

# Preventing Burnout Through Spiritual Self-Care

By Victor M. Parachin

**S**adly, an increasing number of people — including priests — live lives that are stressed and burning out. Characteristics include a weakening of spirit and energy, a decreased capacity to care or a decreased capacity to be filled with loving-kindness, patience, humility, joy and altruism.

An effective antidote to personal and professional burnout is spiritual self-care something promoted by Jesus who asked: "Are you tired? Worn out? . . . Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me — watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. . . Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly" (Mt 11:28-30, *The Message Bible*).

Spiritual self-care is not something that just happens. People must mindfully apply themselves to practices that will result in personal transformation. Here are some ways for priests, religious and other spiritual workers to engage in spiritual self-care.

## Pay attention to warning signs.

Rather than wait for a disaster to strike your life, pay attention to the warning signs so that you can respond rather than react to burnout issues that may be smoldering. These are common signs that a person is under great stress and in danger of burnout:

- Chronic fatigue — exhaustion, tiredness, a sense of being physically run down
- Anger at those making demands
- Self-criticism for putting up with the demands
- Cynicism, negativity, and irritability
- A sense of being besieged

- Exploding easily at seemingly inconsequential things
- Frequent headaches and gastrointestinal disturbances
- Weight loss or gain
- Sleeplessness and depression
- Shortness of breath
- Suspiciousness
- Feelings of helplessness
- Increased degree of risk taking.

**Begin your day with praise to God.** Take your cue from the Psalmist who wrote: "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise" (Ps 51:5). "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth" (Ps 8:9). "I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart . . . I will be glad and rejoice in you" (Ps 9:1-2).

Let the first words of your day be addressed to God expressing joy for a new day, for life, for health, for work, for family, friends, colleagues. Follow that

by repeating this affirmation to yourself: "God is with me and within me. All actions I take today are my offerings of praise to the Divine." Starting your day with a few words of praise to God generates an enthusiasm for your daily life and work.

Observe the Sabbath day. Exodus 20:18 reads: "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord Your God. On it you shall not do any work." This may seem absolutely preposterous given the use of modern technologies (such as cell phones and email) which mean we can be reached 24/7. Yet, consider this insight from a Rabbi who serves a large synagogue in America's fourth largest city (Houston).

Married with six children, every Friday this busy rabbi and his family turn off their cell phones, computers, televi-



Prayer is necessary to avoid burnout.

## IN BRIEF

- *Warning signs*
- *Begin your day with praise*
- *Observe Sabbath*
- *Be a person of prayer*
- *Laughter and humor*
- *Meditate*
- *Recite affirmations*
- *Lighten up*



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sions, radios. Then, they share a ritual meal together. Their Sabbath lasts a full 24 hours. When he was asked, "Didn't your kids rebel when you turned off the TV?" he responded: "No, they loved it!" Consider making yourself unavailable to work demands by giving yourself the gift of a Sabbath one day each week.

**Be a person of prayer.** The busier we become the easier it is to let daily prayer slip. Yet, it is when our energies are most taxed that we need to be in touch with God. Avoid neglecting prayer.

Be guided by this wisdom from Martin Luther who said: "I am so busy now that if I did not spend two or three hours each day in prayer, I would not get through the day." St. Francis of Sales expressed a similar view: "Every Christian needs a half hour of prayer each day, except when he is busy, then he needs an hour."

The point of their advice is not the amount of time spent in prayer but the fact that prayer should never be sidelined because we are feeling swamped. It is prayer which connects us to a power greater than ourselves. Through prayer our energies can be replenished, our vision restored, our anxieties eased, hope refreshed, and our confidence renewed.

**Restore laughter.** The bible reminds us: "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones" (Prv 17:22). Caregivers are usually busy people who live and work at a fast pace. Often there is little room for laughter and humor.

From time to time, take in some comedy either via a movie, a television program or at a comedy club. Studies show that enjoying comedy is therapeutic. In an Indiana study, women cancer patients who watched a funny video had lower stress hormones and higher natural "killer" cells (these are the kind which attack and destroy viruses and cancers) than women who watched a tourism video.

Another study of diabetic patients who suffered a heart attack were prescribed a nightly 30 minute regimen of TV comedy. After a year they showed

drops in blood pressure, used less medication for chest pain and had 80 percent fewer heart attacks than a control group which did not regularly watch comedy television.

**Meditate.** Scores of scientific studies demonstrate that even a few minutes of regular meditation is effective for easing anxieties and bringing peace of mind. "Meditation has a long history as a calming practice," says Andrew Newberg, M.D., associate professor of radiology and psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. "But we now know that when you meditate, different parts of the brain actually turn on and off and your autonomic nervous system slows down, which short-circuits your stress response."

Although meditation may appear complex and mysterious, it is actually quite easy to do by following three S's:

**Silence** — Find a place where you will be uninterrupted and can sit comfortably and be silent for a few minutes.

**Stillness** — Gently close your eyes and mentally embrace the silence. Count your breath from one to 40; an inhalation/exhalation is one count.

**Simplicity** — Spend the last minute or two quietly repeating Psalm 46:10 to yourself: "Be still, and know that I am God. . . ." Slowly, repeat this over and over. This entire meditation will take less than five minutes. It's simple enough and short enough that you could use it periodically throughout the day. Practicing meditation can renew, refresh and refuel body, mind and spirit.

**Recite affirmations.** An affirmation is simply a mini-meditation done by reciting short, positive statements to yourself. These can be repeated quickly whenever you feel anxiety and stress coming on. Even though they are brief, they have an immediate impact on the mind.

Kathleen Hall, Ph.D., founder of the Stress Institute in Clarkesville, Georgia and author of *A Life in Balance*, says such stress therapies are "proven medicine." Researchers used to believe that "it would take six months or at least six hours to lower your stress level,"

she notes "but now we know that you can lower your heart rate, slow your breathing and drop your stress hormone levels in as little as 30 seconds; with practice, you can de-stress in just six seconds.

Your every thought, word and action causes a related chemical reaction, so if you train your mind to relax, your body learns to respond immediately." Some effective affirmations to use throughout your day include: I am calm. I am peaceful. I am capable. I am filled with joy. I am grateful. My cup runneth over. This is the day God has made – I will rejoice in it and be glad

**Lighten up.** Try not to take yourself, others or life so seriously. Approach everything and everyone with an inner smile. Martin Rutte tells of being interviewed by the president of a major advertising firm. At that stage in his career, it wasn't very often that he met with a company president so he was both eager and nervous. Arriving for his 10 a.m. appointment, he was promptly ushered into a spacious, attractive office. The President "had his shirtsleeves rolled up and a mean look on his face," Rutte recalled.

"You've got 20 minutes," the president stated. Rutte sat there silently.

"I said, you've only got 20 minutes," the president repeated. Again, Rutte sat there in silence.

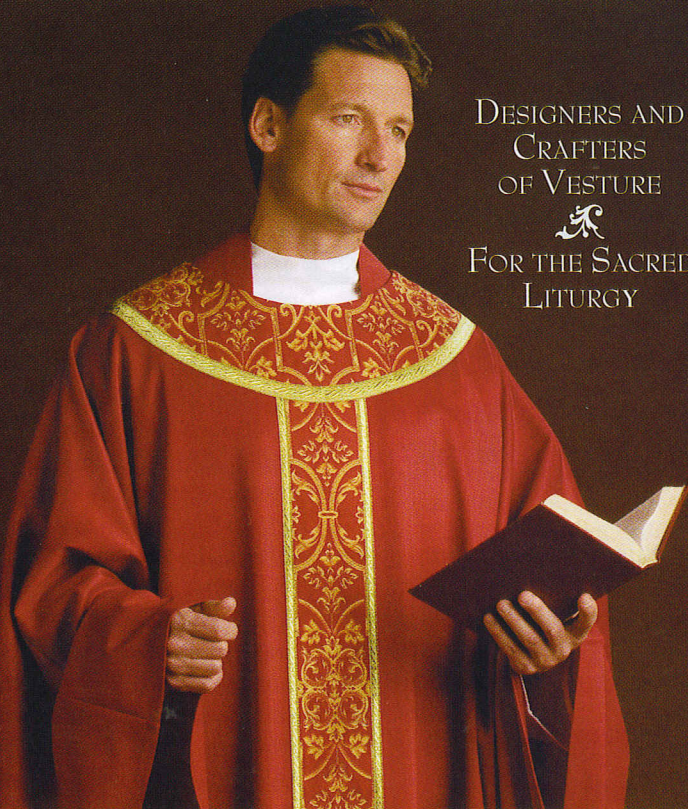
"Your time's ticking away. Why aren't you saying anything?" the president demanded. Rutte finally spoke: "They're my 20 minutes. I can do whatever I want with them."


Upon hearing that, the president burst into laughter. He and Rutte spoke for an hour and a half. Rutte got the job.

Finally, remind yourself that you have a choice about the anxiety and fatigue in your life. If you do not like the toll stress is taking on you physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, you can do something about it today. The choice is yours! **P**

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