

Developing an Emotionally Healthy Church



CONGREGATION & VISITORS



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Practical Ministry Skills: Developing an Emotionally Healthy Church

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DEVELOPING AN EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY CHURCH

Leader's Guide

How to use "Practical Ministry Skills" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS in your regularly scheduled meetings.

Welcome to BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. Selected by the editors of Christianity Today International, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

"Practical Ministry Skills" is completely flexible and designed for easy use. Each theme focuses on a practical area of church ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. You may use them at the beginning of a meeting to help launch a discussion, or you may hand them out as brief primers for someone new to a particular ministry.

This special theme on **Developing an Emotionally Healthy Church** is designed to help you address the link between spiritual maturity and emotional health. You may either use these handouts for personal edification or for a group training session. Or you may choose to provide copies to the church board, staff members, or those involved with specific ministry teams at your church. Simply print the handouts you need and use them as needed.

To learn how to gauge the emotional health of your church, read Peter Scazzero's, "Seven Principles of an Emotionally Healthy Church" (pp. 5-6). To see how one pastor learned to balance the difficulties of ministry while keeping his soul intact, read James Emery White's "Survival Skills" (pp. 7-8). For tips on how to encourage emotional health in your life and in the lives of your congregants, see Skye Jethani's "Rejuvenate" (pp. 18-19).

We hope this training tool will guide your efforts and encourage you as you seek to improve the emotional health of your church. And ultimately, we hope that your congregation, your ministry, and you will be blessed as you see God working through your ministry.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

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DEVELOPING AN EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY CHURCH**Imbalanced Spirituality**

Are we aware of the emotional health of ourselves and our churches?

Psalm 4:1

In terms of emotional and relational maturity, too little difference exists between God's people inside the church and those outside who claim no relationship to Jesus Christ. When you go beyond the praise and worship of our large meetings and conventions and into the homes and small groups of God's people, you often find a valley littered by broken and failed relationships.

Do any of the following people remind you of someone in your church?

1. The board member who never says "I was wrong" or "I'm sorry."
2. The children's church leader who constantly criticizes others.
3. The high-control small group leader who cannot tolerate different points of view.
4. The middle-aged father of two toddlers who is secretly addicted to pornography.
5. The 35-year-old husband busily serving in the church, unaware of his wife's loneliness at home.
6. The worship leader who interprets any suggestion as a personal attack or rejection.
7. The Sunday school teacher struggling with feelings of bitterness and resentment toward the pastor but afraid to say anything.
8. The exemplary "servant" who tirelessly volunteers in four different ministries but rarely takes any personal time to take care of himself or herself.
9. Two intercessors who use prayer meetings to escape from the painful reality of their marriage.
10. The people in your small group who are never transparent about their struggles or difficulties.

They may present themselves as spiritually mature, but something is terribly imbalanced about their spirituality. The sad reality is that too many people in our churches are fixated at a stage of spiritual immaturity that current models of discipleship have not addressed.

Many are supposedly "spiritually mature" but emotionally they remain infants, children, or teenagers. They demonstrate little ability to process anger, sadness, or hurt. They whine, complain, distance themselves, blame, and use sarcasm—like little children—when they don't get their way. Highly defensive to criticism or differences of opinion, they expect to be taken care of and often treat people as objects to meet their needs.

Why?

The roots of the problem stem from a faulty biblical theology. Many Christians have received helpful training in certain essential areas of discipleship, such as prayer, Bible study, worship, discovery of their spiritual gifts, or learning how to explain the gospel to someone else. Yet Jesus' followers also need training and skills in how to look beneath the surface of the iceberg in their lives, to break their past's power of influence over their present, to live in brokenness and vulnerability, to know their limits, to embrace their loss and grief, to model the incarnational model of loving well, and to slow down in order to lead with integrity. Loving God and others well is both the climax and point.

Despite all the emphasis today on spiritual formation, church leaders rarely address what spiritual maturity looks like as it relates to emotional health. For this reason, our churches are filled with people who remain emotionally unaware and socially immature. Sadly, I can think of a number of non-Christian people who are more loving, balanced, and civil than many church members I know (including myself!).

The link between emotional health and spiritual maturity is a large, unexplored area of discipleship. We desperately need to reexamine the whole of Scripture—and the life of Jesus in particular—in order to grasp the dynamics of this link.

While I do believe in the important role of professionally trained Christian counselors to bring expertise to the church, I believe the church of Jesus Christ is to be the primary vehicle for our growth in spiritual and emotional maturity. Sadly, for too long we have delegated "emotional" issues to the therapist's office and

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taken responsibility only for “spiritual” problems in the church. The two are inseparably linked and critical to biblical discipleship.

I believe wholeheartedly that the Lord Jesus and his church are the hope of the world. My commitment is to Scripture as the Word of God, the authority under which we as God’s church are to live. I have been teaching it for my entire adult life. I remain committed to the indispensability of Scripture, prayer, fellowship, worship, faithfulness in using our spiritual gifts, small groups, and community life, stewardship of our resources, and the centrality of the gospel to all of life. But unless we integrate emotional maturity as a focus in our discipleship, we are in danger of missing God’s point completely—love.

—PETER SCAZZERO; taken from *The Emotionally Healthy Church* by PETER SCAZZERO; WARREN BIRD. Copyright © 2003 by Peter L. Scazzero. Used by permission of [Zondervan](#).

Discuss

1. What do you think about the author’s statement “I can think of a number of non-Christian people who are more loving, balanced, and civil than many church members I know”? Is that true in your own life?
2. Why do you think the link between emotional health and spiritual maturity has not been discussed or explored much?
3. Why do you suppose the church often deflects emotional issues to therapists and deals only with spiritual issues?

DEVELOPING AN EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY CHURCH**Seven Principles of an Emotionally Healthy Church**

Use these guidelines to determine the emotional health of your church.

Psalm 139:23

Principle 1: Look beneath the Surface

In emotionally healthy churches, people take a deep, hard look inside their hearts, asking, “What is going on that Jesus Christ is trying to change?” They understand that a person’s life is like an iceberg, with the vast majority of who we are lying deep beneath the surface. They invite God to bring their awareness and to transform those beneath-the-surface layers that hinder them from becoming more like Jesus Christ.

Principle 2: Break the Power of the Past

In emotionally healthy churches, people understand how their past affects their present ability to love Christ and others. They’ve realized from Scripture and life that an intricate, complex relationship exists between the kind of person they are today and their past. Numerous external forces may shape us, but the family we have grown up in is the primary and, except in rare instances, the most powerful system that will shape and influence us.

Principle 3: Live in Brokenness and Vulnerability

In emotionally healthy churches, people live and lead out of brokenness and vulnerability. They understand that leadership in the kingdom of God is from the bottom up, not a grasping, controlling, or lording over others. It is leading out of failure and pain, question and struggles—a serving that lets go. It is a noticeably different way of life from what is commonly modeled in the world and, unfortunately, in many churches.

Principle 4: Receive the Gift of Limits

Emotionally healthy people understand the limits God has given them. They joyfully receive the one, two, seven, or ten talents God has so graciously distributed. As a result, they are not frenzied and covetous, trying to live a life God never intended. They are marked by contentment and joy.

Emotionally healthy churches also embrace their limits with the same joy and contentment, not attempting to be like another church. They have a confident sense of God’s “good hand” on their church “for such a time as this” (Est. 4:11–14).

Principle 5: Embrace Grieving and Loss

In emotionally healthy churches, people embrace grief as a way to become more like God. They understand the critical role grieving our losses plays in discipleship grieving our losses is. Why? It is the only pathway to becoming a compassionate person like our Lord Jesus.

I covered over my losses for many years, unaware of how they were shaping my current relationships and leadership. God was seeking to enlarge my soul and mature me while I was seeking a quick end to my pain. Pastors and leaders, in particular, experience a large number of losses due to our unique position in the body of Christ. Often, when we wonder if we are regressing and going backward spiritually, God is doing his most profound work of transformation in us.

Principle 6: Make Incarnation Your Model for Loving Well

In emotionally healthy churches, people intentionally follow the model of Jesus. They focus on loving well, recognizing that the indispensable mark of spiritual maturity is not about recognition, numbers, spiritual gifts, or biblical knowledge. The essence of genuine spiritual life is to love—God, ourselves, and other people.

They commit themselves to follow the three dynamics of incarnation found in the life of Jesus in order to love other people: entering another’s world, holding on to yourself, and hanging between two worlds.

Principle 7: Slow Down to Lead with Integrity

Integrity means walking in truth, beginning first with what is happening inside of you. This kind of honesty takes great courage. Christ gave his life, creating a safe environment of love for us, so that we can have a genuine, authentic relationship with him.

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Recognize and embrace your limits. They are a gift. You and I are not God. We are not running the world; he is. God invites us to relax, to enjoy the fact that we are not in charge of this world, that even when we die, the world will continue on nicely without us.

— PETER SCAZZERO; taken from *The Emotionally Healthy Church* by PETER SCAZZERO; WARREN BIRD. Copyright © 2003 by Peter L. Scazzero. Used by permission of Zondervan.

Discuss

1. Are any of these principles already true of your church? How will you keep it up?
2. Which of these principles are not true of your church? Why do you think your church is not emotionally healthy in those areas?
3. Which of these principles do you need to work on for yourself? Are there similarities between your own lack of emotional health and your church's?

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Survival Skills

What you need to minister with your spirit intact.

Jeremiah 30:17

To this day, the disappointments can still blindsides me. Nothing prepares you for how ministry can drain you emotionally, leaving you in pain or, even worse, feeling numb, or in despair, or seething with anger. This is why so many good men and women in ministry have swerved into moral ditches or still soldier on with plastic smiles and burned-out souls.

A few years ago, my wife Susan and I were part of a mentoring retreat with about a dozen couples. We started off with an open-ended question: "What are your key issues right now?"

As we went around the room, the recurring answer was "emotional survival." We heard about the hits and hurts that come our way as occupational hazards. And how they tear away at our souls, sapping our enthusiasm, our creativity, our missional stamina. They leave us creating dreams of finding ourselves on a beach with a parasol in our drink—permanently.

There are so many emotional hits: the stress of finances, both personally and in the church, the departure of staff, the pain of letters that criticize your ministry, the pressure of people who want to redefine the vision, mission, or orientation of the church, the agony of making mistakes. And then there's this little thing called your marriage and family.

In ministry so many things can sap your emotions and strength, your very soul and spirit, almost daily.

So what can you do?

There's not a quick fix. Instead, my emotional survival has depended upon a way of life that protects, strengthens, and replenishes me emotionally. This means I've had to cultivate a set of activities and choices that allow God to "restore my soul."

Your list may be different, but here is mine:

1. A regular day off. I take a day off every week, and I'm really off. It's the last part that matters. It's so easy to let ministry tasks, emails, phone calls, text messages, and work demands weave themselves into every nook and cranny of every day. It takes self-discipline and clear intent to actually have a day off. For me, it's Friday, so that I can unwind before our weekend service schedule begins.

Once a month, I also go on a spiritual retreat in the mountains. I drive away from the office on a Thursday afternoon, stay overnight at a little bed and breakfast, and come back the next afternoon. The time is spent in a renewing place, in a renewing manner, and with a renewing God.

2. An annual study break. I take an annual study break of four to six weeks during which I physically relocate. This isn't vacation, but a time of intentional spiritual and emotional renewal for the tasks at hand. Those who teach and lead have to pour out instruction and guidance to others, and need to have annual times not just to rest, but to replenish themselves. This is a time to separate myself from the emotional wear and tear but still invest myself in issues related to ministry.

When I'm on study break, I read widely, travel broadly, visit other churches intentionally, map out another year of teaching strategically, and tackle large leadership challenges diligently. I've taken a summer study break of some kind for nearly 20 years, and it's one of the reasons why I'm still thriving in ministry today. Like an athlete that goes through a grueling season, you have to stop and give your emotions time to heal in order to enter a new season.

3. Clear boundaries regarding giftedness. As a pastor, you teach people about spiritual gifts and the importance of making that gift their area of primary investment. I've had to learn to apply this teaching to myself. There will always be times where you have to serve as needed, but staying primarily within your gift mix is preventative medicine against burnout. Nothing will drain you faster than operating outside of your giftedness.

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I do not rank very high with the spiritual gift of mercy, not to mention how that plays itself out in, say, extended pastoral counseling. If I had to invest in that area with ongoing, regular blocks of time, it would wipe me out. I've had to learn to be very upfront with folks about my areas of giftedness, and how those gifts are supposed to operate in the mix with other people's gifts in the body. Because what happens in a church, even one where spiritual gifts are taught and celebrated, is that the pastor is still expected to have them all—and to operate in them all. The danger is that you'll let yourself try.

4. Emotionally replenishing experiences. I've had to learn to intentionally pursue emotionally replenishing experiences. When you hurt, if you don't find something God-honoring to fill your tanks with, you'll find something that isn't God-honoring. I am convinced this is why so many pastors struggle with pornography—it offers a quick temporary emotional lift.

To prevent that, I've had to learn to do things that flood deep emotional joy into my life. For some folks it's boating, or golf, or gardening. For me, it's travel, pleasure reading, time alone with family, and enjoying anything outdoors—particularly the mountains.

5. Real time with God. The most strategic investment is time with God. But not just any time with God—I must have time with God that touches me at a heart and soul level. Every day I seek to spend some time pouring out my heart, and in turn, receiving his. Few people had the emotional ups and downs of David, and if you read the Psalms carefully, you see that he poured out his emotions to God in a disarmingly candid way. Learning to pray like David has been healthy for me.

Soul Strength

Ministry can be hazardous to your soul. Since we're always doing spiritual things, it is easy to substitute doing ministry with true communion with God. Plus, since so many people assume we're spiritual, it is tempting to believe that and let the estimation of others be the standard by which we judge the state of our souls. From this, there can be enormous levels of self-deception in regard to our spirituality. Coupled with the emotional drain of our vocational lives, we are terribly vulnerable.

I had a defining moment years ago when a mentor in the faith fell into moral failure. I thought, *If that can happen to him, it can happen to me.* It terrified me. At the time I was in a season where I was emotionally drained and spiritually undisciplined. I was overwhelmed with my own vulnerability, and with the realization that no one would ever own my emotions, much less my spiritual life, but me. If I was going to endure in ministry, it would have to be my responsibility. I knew that a personal resolve was called for.

And I made it. You've just read a list of some of the life-changes birthed as a result.

There are so many other investments I have learned to make or seen others make, such as the importance of healthy staff community, safe friends, and effective Christian counseling. They all matter, because the best gift I can give the Kingdom of God as a ministry leader is a healthy, whole, sane me. The hits and hurts of expectations, unsafe people, and crises will never end. But I can be in better shape for them when they do come, and give God my best to still be standing after they are over.

—JAMES EMERY WHITE is pastor of Mecklenburg Community Church in Charlotte, North Carolina; adapted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP journal, © 2009 by the author or Christianity Today International. For more articles like this one, visit www.LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss

1. What do you think about the author's list of ways to stay emotionally healthy?
2. Are there any other things you would add to the list? Anything you would take off?
3. What from this list would be the hardest for you to incorporate into your life? Why do you think that is?

DEVELOPING AN EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY CHURCH**Beating the Pastoral Blues***The effects of emotional immaturity on a life.*

Psalm 69:29

I was finally honest with myself: I hated the ministry. I was tired of the lies, the pretending, the guilt, and the expectations. I wanted out.

I'm sorry, God, I prayed. I gave it my best shot. I tried to do it in your power. It didn't work.

Ten years ago, full of zeal, my wife, Geri, and I had begun ministry with the vision to plant churches among the poor in New York City and around the world. Now, four children later, Geri was battle-weary and wanted a life, a marriage. So did I. Between the need to build the church and the feeling of responsibility for other people, I had little energy to parent my children and to enjoy Geri.

My spiritual foundation had finally been revealed for what it was—wood, hay, and stubble. I limped along for years. It took depression, anger, crying, and blaming myself for every mistake in the church to push me to take a three-month sabbatical. My time away from my congregation forced me to four unpleasant conclusions about myself. But realizing them was an essential step toward regaining my soul and regaining hope and joy in ministry.

I tended to lie a lot.

Last night I negotiated with an associate pastor about planting a church from one of our church plants. We spent hours exploring the real issues behind my associate's frustrations: he wanted to plant the church ahead of our timetable, and his philosophy of ministry didn't parallel ours.

I hated the meeting.

In the past, I would have told myself the meeting was going well, even though it wasn't. I would have manipulated a way for the situation to be a win/win for the pastor and our church. This time, I didn't. I was honest with him about what I felt were his shortcomings and about the fact that he may have to leave the church. This was new to me, and freeing.

In many ways, I have been an emotional cripple.

During my time away, I'd realized that when I didn't like something, I often pretended as if I did. I saw this in my relationship with my wife. I wouldn't communicate what I really thought. I'd act sullen or withdrawn when I didn't get my way. I discovered I did this even with friends. I didn't want to face the messiness of truth and their possible rejection.

I also did this with my church: I'd lie to myself, *We have a great church*. That is an exaggeration. Our church has some solid characteristics, but how could it be great when the senior pastor and his wife were miserable? As Eugene Peterson states powerfully in *Under the Predictable Plant*, all churches are full of Ninevites—sinners.

I often did not tell the truth to our staff and elders. I rarely told them what I was thinking or feeling when I knew they wouldn't like it.

In the midst of my struggle, I found myself exegeting the account of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. It is the first recorded sin in the early church, and it involves lying. Neither Peter nor God appreciated their pretending to be something they were not. Perhaps they had convinced themselves they were giving everything. We don't know. One thing is clear: God hates pretending in his church. He is passionate for truth.

Although it's often painful, I'm learning to tell the truth.

I tended not to feel.

In the two years leading up to my time away, I began to feel emotions I had never felt in my Christian life. This was a shock, since I perceived myself as a Christlike, meek, loving pastor.

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While I relate to Robin Hood's risk-taking qualities, I also carry insecurities and a fear of responsibility. Strong on vision and task, I would let people do or say anything to me as long as they would not abandon the project. After getting run over a lot of times, I started to feel rage, hate, bitterness, depression.

Centuries ago, St. Ignatius wrote that one means through which the Lord reveals himself is in the deepest movements of our feelings.

When my wife and I started asking each other, "What do you feel like doing?" we had difficulty answering. We knew what we *should* and *had* to do, but we were unable to identify what would bring us life. We discovered that each of us guarded large, unexplored expanses of feelings toward all kinds of things. We had little skill in how to listen and express what was going on inside us.

Some people worry that if you begin to feel deeply, it will open the floodgates to sin or to becoming narcissistic or to leaving the ministry. The truth is, some will find out they are not doing Christian ministry for the right reasons. Or they'll find out they're not properly suited for what they are doing.

After a period of disorientation, I felt freshly focused and confirmed in God's call for my life. Through this process, I discovered God was opening me up to let him in. He wanted to *tackle*—and the word is *tackle*—the mixed motivations and dark feelings inside.

I tended to die to the wrong things.

In the desire to serve Christ, I died to the joys of intimacy with my wife and children. At soccer games with my girls, my mind was usually focused on a problem in the church. Weeks turned into months. Months into years. Now years were turning into a decade: I had died to the joys of parenting and marriage for more than ten years.

The day before I started my time away from the church, my wife and I met with Julio and Leonor, who had come to Christ under our ministry. Now, they were the senior pastors of the Spanish congregation at New Life.

In their early years of leadership, they were vivacious, excited Christians. Now, seven years later, they were exhausted, feeling guilty about neglecting their two children. They felt overwhelmed with what was in front of them. After listening to them for three hours, I felt ashamed. Julio and Leonor were the products of our ministry. They were just like their teachers.

Geri and I asked their forgiveness.

We learned a basic but important lesson—the degree to which you love yourself corresponds to the degree to which you love others. Caring for ourselves was difficult for us to do without feeling guilty. We unwittingly thought that dying to ourselves for the sake of the gospel meant dying to marital intimacy and joy in life. We had died to something God had never intended we die to.

While away from the church, I took up drawing and watering our grass. I began to love being present moment by moment in the wonder of life, sitting on the porch holding my wife's hand, taking my five-year-old on a date for ice cream. Even now, as I think about the future, I'd like to play in a basketball league, to write, to take a community-college art course.

Losing my life for Christ is taking on a different meaning for me. I now see it is possible to win the whole world for God and lose my own soul (Mk. 8:36). In many ways, I have been an emotional cripple. Slowly, I'm learning to delight in my wife and children. Slowly, I'm learning to see every person as a human being, not as a task. Slowly, I am discovering the joy of creation. Slowly, I am discovering life.

I tended to have loose boundaries.

My wife and I entered the ministry with a strong commitment to relationships and cell groups. Sacrificial, intentional decisions were made to create community. The problem, however, was that we sacrificed our separateness as individuals, as a couple, and as a separate family within the larger church family.

In *Boundaries*, Henry Cloud and John Townsend define boundaries as a property line: "A boundary shows me where I end and someone else begins, leading to a sense of ownership." Geri and I had to discover that we needed more sharply-defined boundaries.

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Years ago, Geri and I bought a two-family house in Queens. A few years later, our good friends bought the two-family house to which ours was attached. We were excited about building community—four families next to each other. Other families from the church were considering moving into the neighborhood.

After our fourth child, however, we were out of space. For Geri, who was home-schooling at the time, the house was a ball and chain: crowded streets, a baby in our bedroom, having to whisper in the bathroom so friends on the second floor wouldn't hear us, a major highway less than a hundred yards from our door. Geri's desire for space and greenery made her an oddity in our small community.

We hadn't seriously considered moving because of the social pressure we felt. If we moved to another, more spacious part of Queens (there aren't many), or, God forbid, to the suburbs, we thought our friends would feel a sense of betrayal.

After our fourth baby, we had little choice. A newborn and the pressure created by our living situation finally drove me to break ranks with our friends and say, "We're moving." Our friends were hurt deeply. I had created the culture of togetherness and now was pulling out. While our friends eventually came to accept our decision, the process was painful.

Geri and I learned that for a variety of complex reasons—people's need to control, their unrealistic expectations, and our guilt and anger—Christian leadership is emotionally hazardous. For us to be effective long-term required that Geri and I clearly know who we are and who we are not. Otherwise, others would make that decision for us.

Healthy Courage

Almost two years have passed since our time away from the church. It has been some of the best time of our lives. I've enjoyed our marriage and my work as pastor as never before. Most important, I love God and others better.

As I reread this article, I am embarrassed about the way I lived, but I thank God for his mercy. Today I take off two days a week from the church, limiting my hours. New Life Fellowship is actually becoming a healthier place. And I enjoy waking up each day. I've finally become convinced that it is possible to lead a healthy, vibrant church and live a sane, joyful life.

But what it takes, more than I'd imagined, is courage.

—PETER SCAZZERO; adapted from our sister publication, *Leadership journal*, © 1998 Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit www.LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss

1. Have you ever lied to yourself/hid your feelings like the author did? Can you connect this to an unhealthy behavior from your past?
2. Has your marriage and relationships suffered at the hand of your ministry? How can you bring balance to this area of your life?
3. What do you think about the author's statement "Christian leadership is emotionally hazardous"? How have you seen this to be true or false in your life?

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Maintaining Your Psychological Balance

How a counseling pastor preserves his emotional health.

Isaiah 40:13

My prayer was neither theologically nor politically correct. With my green Chevy Vega idling at the corner of Mockingbird and Greenville in Dallas, Texas, I broke down. "Lord, I'm the only thing that stands between these people and hell," I prayed shamelessly. "They'll have to go to hell 'cause I'm going home. I quit."

When I had left the office that evening, my secretary had apprised me of my eight-month waiting list and the 40 or so phone calls screaming for my attention. I was overwhelmed by it all, tyrannized and oppressed by the guilt. Playing the role of messiah had taken its toll. Like the lifeguard who gets pulled under while rescuing a drowning victim, my workaholicism was dragging my own emotional health under water.

Pastors are susceptible to emotional fatigue. Yet the minister's emotional health is indispensable for effective counseling and longevity in the profession. Historically, pastors are caretakers. We need to be needed. And in that sense, perhaps we're all a little codependent, making care-giving an emotional hazard of our profession.

I've discovered since this crisis that the psychological hazards of counseling can be avoided. A meaningful and ongoing prayer life, of course, is the central element to a pastor's psychological health. Prayer not only puts our ministries into perspective, it is the means by which we are given divine strength and wisdom to do the work God has called us to.

In addition to prayer, I've found a few other practices also help.

Monitor Your Pulse

Just like the pulse needs to be checked at the beginning of a physical, so does the pastor's psychological pulse. I monitor my psychological pulse by asking myself a series of questions.

- *Am I emotionally available at home?* The inability to be emotionally present with my wife, Jan, or my daughters is a good indicator I'm on relational overload. If on the drive home from work, I find myself hoping and praying they've had a good day so I don't have to hold the bucket for their tears, my emotional tank is on empty.

And if I'm watching TV, tearing up over a plot not warranting my weeping and sobbing, I'm emotionally needy. I don't have enough emotional reserve to take it in stride. It may be a tragic plot, for example, where a parent is abusive to a child. Under healthy conditions, though, I'd be angry at the parent: "What a rat! You fink!" But if I'm emotionally breaking up over it, that's a reliable barometer about the plight of my soul.

- *Am I snookered?* Getting "snookered," or hooked, is counseling jargon, at least at our church, for letting your own concerns cloud and distort the counseling process.

Growing up in an alcoholic family, I played the role of protecting my mother. As an alcoholic, my father was verbally and emotionally abusive to my mother. So my tendency in marital counseling, if I'm out of balance, is to unconsciously side with the woman against the man. I feel more empathy for the woman; I lose objectivity. Getting snookered may indicate my own emotional needs are on the skids.

- *Am I abusing power?* Power is endemic to pastoral counseling. But the misuse of power, like leveraging clients for your own needs, is evidence of psychological sickness.

Not long ago, I could have quadrupled my money overnight in the stock market simply because I heard some inside information from one of my clients. That's never been a serious temptation to me. But information about businesses and families is privy to pastors, and we need to beware of the temptation to cozy up to people for financial rewards or perks.

Counseling pastors are entrusted with a wealth of information about their clients. Manipulating them with potentially damaging information is unethical and unprofessional.

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• *Am I voyeuristic?* Voyeurism means gaining sexual gratification from a safe distance. By asking questions irrelevant to the counseling process, pastors can become voyeurs, using the guise of counseling to gratify their unmet needs.

If I'm counseling a couple, for example, and the husband complains the wife is not freed up sexually, I need more information to understand what he means by that. Does it mean she dresses in the closet? Or does it mean she won't use whipping cream and swing from the chandelier? I need to ask appropriate questions to help them work through their issues, but not the sort of questions that titillate my own sexual curiosity.

If I start asking questions for my arousal, I've become voyeuristic, which removes me from a position of healing.

• *Am I believing my own press releases?* There are people who demand to see only me. They believe I'm the only person in the world who can help them. At our church, we call it the Hem-of-the-Garment Syndrome: "If I could just touch the hem of Jim's garment . . ." The humor helps us keep perspective. But it's serious business. If you start believing you alone have the answers for all the world's problems, you've crossed over the line of what makes for psychological balance.

• *Is my level of what's acceptable diminishing?* After constantly counseling D-minus marriages, it's easy for me to start believing that a C-plus relationship is not that bad. If I'm emotionally spent and listening to a couple drone on about their marriage, unconsciously I could begin to muse. *Why are you so uptight? Your C-plus marriage is better than most!* I lose hope for the A-plus marriage that God offers them. God's ideals, then, become a casualty of my emotional overload.

Setting Limits

Maintaining emotional equilibrium also requires that I set personal limits in five areas.

1. I have to recognize the number of clients I can emotionally handle each week. For myself, I've noticed that if I counsel six clients per day, I'm fine. If I do seven, I'm marginal. But if I see eight, I'm dead—I've hit emotional overload, and then my soul takes a nosedive. Time for legitimate emergencies and crises also need to be figured into my weekly schedule.
2. I put a ceiling on the number of draining cases in my counseling load. Many psychologists will not work with more than two borderline personality disorders at one time. That's wise advice for the counseling pastor. Their constant depression can easily sabotage the emotional condition of the pastor.
3. I balance my counseling load with clients I truly enjoy working with. I couldn't do just crisis intervention and survive. My first love is teaching, and so I would rather school clients on how to have marital intimacy than to constantly mop up the aftermath. I'm not much of a sewer cleaner. And so I keep a lid on the cases that drain me emotionally and balance the rest of my load, as much as possible, with what I love to do the most.
4. I create artificial barriers between me and my ministry. My secretary is an artificial barrier, my insulation from the instant demands of hurting people. She's like the wicked witch of Endor: no one sees me until they sneak past her! I'm too nice to people. She, on the other hand, is direct with those who would encroach upon my schedule.

Another barrier may be screening the phone calls at home with an answering machine, or simply taking the phone off the hook. Ready statements like "Why don't you call the office tomorrow" or "I need to check my calendar" also serve to buffer the pastor against the barrage of needy people.

5. I refuse to accept my client's problems as my own. I always delineate whose problem is whose.

Recently, a teenage boy kicked out of the house by his parents and with no place to go camped out in my office. I felt as if he was waiting for me to locate a place for him to stay. If I had gotten on the phone and tried to find him a place to stay, I would have rescued him.

And though I hurt for him—the poor guy was obviously scared—I consciously refused. We finally decided he should check into a motel at his expense.

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"Well, there's the phone," I announced. So he called the motel and reserved a room until things cooled down at home.

Sometimes people really do need financial help. Sometimes there's a legitimate need—for example, a husband has just walked off and left a wife and children without any resources. Those people we do help.

But a lot of people just want to come in and feel better. And there's a tremendous temptation to free people from their pain. But there's efficacy in pain; pain is a great teacher. By refusing to alleviate their pain, we strengthen them in the healing process and safeguard the emotional well being of our soul as well. If I get sucked into their problems, I can't be a counselor.

Finding a Soul to Lean On

Ongoing supervision for the counselor is another fundamental to long-term emotional health.

Often I've encouraged pastors to find a mental health professional, so that every couple of weeks or once a month, they can get the perspective of a veteran psychologist on their cases.

For the rural pastor, that's impossible. Other local ministers, however, make competent supervisors, even if they are from a theologically "foreign" denomination. And even a mature friend, with little or no psychology background, can offer acumen and perspective on counseling cases.

Accountability, as much as supervision, is another reason why ministers need a soul mate, whether close friend or spouse. Especially with a spouse, though, the pastor must be careful not to poison the spouse's attitude toward individuals in the congregation. Confidentiality still demands the anonymity of the client, even from a spouse.

Accountability bolsters the resolve of pastors, keeping them apprised of their own needs and alert for psychological duplicity.

A Constant Sense of Growing

In the ministry, our walk with the Lord can be easily sacrificed to the urgent; this is especially true in pastoral counseling. Often we become so busy that we forget to nurture our own spiritual needs. A constant sense of spiritual growth, though, forces us to confront our own issues. We don't have to be perfectly whole before the Lord will use us. We do, however, need to be experiencing the presence of Christ in the hidden parts of our psyche.

Some ministers, believing themselves called by God, have ended up in the ministry for all the wrong reasons. In reality, the call of God may have been distorted by errant motives and childhood pain. But whatever the issues—sexual addictions, marital difficulties, or narcissistic personality tendencies—pastors, to be healthy, must be working through their own issues, experiencing firsthand God's healing in their own lives.

And it's this healthiness that makes for effective counseling in the long run. I know one former pastor, for instance, who during his pastoral ministry was distressed that not many came to see him for counseling. And when people did come, he was rarely successful at helping them work through their struggles.

Years later, he recognized that he had been hindered in counseling others because he himself had yet to work through the struggles he was having with intimacy. For some time he had been dosing himself off from his wife, his church, and his friends, sharing less and less of himself with them. His people sensed his reserve and found it difficult to entrust themselves to him.

"If I had had a periodic checkup with another counselor myself, I think I would have seen this pattern earlier and dealt with it. As it was, my counseling ministry was handicapped. I missed an opportunity to help a lot more people."

Psychological health, to a large extent, is a matter of degrees. Emotional balance for the pastor, then, is not about personal perfection but a growing self-awareness.

Professional growth also contributes to my emotional condition. The field of human dysfunction is broad, and counseling pastors, to stay relevant, need continual professional development. The constant process of

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integrating psychology with what I understand biblically and theologically is food for my own psyche. That's why my monthly rendezvous with friends in psychology is so vital. A constant sense of professional maturation serves to maintain my sense of psychological health.

Redeeming Humor

Over the last 25 years of ministry, the prolonged exposure to the human predicament has sobered me. In a way, I suppose, pastoral counseling has scarred me. Seeing so much sadness and inhumanity has rubbed some of the shine off my disposition.

That's why humor is more important to me than ever. I'm convinced that a sense of humor can put some shine back in my disposition. It's another component critical to emotional equilibrium in the ministry.

I try to set an atmosphere where humor is encouraged. In the reception area of my counseling office, I often place a book of cartoons for people to thumb through, offering them a humorous glimpse on our plight as humans. When people get to know me, they often send me cartoons and humorous ditties, and I encourage that.

We all have little quirks that besmirch our personalities and frustrations that get in the way of ministry. Chuckling at our human entanglements liberates us from taking ourselves too seriously. A healthy dose of humor allows the pastor not to lose sight of the forest while counseling in the trees.

My frightful prayer at that memorable comer in Dallas broke my workaholism and my fixation to be the messiah for everyone that came down the pike. It wasn't a dramatic run—I didn't take a sabbatical or completely restructure my life and ministry. I just started to take one day at a time, one client at a time. I still struggle at times with the yearning to fix everybody's problems. But I've started paying more attention to my psychological health. And that, ironically, has helped me attend more effectively to the psychological health of others.

— JIM SMITH; adapted from Mastering Pastoral Counseling, copyright © 1992 Christianity Today International.

Discuss

1. What do you think about the author's suggestion of consulting a psychological professional? How would this help your own emotional health?
2. What other triggers, besides the ones listed by the author, let you know that you are off-balance emotionally?
3. How will maintaining your own psychological health help your congregation?

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The Emotional Reservoir

Four areas to focus on.

Proverbs 2:6

As a pastor, I was usually tuned in to the emotional state of my congregation. There were, of course, those members who wore their emotions on their sleeves so no one had to wonder how they felt (which was often quite negative or depressive). And there were others who kept their emotions in check, like Mr. Spock, until difficult circumstances brought them to me for wisdom or counsel. But most of the congregation fell somewhere in between—and collectively, it was usually pretty easy to sense the mood of the body. My biggest challenge was not the emotions of the congregation, but remaining attuned to my own emotional reservoir—which ultimately became dangerously dry.

Pastors tend to be so focused on meeting the needs of others that we often do not take care of our own needs—whether it's volitional or not, sacrificing our own emotional health not only impacts our own lives, but family and ministry as well. And for many pastors, ignoring emotional warning signs (which often manifest as growing stress or burnout), leads to waning commitment on the spiritual and physical reservoirs too. The combination spells certain doom for our ability to authentically serve as Christ's under-shepherds.

There is an overabundance of books and seminars out there today to help one address his or her emotional needs. Some are excellent, others are not. When it comes to keeping the emotional reservoir full, I have found that there are four "essential" areas on which we must focus: one's identity in Christ, seeking (and accepting) wise counsel from others, ongoing personal discipleship, and the regular practice of peacemaking.

Identity in Christ

One of the single most important things we need in order to have a healthy emotional reservoir is a clear and steadfast understanding of our identity. While most will not admit it, too many pastors today find their identity in their pastorate. If we find our identity in our role or career, then when things go badly (and they do from time to time) it strikes to the heart of who we think we are. But if our identity is firmly planted in Christ—who is steadfast and unchanging—then this critical issue is settled, once and for all.

Knowing who we are and who we are *not* is absolutely essential to our emotional health. Understanding that, by sole virtue of God's grace and our own faith response, we have been made sons and daughters of God through Jesus Christ, we gain the foundation for right emotion. It allows us to be content with how God has "wired" us for relationships and ministry. It provides confidence based upon God and his love rather than on our abilities or circumstances. It fosters a proper self-assessment of our own lives and ministries, recognizing the freedom of basing *everything* on God's appraisal of us rather than the multiple (and often misdirected) appraisals family members, friends, and powerbrokers in the church we serve. The only opinion that matters is God's, and his is clear from both the Scriptures and Christ's sacrifice for us on Calvary.

Finally, a proper Christ-centered identity helps us to see how we uniquely fit within the family of God. This is so important because the rugged individualism of America has now fully infiltrated the church—and the lives of many pastors too. But the truth is that we are dependent upon Christ and his body. Accepting Christ, we are joined to his community. Pastors sometimes take their role as Christ's "under-shepherds" too far, forgetting that Christ alone is Head of the body and we, like those we lead, are "body parts." A healthy identity in Christ gives us all perspective and helps us to thrive where God has planted us to bloom.

Wise Counsel

Another critical factor in maintaining a full emotional reservoir is regular access to and acceptance of wise, biblical counsel. Such counsel comes in many forms: a timely word from a parent, prayerful guidance from church leaders, the wisdom of denominational officials and other colleagues, and even professional Christian counselors. But because pastors often feel the need to show the people they lead that they "have it all together," and because they allow themselves to become overscheduled, wise counsel is often sought too late.

A pastor who is struggling with an addiction struggles on his own for fear that asking for help will be a career-ending move. A pastor who is verbally beaten by a member of his congregation tries to "table" the pain he is feeling so that he can move ahead with the church's ministry. A pastor who has a serious family issue, one that has him totally distracted from his ministry, succumbs to depression because he incorrectly assumes that he is a "failure" with his family and must, thereby, be a failed pastor as well. A pastor unwittingly enters into a church that is at war and becomes collateral damage in what is a long-standing conflict, and simply does not

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know what to do or where to turn. Need I go on? In each of these cases (and others like them), wise counsel can and usually will make the difference.

Personal Discipleship

A pastor's ongoing personal discipleship is another critical piece of this puzzle. Because the Church of these United States has unfortunately relegated nearly all "discipleship" down to an academic experience, filling the head with doctrine but not changing the heart, we have completely forgotten the holistic transformation authentic discipleship produces. It changes the whole man—including his emotions.

Paul talks about the transformation, specifically noting how it renews the mind (Romans 12:2). He speaks of how our attitudes should become like that of Christ—completely humble and other-oriented (Philippians 2:3–11). He describes the ultimate goal to reach "unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). There is so much more, but we quickly see that personal discipleship, along with everything else it produces, is a *primary* component in emotional health. And this is especially important for pastors to remember, if only because their lives are so readily consumed in the service of others. We must all continue our personal growth and transformation.

Personal Peacemaking

A fourth vital factor in keeping one's emotional reservoir filled strikes at the very core of both the Christian faith and the pastoral ministry: personal peacemaking. Conflict is now at almost epidemic proportions within the American church. It's worse in some denominations than in others, but none has been spared this onslaught of Satan. Few things have the power to completely destroy the life and witness of believers, pastors, and whole congregations as does unresolved conflict. And since it is so prevalent today, no pastor can dare risk allowing conflict to go unaddressed in the church, and especially when the pastor is a party to it!

Jesus is the preeminent peacemaker! He sacrificed more than we can comprehend to be incarnate and to take our place on the cross. His life, death, resurrection, and ascension are all a part of God's awesome plan to *redeem* mankind, the crown of his creation. It's all about reconciliation and peace—making the way for sinful man to be *righteous* once again before God. Christ has given us both the *message* of reconciliation (the gospel) and the *ministry* of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:17–21). This is the very heart of the Christian faith! And for anyone who calls themselves "Christian" to refuse to walk in this reconciliation is to destroy any hope of our witness for Christ. It is to declare to the world that we have a powerless message. It is to demonstrate to our congregations that we have no integrity in what we preach. It's sin.

Friends, please hear me on this: there is nothing that will either bind or free you more on every level than denying or pursuing personal peacemaking. Pastors cannot refuse to reconcile with anyone and believe that their emotional reservoir will ever be full. The Holy Spirit will give freedom when we have done everything in our power to reconcile, even when the other party rejects our confession and/or forgiveness. But to choose to avoid that which will demonstrate the reconciliation power of the gospel on a personal level is to let the reservoir run dry. Personal peacemaking is not an option for any believer—especially for pastors.

Most of the years that I served in local church ministry, I did not pay attention to my own emotional dearth. I knew I was in pain, but I rationalized that "Jesus told me there would be tribulation." It was not until an older, wiser friend came alongside me and helped me address this area of my life that I realized how vital it is to a healthy, fruitful pastorate. I'm still working on it. I feel like Paul, who notes that he has yet to obtain the goal (Philippians 3:12). But I am pressing on. And I hope that you also will press on, because we neglect our emotional reservoir to our own detriment.

—REV. DR. JOHN R. KIMBALL is Director of Conference Care and Church Redevelopment for the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference; © 2008 by the author. Used by permission. This article is one part of a series found [here](#) and [here](#).

Discuss

1. Have you ever rationalized your own pain, like the author? Why do you think that's a common response?
2. Do you often seek wise counsel from others? How has this helped you gain emotional steadiness?
3. Did the author's call to forgiveness and peacemaking convict you? Why is this practice often overlooked?

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Rejuvenate

13 Ways to Refresh Your Soul.

Psalm 73:4

How does a pastor's soul find rejuvenation? That is the question *Leadership* asked dozens of church leaders, and beyond the valuable, but expected, answer of "read the Bible and pray," many of the answers were insightful and unexpected. Here are 13 things various pastors have done to benefit the soul.

1. Take a walk.

Even a casual reading of the New Testament reveals that Jesus and his disciples did a lot of walking. Of course, for them it was the primary form of transportation, not necessarily a spiritual discipline. Still, regularly taking a long walk can quiet your soul and help you draw near to God. Many pastors report using walks to internalize their sermons and prepare their souls to preach.

2. Pray the daily offices.

In the early centuries, Christians gathered at designated times during the day for prayer. These prayer times, known as "offices," are still practiced by believers today. With the aid of a prayer book, you can pray alone knowing that others across the globe are sharing in your prayers at the same time. David Robinson, pastor of Harvest Fellowship Church in Manhattan, Kansas, says, "Learning to pray along with the Church and for the Church has significantly changed the scope and perspective of my prayers from simply the 'world around me' to the overriding and delivering promises of God's glory."

3. Say *no*.

Erecting proper boundaries is a critical discipline for a pastor. Even Jesus turned down certain requests. People are always clamoring for our time and energy. Learning to say *no*, even to good ministries and opportunities, will give the soul room to breathe and find rejuvenation.

4. Make a "non-utilitarian" friend.

Ministry is about people, but sometimes we can see people as a commodity necessary to advance our ministry. We may take a member to breakfast, but in the back of our mind, we know that a stronger relationship with this person is a resource for the church's ministry. Of course, this attitude goes both ways. Many people try to use pastors to advance their agenda as well.

So Brian McLaren suggests at least a few "non-utilitarian" friendships: "This is when we intentionally have a friendship because we like the person and we're not trying to use them for our success. It's to be with people just because you appreciate who they are, and they appreciate you." That kind of friendship creates the safety and grace the soul needs to thrive.

5. Fast from media, even ministry books.

The amount of information available today is never-ending. Even the literature available to pastors about ministry is overwhelming. While some of it is clearly beneficial, sometimes we need to rest from filling our heads with new insights and the pressure to implement them. One pastor told us, "Sermons, articles, and books that reveal how dysfunctional my church is drain me and do nothing beneficial for my soul."

6. Exercise.

Many pastors told us regular exercise is critical to the health of the soul as well as the body. And research has shown that a healthy body positively impacts a person's emotional and mental capacities.

Jeff Weddle from Rhinelander Bible Church in Rhinelander, Wisconsin, says, "Exercise outside is the best way for me to recharge. Some of my best prayers are said on my bike. It also allows me time alone to develop my sermon illustrations and ideas."

7. Laugh.

One pastor, name withheld, says, "After a difficult Sunday at church I like to come home and watch my DVD collection of Tom and Jerry cartoons. The slapstick humor helps me fight the temptation to take ministry, or myself, too seriously." Laughter, as the saying goes, is good medicine.

8. Take a pilgrimage.

Vacations are about relaxation, mission trips are about serving, but pilgrimages, says Tony Jones, "are an outward expression of an inward journey." The word may conjure images of superstitious peasants seeking ancient relics, but some pastors today are finding personal pilgrimages meaningful.

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David Fitch, pastor of Life on the Vine in Long Grove, Illinois, plans a pilgrimage every year to visit his childhood home. He says, "I spend a few days walking the streets of my upbringing, contemplating what God has done in my life, praising him, and praying about the future."

9. Find a spiritual director.

Not exactly therapy, not quite coaching, a spiritual director offers something else: a God's-eye view of your soul. Dieter Zander, pastor of spiritual formation at Bay Marin Community Church in Novato, California, visits his director, Father Tom, once a month.

"Just the discipline of going to him and submitting to his insights has been a rich experience for me," he says.

Brian Owen, from Campus Crusade, credits his spiritual director for helping him recognize God's movements in his life. "My spiritual director helps me step back and notice the activity of God in the intimate details of my life. I often leave our sessions with a fresh sense of hope, with greater awareness of God's will."

10. Meditate on the Lord's Prayer.

The Eastern Church has a tradition known as "hesychasm." This is the practice of repeating a short prayer, such as the Jesus prayer ("Lord have mercy" or the extended form, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner") over and over.

The goal is to focus your mind on God so you can commune with him more intimately. Many short passages of Scripture are used for this kind of prayer, but one of the most common is the Lord's Prayer.

Try sitting in silence for five minutes, and then say the Lord's Prayer reflectively aloud. Afterward, center your thoughts on one word or phrase and allow it to inspire your own prayers to God. One pastor reports using this practice three times a day or whenever he feels frazzled.

11. Begin a hobby.

When we asked pastors how they refresh their souls, many said they rely on a hobby unrelated to ministry. Some hobbies were highly physical, like surfing or rock climbing. Others were more contemplative and creative, like model-building or painting or writing poetry. David Kuo, a Christian who found himself serving amid the political chaos of Washington, D.C., says he found rejuvenation through fly-fishing.

12. Write an encouraging letter.

Proverbs 12:25 says, "Anxiety weighs down the human heart, but a good word cheers it up." The proverb does not specify whether the benefit is for the heart that receives the good word or the heart that gives it. Take time to reflect on a person who has blessed your life and ministry. After thanking God for him or her, write the person a letter of gratitude and encouragement. The exercise might bring cheer to both of your hearts.

13. Break something.

No one denies that ministry is a stress-inducing job, but many church leaders suppress the tension until it manifests itself in unhealthy ways.

Dave Johnson, senior pastor of Church of the Open Door in Maple Grove, Minnesota, tells how he handled stress during a period of rapid expansion and increasing pressure. The church had just been given a plaque for being one of the fastest growing churches in the area. Johnson and an associate hung the award on a tree and shot it to pieces with their rifles.

Drastic? Perhaps. Therapeutic? Definitely.


—SKYE JETHANI; © 2007 Christianity Today International/Leadership Journal.


Discuss

1. How would these ideas impact your emotional health?
2. What do you think about incorporating exercise into your routine? Would this help or hinder you?
3. What else would you add to this list?

DEVELOPING AN EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY CHURCH**Further Exploration**

Books and other resources to address and improve emotional health in your congregation.

 **BuildingChurchLeaders.com**: Leadership training resources from Christianity Today International.

 **LeadershipJournal.net**. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

The Emotionally Healthy Church by Peter Scazzero. (2003; Zondervan. 9780310246541). This book explores the connection between spiritual maturity and emotional health, helping pastors and leaders to straighten out their own emotional health in order to help their churches.

EKG: Probing the Heart of a Pastor by Tom Garasha. (Good Shepherd Publishers; 9781606436721). Learn how the condition of your physical heart affects your emotional and spiritual heart.

How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems by Peter L. Steinke. (The Alban Institute; 2006. 9781566993296). This book teaches you how to recognize and treat the emotional issues of your church.

Creating a Healthier Church by Ronald W. Richardson. (Fortress Press; 1996. 9780800629557). Understand how your church functions emotionally and learn how to improve the quality of life of your church.