Priorities

Identifying priorities and maintaining healthy boundaries are life skills that, when implemented, effectively help a person develop a healthy life rhythm.

Everything in life is not equally important and God doesn't call each person to everything. When we prioritize, we order things according to their importance. And generally, we give our time, energy (e.g. affection, attention) and resources to those things that are priorities.

As believers we want our priorities to align with things God calls out as important in scripture. For example, Matthew 6:33 says, "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." Therefore, God and His kingdom and His righteousness ought to be a priority for every believer.

And, Matthew 22:37-38 says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Therefore, it is important to love God, love our neighbor, and in the same way care for ourselves.

Finally, Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." It is important for each person to identify these "good works" and take action. These represent priority areas for all believers.

It is important to make sure we honor priorities by spending our time, energy, and resources in the areas God wants us to. We are finite and expending ourselves too much in one area means another area suffers. Therefore, to maintain a healthy, balanced life rhythm, we need to identify our priorities and make sure we are spending our time, energy, and resources in those areas.

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Reflection Questions



1. "Lord, what are my top priorities right now?" –how am I spending my time, attention, affection, resources?
2. "What do you want my top priorities to be?" –how do you want me to spend my time, attention, affection, resources?
3. "What changes do I need to make?" –are there changes to make in how I spend my time, attention, affection, resources?

Maintaining Healthy Boundaries

Once priorities are established, healthy boundaries ensure our time, energy, and resources are spent on the right things. Boundaries mark when one thing ends, and another begins. Many problems in life stem from a lack of healthy boundaries –car accidents, property disputes, lack of confidence, being over-booked and emotionally burning out. Boundaries help us keep the good in and the bad out by using wisdom to say “yes” and “no” to the right things. Setting boundaries inevitably involves taking responsibility for choices. It is acknowledging that with every “yes” or “no” there are consequences and trade-offs.

Reflection Questions



- Do you tend to say “yes” too often?
- Do you tend to say “no” too often?
- Do you have a hard time knowing when to say “yes” or “no”?
- Is it easy for you to know when to say “yes” or “no”?

Sometimes a person struggles to maintain healthy boundaries. There are some people who say “yes” when they really ought to say “no”. And, others who say “no” when they really ought to say “yes”. There are certain ungodly beliefs and thinking patterns that make a person more at-risk for unhealthy boundaries. The Bible is clear that we need to renew our minds to know God’s will and live as He desires. Exploring beliefs and replacing lies can help a person maintain healthier boundaries.

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” (Romans 12:2)

Lies/Thinking Patterns that Lead to Poor Boundaries:

- False sense of responsibility or feeling overly responsible (i.e. it is wrong to say “no”)
- Identity (worth, acceptance, importance) = Ministry Role, Title, Position
- Identity (worth, acceptance, importance) = Achievement, Perfectionism
- Identity (worth, acceptance, importance) = Approval from Others
- Negative view of self (e.g. I am not _____ enough)
- Idols or using (money, work, security, family, ministry) to meet needs that God wants to satisfy
- Belief that you are not important/valuable



Before Saying Yes or No to a Request

1

Pray: Ask God for His opinion and direction each day. Does He want you to say “yes” or “no”?

2

Review Priorities: Set your priorities in advance and review them to make sure you are using your time, energy, and resources in a way that reflect your God-given priorities. Making decisions ahead of time equip you to respond with confidence in the moment.

3

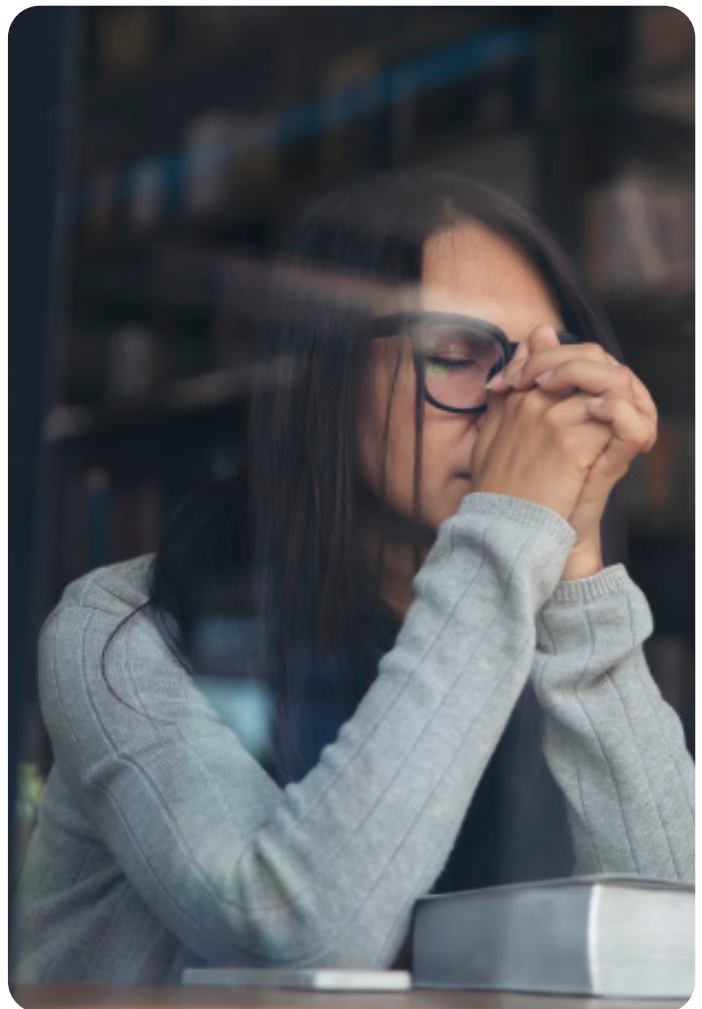
Build in Accountability: Let 1-2 other people know your priorities, share important decisions with them, pray together, share challenges you encounter when setting and maintaining your priorities and boundaries.

4

Renew Your Mind: Establish the practice of asking the Holy Spirit to reveal any lies you are believing that make it difficult to prioritize and maintain boundaries. Replace those lies with Truth.

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(Romans 12:2)



Build in Healthy Rhythms: Eight Areas of Self-Care

Self-care means taking care of yourself so that you can be healthy, take care of your family, do your job, serve in ministry, help and care for others, and do all the things you need to and desire to accomplish in a day. It is not self-indulgence.

Self-care aligns well with the biblical concept of rest.

“And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.” (Genesis 2:2-3)

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God.” (Exodus 20:8)

And he said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” (Exodus 33:14)

“My soul finds rest in God alone” (Psalm 62:5)

Rest is a gift from God to help us restore our physical body, mind, emotions, and spirit. It is important to consider what rest for each part looks like.

Reflection Questions



- What do I do to give my physical body rest?
- What allows my mind to rest? What truths bring peace to my mind?
- What helps me to rest emotionally?
- Which spiritual disciplines help my spirit to rest in His Presence?



Areas of Self Care

Just as different parts of a person need to rest, different areas of a person's life need attention and care. The following eight areas of a person's life need to be nurtured so they are able to thrive in life:



1. Spiritual:

Caring for the needs of your spirit and soul by having beliefs and values that are lived out. Examples of spiritual self-care include prayer, reading scripture, worship, engaging with a faith community.



2. Physical:

Caring for the needs of your physical body. Examples of physical self-care include getting adequate sleep, eating a balanced diet, movement and exercise, and proper hygiene.



3. Emotional:

Caring for emotional needs by navigating emotions, increasing empathy, and managing stress effectively. Examples include making time to reflect on feelings, practicing self-compassion, and maintaining emotional boundaries.



4. Social/Relational:

Caring for relational needs by building a network of supportive relationships. Some examples of social/relational care include asking for help when you need it, honoring commitments to others, and spending time with family and friends.



5. Psychological:

Caring for your mind by learning new things, practicing creativity, and attending to the present moment. Some examples of psychological self-care include learning a new skill, deep breathing, reading a book, taking a break from technology, and spending time in nature.



6. Professional/Ministry:

Identifying and sharing your strengths and gifts and engaging in activities that give meaning and purpose. Some examples include educational attainment, professional or ministry development, setting clear expectations and boundaries, and celebrating impact and achievement.



7. Security

Being responsible with your finances and other resources and planning that involves future goals. Some examples of security self-care include spending and saving money wisely, future planning around resources, and identifying sources of income and financial support.



8. Environmental:

Having a safe, organized, well maintained work, ministry, and home environment, having clean clothes and a clean and well-maintained mode of transportation. Examples include taking time to declutter, maintaining the environment, and working to leave unsafe situations.

Reflection Questions

1. Which types of self-care do I engage in the most? Which types of self-care do I engage in the least?
2. What keeps me from engaging in self-care?
3. What changes do I need to make so I am taking care of myself in each of these areas?



“For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church.”

(Ephesians 5:29)

“And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.”

(Mark 1:35)

Diffusing Stress

Even when we engage in self-care, there are often stressors that cannot be avoided. These situations trigger a stress response in the brain and body that must be diffused for a person to return to a relaxed state. Sometimes even when the stressor is removed, the person can be stuck in a state of stress. For example, have you ever had a stressful day at work and carried the stress back home? The stressor (work) was removed, but the brain and body were stuck in a state of high stress. There are several research-proven ways to complete the stress cycle and help your body to know it is safe so it can relax. These include:

Physical activity: Any movement of your body is the best way to complete the stress cycle and battle burnout.

Breathing: Deep, slow breaths regulate the stress response, especially when exhalation is long and slow and goes all of the way to the end of the breath so your belly contracts. Scripture can be incorporated into deep breathing exercises.

Positive Social Interaction: Casual, but friendly interaction is a sign that the world is a safe place and that people are kind and can be trusted. This can also involve prayer and sharing thoughts and emotions with God.

Laughter: Laughing together increases connection and builds relationships.

Affection: Deep affection with a loving presence is an antidote to stress. For example, a 20 second hug can change hormones, lower blood pressure and heart rate, and improve mood. Guided imagery can be used to help a person imagine their Abba Father embracing them.

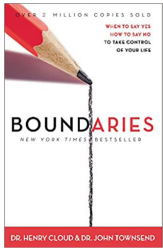
Tears: Crying can be a power release and help you process emotions. Emotional tears contain mood regulating manganese and activates the parasympathetic nervous system to restore the body to a state of balance.

Creative Expression: Creating can lead to more energy, excitement, and enthusiasm. Try making a craft, paint, draw, sing a song, or tell a story.

Sing: When we sing endorphins are released and oxytocin is produced. Worship reminds us of God's Word and the hope we have in Him as well as helps the body experience positive emotions and relax.

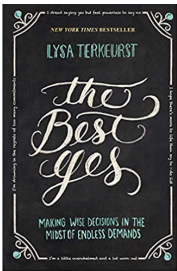
“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”
(Philippians 4:6-7)

Helpful Resources on Self-Care



Boundaries: When to Say YES, When to Say NO, To Take Control of Your Life Henry Cloud

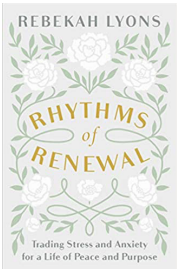
Having clear boundaries is essential to a healthy, balanced lifestyle. A boundary is a personal property line that marks those things for which we are responsible. In other words, boundaries define who we are and who we are not. Boundaries impact all areas of our lives: Physical boundaries help us determine who may touch us and under what circumstances -- Mental boundaries give us the freedom to have our own thoughts and opinions -- Emotional boundaries help us to deal with our own emotions and disengage from the harmful, manipulative emotions of others -- Spiritual boundaries help us to distinguish God's will from our own and give us renewed awe for our Creator.



The Best Yes: Making Wise Decisions in the Midst of Endless Demands Lysa TerKeurst

Are you living with the stress of an overwhelmed schedule and aching with the sadness of an underwhelmed soul? Lysa TerKeurst is learning that there is a big difference between saying yes to everyone and saying yes to God. In *The Best Yes* she will help you:

- Cure the disease to please with a biblical understanding of the command to love
- Escape the guilt of disappointing others by learning the secret of the small no
- Overcome the agony of hard choices by embracing a wisdom based decision-making process



Rhythms of Renewal: Trading Stress and Anxiety for a Life of Peace and Purpose Rebekah Lyons

Rebekah draws from her own battle with depression and anxiety and shares a pathway to establish four life-giving rhythms that quiet inner chaos and make room for a flourishing life. By taking time to rest, restore, connect, and create, you will discover how to:

- Take charge of your emotional health and inspire your loved ones to do the same
- Overcome anxiety by establishing daily habits that keep you mentally and physically strong
- Find joy through restored relationships in your family and community
- Walk in confidence with the unique gifts you have to offer the world