

HOW TO DEVELOP HABITS FOR WELL-BEING

Seminaries and social work programs often ask their students to create a self-care plan. Not only does this send a message about self-care while pursuing a degree, ordination, or certification, it also makes clear that self-care is a life-long commitment for those who serve the church and others. High demands and weak support systems can foster a toxic environment for clergy health. Therefore, some experts see a problem with the idea of *self-care*, which suggests that responsibility for clergy well-being falls entirely on the pastor. Clergy health and well-being involve three systems: the individual pastor's lifestyle, family and friends, and the congregation or denomination. Although all three systems share responsibility, this issue focuses primarily on the role of clergy.

Making Better Choices

Mounting research finds that genetic differences are less important for longevity and health than previously asserted. Twin studies reveal that genetics only account for 25% of the defining forces related to life span. What accounts for the rest? Lifestyle choices and habits. For example, Sanjay Gupta lists five habits that can extend a person's life by a decade or more: eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly, maintaining a healthy body weight, consuming alcohol in moderation, and never smoking.¹

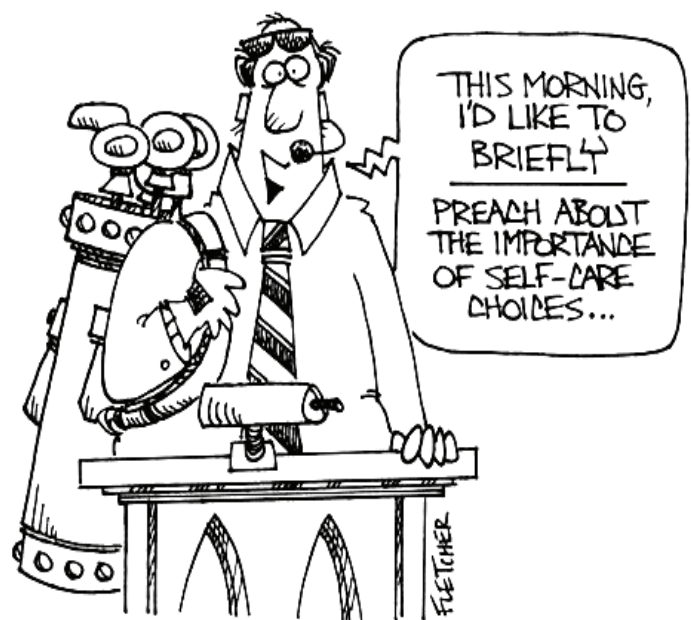
Models of well-being incorporate additional elements beyond physical health because studies find clear links between mental, social, and physical health. For instance, scientists are beginning to pay attention to a sixth healthy habit: maintaining a strong social network. Although positive emotions and moods relate to overall health, they only produce short-term impacts. Positive mental health combined with high psychological and social functioning delivers greater long-term health.²

Map Your Self-Care Plan

Before you can make deliberate changes to construct a personalized self-care plan, you must know where you

are already strong and where you need to focus to see improvement. The self-care wheel, available in multiple versions, is such a tool and illustrates the interaction between multiple dimensions of daily life.³ Imagine a pie cut into six equal parts with each section representing one area of your life: physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, personal, and professional. If you imagine the center as zero and the outer edge of the pie section as ten, you can rank your satisfaction level within each area by drawing a line to create your own outer edge for each area.

When the findings are graphed onto the pie, some sections are longer or shorter than others. The shorter areas reflect areas of life where functioning can be improved. For example, lower scores in the spiritual area might prompt someone to explore new spiritual practices, participate in a small spirituality group, or other actions aimed at creating greater levels of life satisfaction and balance. Ultimately, you see your full life balance picture and can begin to consider how to improve the whole.



Other approaches entail completing short questionnaires (see the Buffalo School of Social Work for an easy to complete example⁴). Or clergy can honestly answer questions like:

- How often in the past two years has poor physical health, emotional problems, or family demands interfered with your ministry effectiveness? How do you cope in such situations?
- What practices do you regularly engage in that sustain you physically, emotionally, and spiritually? Are additional efforts needed to support your well-being and reduce stress?
- How would a spouse or best friend answer these questions? Your coworkers?

The value of these approaches is that the agency for making better choices rests with the individual. A friend of the late Senator John McCain remarked that he was not very good at lying to himself. McCain would joke that his biggest accomplishment as a Navy pilot was crashing five jet planes, reflecting his belief that “We cannot forever hide the truth about ourselves, from ourselves.”⁵ Authenticity or self-integrity is a gift to be treasured.

Create and Enact Your Self-Care Plan

Just as there is no “right way” to experience God, there is no “right way” to find a greater sense of well-being. Once you have mapped what your current life balance looks like on the pie chart and honestly answered questions about your life habits, take time to make a solid plan. For the areas of your life where you are strong, write a few sentences about how to maintain or even enhance those areas. For areas that are closer to zero, write down goals to help you increase your satisfaction. You also want to periodically check in on how you’re doing with these goals to see if you need to revise any of them as your life changes. It is okay to begin with only one or two areas. Finally, find someone who cares about you to hold you accountable and who is willing to help you achieve these goals. It’s best to find someone in a similar situation as you, such as another clergy member. Share your self-care plans and meet regularly to check in with each other.

Remember that people will be motivated to form new habits by different incentives and identities. These differences mean that no two people will choose an identical path to a more satisfying life and that the goals you set must be tailored to work for you.

Congregational and Denominational Support

Every congregation should have a functioning personnel committee because a church cannot succeed unless the pastor succeeds. The regular interaction between the committee and the pastor contributes to the pastor’s overall ministry and life satisfaction, assists the pastor in establishing priorities and boundaries, and supports the pastor’s self-care choices. The pastor and the committee members must share a vision for ministry and a shared understanding of the pastor’s gifts.

Several denominations began to recognize that support for pastors needed to extend beyond seminary. For example, the Church Pension Group of the Episcopal Church started CREDO, a conference for pastors aimed at enhancing clergy wellness. Participants explore four areas—spiritual, vocational, financial, and physical/psychological health—in a week-long community experience. The Board of Pensions, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), launched a similar national clergy program to help pastors examine their health and replenish their spirit. Other judicatories and denominations invite their clergy to workshops and experiences that help pastors deal with stress, nurture spiritual vitality, and promote flourishing ministry. Congregational leaders should encourage the pastor to participate in such conferences.

Well-Being Is a Journey

The good news of the gospel says again and again, “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev 21:5). People, who are made in the image of God, are free to make choices. And they are free to make new choices. Begin with one new self-care practice today. Begin with one new way of finding joy in life. Try it on and risk failure. Pastors and people of faith can count on the promise of John 10:10: “I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly.”

1. Dr. Sanjay Gupta, “Forget science (for now); living longer is in your hands,” <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/27/health/living-longer-sanjay-gupta/index.html>.

2. R. J. Proschold-Bell and J. Byassee, *Faithful and Fractured: Responding to the Clergy Health Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018), 112-113.

3. <http://www.olgaphoenix.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Self-Care-Wheel-Final.pdf>

4. <https://socialwork.buffalo.edu/content/dam/socialwork/home/self-care-kit/self-care-assessment.pdf>

5. https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/john_mccain_135484