

Burnout, Anxiety, and Depression during COVID-19:

Pathways to resilience and holistic flourishing informed by longitudinal research with religious leaders

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Challenges inherent to Religious Leadership

- ▶ High or unrealistic expectations – not only for the religious leader, but for their spouses and children as well (Morris & Blanton, 1994)
- ▶ Stressors within the religious community context (Foss, 2002; Lee & Iverson-Gilbert, 2003)
 - ▶ Presumptive/unrealistic expectations
 - ▶ Personal criticism/attack, Family criticism/attack
 - ▶ Boundary ambiguity (i.e., you're always a leader 24-7)
 - ▶ Emotional isolation
 - ▶ Exposure to crises, unpredictability of crises
 - ▶ Interpersonal and administrative demands
 - ▶ Performance-oriented tasks (e.g., preaching/speaking)

Challenges inherent to Religious Leadership

- ▶ Impact of unhealthy religious community environments on religious leaders (Proeschold-Bell et al., 2009)
 - ▶ Congregant opposition to even small changes suggested by the clergy member
 - ▶ Having two sets of members within a congregation who polarize issues along group lines
 - ▶ Congregants using intimidation or abusive tactics to oppose clergy.

***Clergy Killers (Rediger, 1997),
The Toxic Congregation (Rediger, 2007)***

Challenges inherent to Religious Leadership

Many religious leaders isolate, hold their pain, and just keep going – despite the further hurt this may cause (to themselves and others), due to:

- The sacredness of their work may drive religious leaders to work harder and longer than other helping professionals (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005)
- The implications of changing careers for religious leaders
 - “Vocational abandonment” – abandoning a sacred life calling (Proeschold-Bell et al., 2016)

Challenges inherent to Religious Leadership

- ▶ Clergy “wasting out” – leaving their religious vocation demoralized, depressed, and disillusioned with God/religion. (Hunt et al., 1990)
- ▶ Varying prevalence of Christian clergy members across studies:
 - ▶ Burnout causes 1/3 of all religious leaders to ponder implications of leaving what they thought would be their life work (Daniel & Rogers, 1982).
 - ▶ 30% of a sample of clergy (Rolph et al., 2015)
 - ▶ 65% of clergy reporting suffering from burnout at one point in their ministry life (Visker, Rider, & Humphers-Ginther, 2017)

Empirical Predictors of Burnout

- Depression* (Jacobson et al., 2013)
- Loneliness & Isolation (Scott & Lovell, 2015)
- Marital tension & conflict (Rolph et al., 2015)
- Certain coping behaviors
 - Behavioral disengagement
 - Mental disengagement
 - Exclusive focus on venting emotions

(Visker, Rider, & Humphers-Ginther, 2017)

Empirical Predictors of Burnout – cont'd

- ▶ Feeling guilty when not working, pushing oneself to work hard even when it is not enjoyable (Sterland, 2015)
- ▶ Desire to please others, guilt/shame orientation (Barnard & Curry, 2012)
- ▶ Lack of self-compassion (Barnard & Curry, 2012)
 - ▶ See themselves as one who offers help but does not require any support themselves.
 - ▶ Own struggles and suffering as less relevant compared to that of others (Barron, 1999)

What are the signs of burnout?

- ▶ **Emotional Exhaustion:** feeling emotionally worn-out and drained as a result of accumulated stress from work. Symptoms include: chronic tension, anxiety, physical fatigue, insomnia, etc. (Lee & Ashforth, 1990)
- ▶ **Depersonalization:** a negative, callous, or excessively detached response towards people you care for (Kahill, 1988). Treating others as objects or numbers in order to protect oneself from unwanted demands and perceived threats (Ashforth & Lee, 1990).
- ▶ **A Lack of Personal Accomplishment:** the tendency to negatively evaluate the worth of one's work, feeling insufficient or incapable with regards to the ability to perform one's job (Maslach & Jackson, 1981)

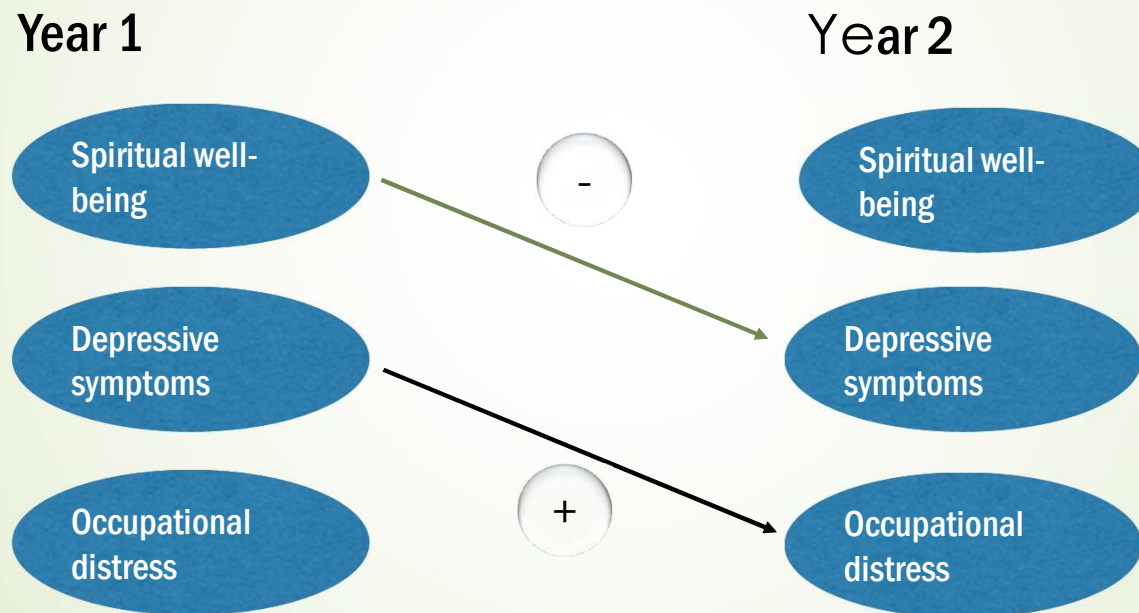
Longitudinal Research on Clergy Burnout

The Duke Clergy Health Initiative

Measured the three major components of burnout in all UMC clergy in North Carolina from 2010-2016

- ▶ **Emotional Exhaustion:** feeling emotionally worn-out and drained as a result of accumulated stress from work lives
 - ▶ Of clergy*: 68% have low levels, 22% have moderate levels, 10% have high levels
- ▶ **Depersonalization:** a negative, callous, or excessively detached response towards people you care for
 - ▶ Of clergy*: 78% low; 14% moderate; 8% high
- ▶ **Lack of Personal Accomplishment:** the tendency to negatively evaluate the worth of one's work, feeling insufficient in regard to the ability to perform one's job
 - ▶ Of clergy*: 56% low; 22% moderate; 22% high

What comes first: Predicting shifts



Milstein, Hybels, & Proeschold-Bell. (2019).
Psychology of Religion and Spirituality.

What can be done to safeguard clergy from burnout?

- Leisure behavior, leisure satisfaction predicted lower burnout (Stanton-Rich & Iso-Ahola, 1998)
- Seeking Mentors (Barnard & Curry, 2012)
- Sabbath-keeping (Beebe, 2007)
- Taking a vacation (De Bloom et al., 2009)
- Reaching out to others, developing a social support network (Proeschold-Bell et al., 2015)
 - For male clergy in particular, reaching out to other pastors is related to lower levels of depression (Lutz & Eagle, 2019)

What can be done to safeguard clergy from burnout?

- Recognize the possibility that clergy can simultaneously experience burnout and work satisfaction at the same time (Doolittle, 2010).
 - Pastoring can be understood as a paradoxical experience of emotional extremes whereby an individual can experience joy and meaningfulness **AND** the three components of burnout all at the same time. (Adams et al., 2017)
 - Some clergy members work themselves into burnout **because** they enjoy their work so much.

Acknowledgements

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- Creating and pilot testing a seminarian character/virtue and spiritual development program assessment instrument (ID: 61034)
- The assessment of character and spiritual formation: An empirical, longitudinal, and ecumenical project with seminary students and faculty (ID: 61515)

Project Activities

Collect Longitudinal dataset on character/spiritual development from a large and diverse cohort of Christian seminary students

- Data collected from seminary students enrolled in 18 seminaries who initially enrolled in seminary on Fall 2019
Ambrose Seminary, Aquinas Institute of Theology, Baylor University (Truett Seminary), Boston University, Fuller Theological Seminary, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Hood Theological Seminary, Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, Mount Angel Seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary, Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology, St. Mary Seminary, St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, Talbot School of Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Virginia Theological Seminary, University of Notre Dame
- 6 timepoints of data spanning three years (Fall 2019 – Spring 2022)

Preliminary Findings: Pre-Post COVID-19

1. Mental health near peak of COVID-19

Depression (Fall 2020) – 51.1%; PHQ-9

- 29.9% (mild depression)
- 11.6% (moderate depression)
- 7.0% (moderately severe depression)
- 2.6% (severe depression)

Anxiety (Fall 2020) – 43.1% anxiety; GAD-7

- 26.7% (mild anxiety)
- 11.6% (moderate anxiety)
- 4.8% (severe anxiety)

PTSD (Fall 2020) – PC-PTSD-5

- 43.4% of total sample reported experiencing a traumatic, life-threatening event in their lifetime
- 33.7% of total sample endorsed sufficiently significant trauma symptoms to be considered for a potential diagnosis of PTSD

Preliminary Findings Pre-Post COVID-19

2. Impact of COVID-19 on Mental health

“All things considered, how would you assess the impact of the COVID-19 situation on your life?”

[0 to 100, where 0 = very negative, 50 = positive and negative in equal amounts, 100 = very positive]

Negative COVID Impact significantly related to:

- **Depression**
- **Anxiety**
- **PTSD**
- **Spiritual Struggles—Divine** (anger at God, feeling as though God was punishing me, feeling as though God had abandoned me)

Preliminary Findings Pre-Post COVID-19

3. Which constructs at Fall 2019 predicted outcomes in Fall 2020? (statistically controlled for COVID impact and baseline depression levels @ FA2019)

Fa 2019 predictors of lower levels of depression in Fall 2020

- **Humility** (Appreciating other's strengths, teachability)
- **Forgiveness of others**
- **Differentiation of Self** (emotional reactivity, acceptance of what we cannot change)
- **Secure attachment**
- **Church attendance/participation**

Preliminary Findings Pre-Post COVID-19

3. Which constructs at Fall 2019 predicted outcomes in Fall 2020?

Predictors of higher levels of depression in Fall 2020? (after statistically controlling for COVID impact and baseline depression @ Fall 2019)

- **Experiential avoidance**
- **Shame**
- **Avoidant attachment/Avoidant attachment to God**
- **Spiritual struggles**
- **Social Disconnectedness**

Preliminary Findings Pre-Post COVID-19

What in Fall 2019 predicted lower levels of anxiety in Fall 2020? (after statistically controlling for COVID impact and baseline anxiety @ Fall 2019)

- **Forgiveness of others**
- **Gratitude**
- **Differentiation of Self** (emotional reactivity, acceptance of what we cannot change)
- **Church attendance and participation**
- **Authoritarian beliefs***

Preliminary Findings Pre-Post COVID-19

What in FA 2019 predicted higher levels of clarity in one's calling/vocation in FA 2020?

- Gratitude, Joy
- Social Justice Commitment
- Scripture engagement, contemplative and colloquial prayer (but not liturgical and petitionary prayer)
- Emotional regulation



Implications of our findings: Pathways towards well-being

Empirical predictors of spiritual & human flourishing

- 1) Differentiation of Self** – one's capacity to navigate paradoxical relational needs of being both independent/autonomous as well as connected/intimate with others.
- To be intimately connected to others without losing oneself, to retain one's uniqueness without spurning connection with others



Differentiation of Self

“Let him who cannot be alone beware of community...Let him who is not in community beware of being alone. Each by itself has profound perils and pitfalls. One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and the one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation and despair”

-- Bonhoeffer, Life Together

Empirical predictors of spiritual & human flourishing

2) Intercultural Competence – one's sensitivity and competence in navigating cultural differences with others.

- Relating to God/the Divine as the 'other'
- Linked positively with humility, gratitude, spiritual well-being, meditative prayer
- Linked negatively with spiritual instability, spiritual grandiosity, and insecure attachment to God

Empirical predictors of spiritual & human flourishing

3) Religious Quest

- Ability to engage in existential questions without simplifying in complexity, perceiving religious questioning/doubt as positive, openness to change religious ideals and beliefs (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991).
- In the short-term, can intensify feelings of anxiety, instability, and identity confusion. (Watson, Morris, Hood, Milliron, & Stutz, 1998).
- Over time, associated with joy and meaning in life (Jankowski, Murphy, Johnson, Sandage, Wang, & Tomlinson (2021).



Question we asked to our team:

What observable qualities or indicators point to the reality that someone is spiritually flourishing/spiritually mature?

Indicators of Spiritual Flourishing

Spiritual Directors and Human Formation Advisors (Mount Angel Seminary and Abbey)

- **Freedom** – acting and choosing the course and direction of life in freedom (not reluctantly or out of pure duty/obligation)
- **People of communion**—with deep relational capacities not only with God but also with one's neighbor
- **Affective maturity**—aware of internal emotional states and equipped to cope with these internal states
- **Interculturally competent**—particularly as it relates to one's treatment of the poor
- **Well-integrated person**—regardless of context; vs. a compartmentalized spiritual life (“I know doctrinally that God loves me, but I don't feel that way”)
- **Gift of compunction**—returning to the Lord faster after they have sinned, not sinking into despair or shame, not shocked or surprised at their capacity to think and act in ways they wish were not true; self-acceptance
- **Wielding power**—will to power, will to dominate and manipulate others; clericalism (wanting recognition, entitlement, privileges)
- **Dangers of wanting to choose one's own cross**—Christians are not free to do that. Instead, we are to take up the cross that we have been given to bear in obedience.

