

Practical Suggestions for

Self Care for Ministers

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Professional ministers are at special risk to become emotionally/psychologically depleted by the demands of those who look to them for guidance, support and assistance. They are particularly vulnerable to “compassion fatigue” as a result of their pastoral role and to “burn-out” as a result of their habitually high demands of self, tendencies toward over-work/over-achievement, and difficulty maintaining appropriate professional limits and boundaries. They may become consumed with the demands of others to the point of neglecting self-care, nurturing their marriages and families, and maintaining their social support networks. Recommended ways to guard against compassion fatigue and burn-out include:

1. Attend to your own physical, spiritual and emotional needs- eat, rest, exercise, engage in recreational activities, regularly engage in spiritual disciplines (prayer, scripture reading, confession, etc.) spend time with friends, etc.
2. Incorporate healthy stress management practices into your regular daily routine.
3. Treat yourself and your family with extra TLC during stressful periods.
4. Let the people you serve “own” their own problems and their consequences.
5. Set and maintain boundaries that protect your personal and family time.
6. Accept your own limitations and powerlessness. God is God and you are not!
7. Ask for help. Let others know what you need, and be specific (even if it’s something as simple as a quick prayer over the telephone).
8. Take regular breaks to do something fun, rejuvenating and revitalizing.
9. Have at least one friend with a great sense of humor who always makes you laugh.
10. Have at least one friend who will confront you with self-destructive behavior and “delusions of adequacy.”
11. Have at least one friend who asks how you’re doing and won’t settle for “Thanks, I’m okay,” for an answer.
12. Have at least one friend who accepts, affirms and encourages you when you are less than your best self.
13. Have at least one friend who inspires you to be your best self.
14. Have at least one friend who is willing to walk to the brink of the pit with you and not let you fall over the edge.
15. Regularly seek out connection and communion with God, then shut up and listen!

Church Risk Management 101

Those the church serves have a right to expect church leaders to take appropriate steps to protect them from harm. Hoping and praying that abuse, exploitation and misconduct won’t happen in your church simply aren’t enough.

“Community Standards” are key principles in determining whether a course of action is reasonable, appropriate and adequate in regard to church safety and security and protection of vulnerable others. Community Standards are what the majority of similar organizations with similar programs & services are doing to address issues of risk

management and protection of vulnerable others. Community Standards lead to development of Community Expectations. Failure to meet these standards and expectations can quickly lead to loss of church credibility.

Community Standards and Expectations in regard to protection of vulnerable others:

- “No Tolerance” Stance
- Prevention Policy, Reporting Process and Response Plan
- Background & Reference Checks
- Training of staff, leaders & volunteers
- Familiarity and compliance with legal and ethical requirements
- Accountability processes and procedures
- Incidents handled swiftly & responsibly

Major Areas of Church Liability in Regard to Protection of Vulnerable Others

- Absence of written policies and procedures
- Lack of education and training process
- Failure to screen staff, leaders or volunteers
- Lack of adequate supervision and oversight of personnel, facilities, activities, etc.
- Assumption that all church members are trustworthy
- Swiftness to extend forgiveness and multiple “second chances”
- Absence of written standards of ethical conduct
- Easy access to unsecured campus and buildings

Maintaining an “Integrity Zone”

Beyond implementation of policies and procedures, processes need to be created to provide personal and professional accountability for church leaders. One essential step is the intentional creation of accountability relationships with your spouse/significant other, mentor, other church leaders, and community peers. Regular supervision sessions and performance reviews should address goals in areas of personal and spiritual growth as well as job performance.

A sense of entitlement is one of the biggest threats to church leaders. It’s easy to convince yourself that you do so much and work so hard that you deserve a little something extra, or that the moral standards to which you would hold others don’t apply in your case. Being at the top of the leadership chain provides ample opportunity to indulge your desires without anyone being any the wiser, at least until you cross a line that results in a complaint being made. Finding other leaders who understand the stresses and temptations you face and hold you accountable for your behavior is essential to protecting your integrity and credibility. Isolation is your greatest enemy.

Boundaries and Boundary Crossings in Professional Relationships

Appropriate Boundaries in Professional Relationships:

- Dealing effectively with your own emotions & emotional needs without using those you serve to meet your personal needs
- Dealing responsibly with the emotional needs of those you serve
- Meeting standards of ethical conduct
- Being accountable for your actions, interactions & relationships with those you serve in the role of coach, mentor, etc.

Setting & Maintaining Healthy Professional Boundaries:

- Directly address issues of confidentiality, privacy, & propriety.
- Clarify the limits of your availability.
- Guard against inappropriate emotional attachments.
- Be cautious in using physical touch.

- Avoid enabling poor choices & problem behaviors.
- Protect your own emotional & spiritual wellbeing.

Red Flags:

- Boundary Crossings
- Emotional overinvestment
- Exclusive relationship or interactions
- Special attention, favor, etc.
- Change in mood, behavior, attitude, interests, routine, work or school performance of vulnerable individual

Boundary Crossing vs. Boundary Violation

Crossing certain professional boundaries may at times beneficial, at times neutral, and at times harmful. “Boundary crossing” is a descriptive term, implying neither universal approval nor rejection of the practice. The impact of any particular boundary crossing must be assessed on a case-by-case basis that takes into account the context and situation-specific facts, such as the possible benefit or risk of this crossing to the person being served. A boundary violation is a harmful boundary crossing, or a transgression of a boundary. Areas of boundaries such as role; time; place and space; money; gifts, services, and related matters; clothing; language; self-disclosure and related matters; and physical contact are subject to boundary crossings. While broad guidelines are helpful, the specific impact of a particular boundary crossing can only be determined by careful attention to the context in which it occurs.

Considerations in Boundary Crossings:

- Would I do this for any other person in the same or a similar circumstance?
- What would my peers think of this behavior?
- Could my behavior be misinterpreted?
- Could my behavior appear to exploit or abuse a vulnerable person?
- Am I helping or enabling (rescuing another person from the consequences of their choices)?