

12 Mental-Health Hazards to Watch for in Your Pastor

With the incredibly heartbreaking suicide of young pastor Andrew Stoecklein, the topic of mental health for pastors is now front and center of the conversation regarding spiritual leadership.

Paul the apostle alluded to some of his psychological challenges in the intensely personal second epistle to the Corinthians when he said he was “pressured beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. We had the sentence of death in ourselves” (2 Cor. 1:8-b), and in another place, he said he was tormented (12:7). He also said he was constantly dealing with adverse circumstances and feeling the daily pressure of all the churches (11:17-29).

The above illustrates that even the great Paul the apostle had to deal with incessant challenges to his mental and emotional state. Paul said that while we are in this body on earth we constantly groan and are burdened (5:4) because we want mortality to be consumed by immortality (almost as if there will never be a time this side of heaven when we will fully be content with just how good everything is around us).

Some scholars even wonder if the above referred to Paul dealing with depression, among other things. Be that as it may, serving as a pastor is indeed a dangerous calling of certain challenges to emotional and mental health.

As a spiritual leader since the early 1980s, I also have had to battle against my share of discouragement and minor depression and have to look to the Lord constantly to stay above water.

12 Hazards to a Pastor's Mental Health

1. Loneliness in Leadership

I know many pastors who have told me that they have no one they can trust to confide in. This is because of a fear that their church elders, overseers or peers will lose respect for them if they open up regarding their internal emotional struggles.

Every pastor has to have at least one person or spiritual guide they can pour their heart out to. Just knowing another person has heard and understood you can itself bring a measure of healing—even if they don't have all the answers you are looking for.

2. Avoiding Conflict

Many pastors refuse to confront problematic people due to a fear of conflict—they hope that by ignoring it, the problem will go away, but it only gets worse in time. As hard as it is, pastors need to learn to walk in the light with others (1 John 1:7) and confront unruly people (Matt. 18:15-17; 2 Thess. 3:15). Having to confront people we know and love is one of the biggest causes of mental stress for pastors.

3. Work Overload

The present expectation of the contemporary pastor can be toxic due to the workload. Nowadays, lead pastors (especially of small to medium-sized churches) are responsible not only for preaching and teaching, but counseling, real estate decisions, staff decisions, fund raising and leadership development as well as shepherding the flock. It is no wonder so many pastors live with depression and have emotional meltdowns and physical health challenges.

This is why pastors need to prioritize leadership development above most other tasks so they can delegate responsibilities and not burn out.

4. Mental Overload

I have found that even when pastors are not at work, their mind still feels the pressure of the ministry. They may even be away on vacation and yet their minds are still at work.

Mental overload is one of the greatest hazards of serving as a lead pastor. Eventually, in order to survive, they have to have boundaries and learn to shut down mentally when they go home or rest their brain when they are on vacation or taking a day off.

I have learned that the work will never end—tasks will never be fully completed, and perfection never comes. No matter how hard we try, there will always be loose ends and unresolved issues and worrying about them do not make them go away or get better.

5. Betrayal

All pastors have received “gut punches” when people, spiritual children and/or leaders they have spent years developing and investing in up and leave the church for greener pastures—without properly processing it with the lead pastor and/or without doing it the correct way.

Worse yet—sometimes they even speak bad about the church and leadership and attempt to take other people with them. This is perhaps the worst feeling a pastor can have and causes many a spiritual leader to ponder resigning the ministry.

Talking and praying with other seasoned pastors who have had similar experiences will help pastors get through this difficult experience.

6. Loss of Spiritual Devotion

Often, pastors lose their devotion to Christ and neglect engaging in regular prayer and reading of Scripture because they are so busy. This loss of spirituality weakens their inner man and diminishes their capacity to tap into God’s

power to deal with ministry and personal challenges.

Pastors have to learn to work everything else around their private devotional times of seeking God, or they will not have the emotional and mental strength they need to endure (see Eph. 6:10-13).

7. Marital and Family Conflict

Often when pastors have marital or family problems, they attempt to hide it from their overseers, peers and elders. This is because they are afraid divulging these challenges will result in a loss of respect and even loss of ministry.

Unfortunately, most people expect their pastor to have a perfect marriage or have a perfect family, which puts even more mental pressure on the pastor. Having nobody to talk to or confide in is a recipe for disaster. I have found that when I have these kinds of challenges, I need a leader close to me to pray for me and advise me, so I am not alone in this difficult journey of life and ministry.

8. Living With a Sense of Failure

Some pastors constantly battle with a sense of failure from not measuring up to the ideals, goals and standards they and others have placed upon them.

Living with an attitude of feeling like a failure is a horrible existence and results in discouragement and deep depression. An outside voice of reason and encouragement is needed to speak life and restoration of vision and hope into this pastor.

Unfortunately, some people feel the only way out of this horrible feeling is to take their own life. This is why it is imperative pastors have other seasoned pastors to talk and pray with.

9. Lack of Leadership Capacity

Sometimes pastors have been thrust into a leadership position they did not properly grow into (especially when a lead pastor dies and a young leader takes their place without proper grooming).

This feeling of being overwhelmed can result in looking for ways to “escape” through excessive entertainment, excessive drinking, adultery, social media, video games and other forms of medicating themselves to get through the daily grind of overwhelming pressure.

These forms of escape only result in piling up even more responsibility which exacerbates their feeling of being overwhelmed. Unfortunately, the ultimate method of escape in the minds of mentally challenged leaders is suicide—which no doubt happens when a person buys into the lies of the enemy instead of taking concrete steps to either walk away from that ministry position or find capable staff and/or mentors to walk with them until they grow into the job.

10. Comparisons to Other Pastors

One of the deadliest hazards to a pastor’s mental health is when they hear other people in their midst (or even church members) brag about how good other pastors or churches are. When this happens, this pastor interprets these comments as people saying they do not measure up to other leaders.

11. Their Identity Is in the Ministry

At the end of the day, all pastors have to have their identity as children of God in Christ—more than what they accomplish in ministry. A pastor whose identity is totally rooted in their work will be competitive, never satisfied and always striving for greater achievements to fill the vast hole in their hearts that will never be satiated by anything but Christ alone.

12. Divisions in the Church

Finally, perhaps the worst feeling and challenge to a pastor’s

mental and emotional health is when another leader in their congregation leaves and takes others with them. This is perhaps the highest form of church betrayal and the deadliest to a church, simply because it often results in a lack of volunteers and a huge dip in tithes and offerings, which furthers the mental stress and pain. These pastors have to learn how to function during high- stress situations as well as manage their emotional pain in order to navigate the church through troubled waters so she can survive.