

MARK ROCKENBACH

Stress in the Lives of Church Workers



Stress is the amount of pressure that is exerted against an entity. Too much pressure will crush you, and no pressure at all means you are dead. Consider your blood pressure. Blood pressure is the force applied against the walls of the arteries as the heart pumps blood through the body. If the heart pumps with too much force exerting too much pressure against the vessel walls, you have high blood pressure or hypertension. High blood pressure increases the risk of developing heart disease, kidney disease, eye damage and stroke (brain damage). A diagnosis of high blood pressure requires treatment that will help normalize blood pressure and prevent complications.

In healthy people, especially athletes, low blood pressure is something that is desired. However, low blood pressure (hypotension) may cause inadequate blood flow to vital organs such as the brain, heart and kidneys. Those with low blood pressure typically experience dizziness, lightheadedness, chronic fainting spells, nausea, fatigue and clammy skin. When symptoms of low blood pressure begin to interfere with daily function, lifestyle changes can help correct the problem.

As you can see, stress against the walls of the arteries impacts the overall health of the person. Too much pressure (stress), or too little, can result in difficulties. But not all

stress is destructive. In fact, research has discovered that stress is actually good for you.

Acute Stress

Acute stress will strengthen the immune system, protect against certain diseases and help you meet environmental challenges (Segerstrom & Miller, 620). Bruce McEwen notes that "Stressful events and the accompanying release of stress hormones can enhance the immune system" (McEwen, 97). The stress hormone which is most significant in this process is called "cortisol." It is a steroid hormone made from cholesterol (McEwen, 24). It is a major player in our response to stress. Small amounts of it give a quick burst of energy, increase memory and strengthen the immune system. Cortisol is very important to help us deal with acute stressors, sometimes referred to as the *fight or flight* response.

An increase in blood pressure in times when you are under stress will help you deal with life around you. When you get up in the morning there is an extra boost of stress hormones (cortisol) to help get you going. Bruce McEwen says, "Ideally, the tide of cortisol is highest in the early morning, ebbing in the afternoon and reaching a low at night" (McEwen, 26).

Acute stress (eustress) gives you a feeling of fulfillment and achievement rather than anxiety. Eustress gives you a competitive edge

and focus. It stimulates you and gives a sense of accomplishment. When I get into the pulpit to preach or stand before large groups to give a presentation, I have a healthy amount of stress that puts me in the zone. Athletes encounter the same thing when they compete. Without the acute stress response, we would not have the focus and alertness needed to perform under great pressure. Therefore, pressure (stress) is imperative in helping us perform and be productive. Without it we would not be motivated to do anything.

Chronic Stress

However, too much cortisol impairs cognitive performance and increases risk factors of high blood pressure which results in lower immunity (McEwen, 24; Segerstrom & Miller 618).

While acute stress is beneficial to the immune system, chronic stress has the potential to be damaging to the immune system. At Ohio State University, they discovered a connection among chronic stress, loneliness and social support. They found that loneliness, bereavement and lack of a social system had a negative impact upon the immune system (McEwen, 93).

Too much pressure (stress) over a long period of time is called chronic stress. While acute stress can be thrilling, exciting and healthy, chronic stress interferes with living. Chronic stress will result in either distress or burnout. Dr. Archibald Hart describes distress and burnout this way: "Burnout may never kill you, but your long life may not seem worth living. Stress (distress) may kill you prematurely, and you won't have enough time to finish what you started" (Hart, 5).

Both distress and burnout are the result of chronic stress. Too much pressure over a long period of time that is not properly dealt with is devastating. And pressure is typically felt from many different directions. Stress in one area of life can result in stress in another. While we are told to leave work at the office, it is easier said than done. Sleepless nights, poor eating habits, limited physical activity, and poor attitude toward those we have conflict with, all make their way home.

THE REV. MARK ROCKENBACH (M. DIV.,
MAC, LMHP) SERVES AS THE CHURCH
WORKER HEALTH EXECUTIVE OF THE
NEBRASKA DISTRICT. MARKR@NDLCMS.ORG

And the stresses of home also make their way to work. When the pressures around us become too intense and last too long, it becomes chronic stress. One of the worst aspects of chronic stress is when people get accustomed to it. This can be a particular problem for church workers. They begin to tell themselves that this is normal and even expected.

Stress Reaction

The stress reaction diagram (page 9) is a work in progress that I have been developing. Ultimately, a person wants to be in the middle where the stressors of life are in healthy balance. However, as stress accumulates and our responses become ineffective, we will soar into distress or dive into burnout. Dr. Hart has developed symptoms for distress and burnout that I have included in the diagram. The trigger for either distress or burnout is chronic stress. But each has very different symptoms and results.

First, I draw your attention to the middle of the diagram that is identified as *healthy homeostasis*. Homeostasis literally means "to stay the same." Every system needs balance in order to function properly. When the body is subjected to major change, it will react to maintain homeostasis and create health. If there remains a chronic imbalance in the system and homeostasis can't be achieved, there is illness. Eustress is healthy homeostasis that is good for your immune system and life functioning. Remember, the only person who is without stress is a dead person. So if you live, breathe and are reading this article, you have stress. Eustress (acute stress) will enhance the immune system and give you the strength to meet each new day. Yet, if you experience chronic stress, and the tide of cortisol continues without ceasing, the stress is no longer eustress or acute, but chronic stress.

Chronic stress gives way to two options. You will become distressed or burned out. Each option is the result of too much pressure that has not been dealt with in a healthy way and becomes unhealthy stress. From my experience it is common for professional church workers to become distressed and then become burned out.

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon use the illustration of a rocket. When the church worker is in distress, it is like a rocket soaring "skyward on a huge burst of energy, then it 'burns out' and falls

to the earth” (248). The teacher who sits at her desk while the kids run wild in the classroom is burned out. The pastor who stays in bed until noon and dreads going to the office is burned out. Burnout leads to lack of motivation and loss of calling and purpose.

Initially, burnout is your body’s way of blowing a fuse before the whole system blows up. When chronic stress puts you into a distressed state, your body will slow you down (symptoms of burnout) and produce a state of lethargy and disengagement in order to protect you from total destruction.

Recently, I was making a visit on a pastor in the hospital. It was my last visit of a very long day. In the midst of the visit I began to sweat and became clammy. I felt dizzy, sick to my stomach and was unable to concentrate upon the conversation. I was determined to finish the visit, but eventually it became evident that this was not possible. I quickly excused myself and sat in the hospital waiting room for about 45 minutes trying to recover. What happened? I had been dealing with chronic stress, and I had been living in a state of distress. I was over-engaged, leaving early and coming home late in order to satisfy the pressures of my vocation. But there, in a hospital room, an internal fuse blew. My body was attempting to protect me from total destruction.

Rowland Croucher identifies four categories of stressors:

- *Bio-ecological factors*—poor diet and exercise. Consumption of caffeine, alcohol or drugs. He also indicates the contribution of noise and air pollution.
- *Vocational factors*—lack of identity, too many expectations and poor time management. Poor boundaries, not taking time away from work.
- *Psychological factors*—loss of loved one, transitional issues, relating to social environment. Key elements relate to conflict and loss.
- *Spiritual factors*—questioning one’s faith, living under the Law and no deliverance of the Gospel. Immoral living: According to *Focus on the Family*, one in five pastors has a problem in the area of pornography. (www.focusonthefamily.com)

Expectations

The pressures which professional church workers face are typically the result of expectations from

others and themselves. With each expectation they are faced with fears, desires and judgments (Sande & Kober). The fears, desires and judgments can fall into three categories: real, imagined or threatened.

For example, Pastor Jack believes that his sermons, member visits and leading of worship all need to be high quality. His *fear* is that he will be rejected by his peers and those he is called to serve if his work is not high quality. This *self-imposed expectation* has created in him an *imagined fear*. As a result, the fear of rejection puts a lot of pressure on him to do everything perfectly.

Pastor Jack’s congregation also has *expectations* of him. They want (*desire*) their pastor to resurrect the youth group, increase church attendance, resolve the budget shortfall, and reach out to inactives and unchurched. They want this so much that they told him his raise will depend upon progress in these areas. This is a *threatened expectation* that has been imposed upon Pastor Jack. As a result, the *desires* of his congregation put a lot of pressure on him to do everything perfectly.

These expectations of both pastor and congregation are unrealistic. Yet, both have a tendency to look at ministry idealistically. Pastors will spend hours at the office or visiting members and prospects. Teachers take papers home to be graded, and they volunteer to coach sports or raise funds for school activities. Directors of Christian Education spend weekends on youth retreats and evenings in meetings or lock-ins. Some will spend their own money for ministry projects which the church will not support. They think they can solve any and all problems that come their way. They honestly believe they are God.

But it takes a lot of energy to be something you are not.

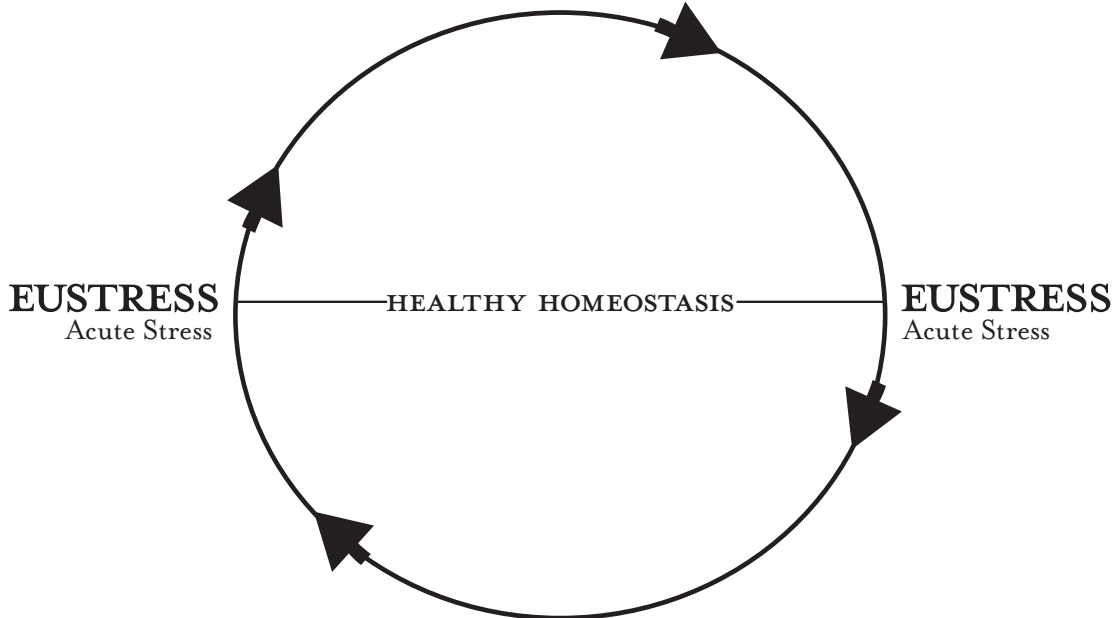
Identity

The demands of the church worker may not be that different or greater than other professional vocations. After all, each vocation has its own unique set of stressors. But how the church worker responds to stress is important. How they respond to the pressures of ministry will say a lot about who they are. It is at this critical time that they will either cling to the cross or cling to themselves.

Distress and burnout many times are the result when church workers cling to themselves rather than to the cross. They believe that they can handle the



DISTRESS
Impaired Functioning
Chronic Stress



BURNOUT
Decreased Motivation
Chronic Stress

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF BURNOUT

- Disengagement
- Emotions blunted
- Emotional damage primary
- Affects motivation/drive
- Sense of helplessness/hopelessness
- Loss of motivation/hope
- Produces paranoia, depersonalization/detachment/depression

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF DISTRESS

- Over-engagement
- Emotions over-reactive
- Physical damage primary
- Affects physical energy
- Sense of urgency/hyperactivity
- Loss of feul/energy
- Produces panic, anxiety disorders



pressures that are put upon them, without the help of God. They think that if only they try harder, work longer, give in more often, sacrifice more of their own family time, they can be all things to all people. But when they are faced with the reality that they can't do it all, that they can't be God, they fall into distress or burnout (First Commandment issues).

It is my observation that distress and burnout among professional workers many times takes place when they lose sight of Christ. Like Adam and Eve, they desire something more than God. They want to be God (Genesis 3:4-5). But Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 4:5, "For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." Paul is clear that he does not preach about himself but about Christ. This makes all the difference in the world. God expects us to fear, love and trust in Him. This expectation is not imagined or threatened, but it is real. Paul faced persecution and suffering (which probably caused him stress) with confidence because his hope in Christ helped him to be realistic about what he was facing.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1:8-10:

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardship we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure (stress), far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we set our hope that he will continue to deliver us.

God does deliver us from our sins. When unrealistic self-imposed expectations or outside expectations drive us to sin against the first commandment, there is forgiveness. Isaiah assures us: "But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses. I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more" (Isaiah 43:24b-25).

One of the most significant things you can do is change how you respond to stress. And this begins by remembering who you are. Most importantly, you are not God. When you face pressure (stress)

far beyond your ability to endure, don't rely on yourself. Only God can deliver you and give you the strength to endure such hardship; and He does so through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Paul Tripp says, "Our deepest problem is that we seek to find our identity outside the story of redemption . . . Only as we see our story enfolded in the larger story of redemption will we begin to live God-honoring lives. Lasting change begins when our identity, purpose, and sense of direction are defined by God's story" (27-28). The good news is not that we will be without pain, suffering, or stress. The Good News is that Christ comes to us in the midst of pain, suffering and stress. Gene Veith says it well: "But when we realize just how lost we are, then we cling to the cross, trusting Christ to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves" (60). In response, we can say with the Psalmist, "Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens" (Psalm 68:19).

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