

Honoring Priorities

An Illustration

One day a teacher was speaking to a group of students and, to drive home a point, used an illustration.

As this teacher stood in front of the group of the students he said, "Okay, time for a quiz." Then he pulled out a one-gallon, wide-mouthed mason jar and set it on a table in front of him. He then produced about a dozen fist-sized rocks and carefully placed them, one at a time, into the jar. When the jar was filled to the top and no more rocks would fit inside, he asked, "Is this jar full?" Everyone in the class said, "Yes." Then he said, "Really?" He reached under the table and pulled out a bucket of gravel. Then he dumped some gravel in and shook the jar causing pieces of gravel to work themselves down into the spaces between the big rocks.

Then he smiled and asked the group once more, "Is the jar full?" By this time the class was onto him. "Probably not," one of them answered. "Good!" he replied. And he reached under the table and brought out a bucket of sand. He started dumping the sand in and it went into all the spaces left between the rocks and the gravel. Once more he asked the question, "Is this jar full?" "No!" the class shouted. Once again he said, "Good!" Then he grabbed a pitcher of water and began to pour it in until the jar was filled to the brim. Then he looked up at the class and asked, "What is the point of this illustration?"

One eager student raised his hand and said, "The point is, no matter how full your schedule is, if you try really hard, you can always fit some more things into it!"

"No," the teacher replied, "that's not the point. The truth this illustration teaches us is: If you don't put the big rocks in first, you'll never get them in at all."



*"But seek first the kingdom
of God and his righteous-
ness, and all these things will
be added to you."*

(Matthew 6:33)

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.

It is important to make sure we are 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 honoring them with our time, energy, and 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 overbooked 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”?

False Beliefs 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

Reflection Questions:

1. “Lord, what are my top priorities right now?”—where am I spending my time, attention, affection, resources?
2. “What do you want my top priorities to be?”—where 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?

“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)

Understanding Burnout

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.

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, clergy, and health care.

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. 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 helps to complete the stress cycle and battle burnout.

Breathing: Deep, slow breaths regulate the stress response. 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.

Laughter: Laughing together increases connection and builds relationships.

Affection: Kind words, a hug or any affection with a caring presence is an antidote to stress.

Tears: Crying can be a power release and help you process emotions.

Creative Expression: Creating can lead to more energy, excitement, and enthusiasm.

Sing: When we sing endorphins are released and oxytocin is produced. Worship is an antidote to stress.



Oldenburg Burnout Inventory

Mark the degree to which you agree or disagree with each of the statements below. Sum the numbers circled for each answer to learn the degree to which you are currently experiencing burnout. This scale measures disengagement (D) and exhaustion (E).

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I always find new and interesting aspects in my work (D)	1	2	3	4
There are days when I feel tired before I arrive at work (E)	4	3	2	1
It happens more and more often that I talk about my work in a negative way (D)	4	3	2	1
After work, I tend to need more time than in the past in order to relax and feel better (E)	4	3	2	1
I can tolerate the pressure of my work very well (E)	1	2	3	4
Lately, I tend to think less at work and do my job almost mechanically (D)	4	3	2	1
I find my work to be a positive challenge (D)	1	2	3	4
During my work, I often feel emotionally drained (E)	4	3	2	1
Over time, one can become disconnected from this type of work (D)	4	3	2	1
After working, I have enough energy for my leisure activities (E)	1	2	3	4
Sometimes I feel sickened by my work tasks (D)	4	3	2	1
After my work, I usually feel worn out and weary (E)	4	3	2	1
This is the only type of work that I can imagine myself doing (D)	1	2	3	4
Usually, I can manage the amount of my work well (E)	1	2	3	4
I feel more and more engaged in my work (D)	1	2	3	4
When I work, I usually feel energized (E)	1	2	3	4

Scoring

Low (less than 26): If your score was below 26 you are likely not experiencing burnout. While there is always stress associated with work, ministry, and family you are managing it well and likely engaged in healthy rhythms of self-care.

Medium (27-42): If your score is between 27-42 you are experiencing a moderate level of burnout. This means stress from work, ministry, or family is sometimes difficult to manage. It is important for you to build healthy rhythms of self-care into your life and identify strategies to manager and diffuse stress.

High (over 42): If your score is over 42, you are likely experiencing burnout. Research shows that burnout can impact a person's physical and mental health. It is important that you take time to assess situations where you are experiencing stress and burnout and identify changes that will help. It is important for you to build healthy rhythms of self-care into your life and identify strategies to manager and diffuse stress.

(Scoring taken from Delgadillo et al, 2018)

Healthy Rhythms of Self Care

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. 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 and desire to accomplish in a day.

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, and engaging with a faith community.



2. Physical:

Caring for the needs of your physical body. Examples of physical self-care include getting adequate sleep, rest, 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:

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

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

“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?

