

10 Ways To Prevent Burnout In Ministry

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Ministry is a 24/7 occupation and can be emotionally and physically taxing. The pace of life, the demands of counseling and public speaking, the strain of leadership, and spiritual warfare can drain your resources. Burnout is rarely discussed because we often feel that we must have it all together and put on a happy face. No one wants to admit they are feeling weary from the everyday challenges of ministry.

In our work as Executive Search Consultants, we have the privilege of talking with hundreds of people in ministry and hearing their stories. While many of them are in thriving ministries and are excited about their future, almost all of them have experienced a time when ministry was more drudgery than joy. If you're reading this and you're currently battling ministry burnout, you are not alone. Be encouraged and know that it is completely normal and just a season.

In order to combat burnout, we need to focus on who God has created us to be. Living well begins with owning the health of your own soul, body, and mind. Self-care, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual, is not selfish; it is good stewardship.

Here are 10 ways to prevent burnout in ministry and pursue living well in ministry:

1. Establish long-term goals with short-term action steps.

One of the quickest ways to misery in ministry is to lose sight of why we started down the path in the first place – our love of Jesus and the desire to serve him. Some of us face ministry burnout because we don't even know what we're working toward. Mondays can feel daunting if you have an extensive to-do list but no context of what you're working toward this week, this month, or this year.

Establish long-term goals with your ministry team that inspire you with a vision of what's ahead and why it matters. It's equally important to determine short-term action steps for each of your long-term goals so that you can see real-time, tangible examples of your goals coming to fruition. Achieving those short-term steps will help you see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Caveat: In setting goals, don't develop unrealistic expectations. Leaders can sometimes set goals and expectations for themselves and their organization that they simply do not have the capacity or resources to achieve. If we have unrealistic expectations and we fail to live up to them, we can spiral into disappointment. In those moments, it's important to remember that God is not disappointed in us.

2. Take care of yourself.

A church is only as healthy as the health of its leaders, and holistic self-care is three-fold:

- **Take care of your soul.** Jesus taught us that the Christian life is "inside out." Proverbs 4 says "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." Nothing is more important than guarding the attitude of your heart. Set aside time for personal Bible study, fellowship with family and close friends, and use the Sabbath to refuel and center yourself and your walk with the Lord.
- **Take care of your body.** Getting the body well contributes to the well being of your soul as well. One study found that when a group of people suffering from mild to moderate depression exercised for at least 20 minutes 3 times a week, they were significantly less depressed 5 weeks later. The benefits were immediate and were maintained as long as they kept on exercising. Make healthy living – eating, exercising, and sleeping – a priority.
- **Take care of your mind.** Learning inspires growth and innovation. Read a new book on your area of ministry, take a Bible class, and attend leadership conferences. It's difficult to feel stagnant or burnt out in your ministry when you're being challenged to try new things.

3. Rest.

Taking time away to refocus and be refreshed is not optional – it is vital for your health and longevity in ministry. Perhaps you’re suffering from burnout because this has not been a priority for you in the past.

If you’re new to the discipline of rest, try this: rest 1 day every week, 1 weekend every month, 1 week every year, 1 month every 5 years. Whether or not this guideline works for you, establishing regular, scheduled rest is a must. Is it time for you to take a sabbatical? Do you set aside the Sabbath to truly rest? If you preach on Sundays, are you using Mondays to recuperate?

4. Pursue your passion.

Be sure you’re in a place in ministry that most aligns with your passion. Center your day on the part of your job you are most passionate about. If you’re not currently in a position where you’re able to pursue your passions, try talking with your leaders about how you can incorporate your passions into your daily responsibilities. You’ll do your best work when you’re doing what you love.

5. Don’t focus on people pleasing.

In ministry, we not only work for the “audience of one,” we also work to minister to the people God has called us to serve. As we focus on serving others, it can be easy to fall into caring too much about the approval of others, and that can suck the life out of us. We need to shift our concerns about what people might think of us to what God is calling us to say and do. His “well done” is more important than anyone else’s.

6. Don’t become a perfectionist.

Perfectionism replaces “faithfulness” with “external fruitfulness” as the ultimate measure of someone in ministry. Excellence in all we do is something to strive for, but be careful not to slip into an unhealthy drive for perfection. It’s easy to focus on the external things that we can control – the wording of our messages, the placement of greeters, and the perfect background for the worship set – instead of focusing on letting the Holy Spirit work internally. Perfectionism is a never-ending pursuit that will ultimately make you and those

around you miserable. It may sound funny, but try to knowingly make one minor mistake a day just to remind yourself that while excellence is a worthy goal, perfection is not.

7. Don't do it alone.

When we feel overwhelmed with leadership responsibility, it's often our natural inclination to isolate ourselves. However, this often causes us to make decisions that can negatively influence us, people we care about, and organizations we serve. The solution to this is to identify a few close friends outside of your organization whom you trust and seek out a confidential mentoring relationship. Enthusiasm is contagious. Seek community with those who have walked in your shoes and are thriving in ministry. They have most likely experienced the ministry burnout you're feeling and will have advice on ways they overcame it.

8. Gain clarity on who you are.

As Psalm 139:13 says, each of us are fearfully and wonderfully made. Who has God uniquely made you to be? What are you good at? What are you not good at? What energizes you? What sucks the life out of you? Which moments of life have made you feel the most alive? Which moments have made you feel depressed or defeated? If money weren't an issue, what would you spend your life doing? Profiles like Leading From Your Strengths, Myers Briggs, Strengthsfinders, and DISC are also helpful tools to help you gain clarity about your gifts, strengths, blind spots, and areas to work on improving.

9. Determine what matters most to you.

As Matthew 6:24 says, "No one can serve two masters." Jesus wasn't just talking about God and money. Much of our burnout happens when we place value on the wrong things. Many people in ministry will stretch themselves too thin by trying to do too much and be all things to all people. Overcoming this requires some "heart surgery." Gather a few trusted friends around you. Ask them to give you honest feedback about what drives your decisions. Write down your priorities, both personal and in your ministry, and focus the bulk of

your efforts on the top priorities. Know how to delegate and how to say no to what is not important.

10. Realign your beliefs.

Constantly remind yourself that God is in control, and spend time with the Lord daily, refreshing yourself in His Word and asking Him to lead and guide you as you serve His people. If you're experiencing burnout, pray for God's rest, renewal, and direction. We are all flawed instruments serving His Kingdom, but he made us, knows our weaknesses, and even at our lowest points, is with us. Take heart in knowing that you are not alone.

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