

10 Commandments of Emotional Health During Stressful Times

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Some seasons are more stressful than others—especially seasons of great change. This past year has been such a season for many people, including church leaders. Spiritually leading and nurturing people through an unprecedented time have taken a toll on many pastors.

Regardless of how much emotional and spiritual reserves you had before the pandemic, a stressful period will deplete your emotional and spiritual tank a little each day, like letting the air out of a tire.

I love what Paul says in the Message paraphrase of Romans 12:12: *“Don’t burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame.”*

How do you keep yourself fueled and emotionally healthy during stressful seasons?

Here are the first five out of 10 biblical actions—or what I’m calling “10 commandments of emotional health”—to prevent burnout:

Show grace to yourself and others. (James 4:6)

Treat yourself and others how God treats you—with grace, mercy, and forgiveness. God always gives us what we need, not what we deserve. During hard times, we need extra grace.

Be kind to yourself. Don’t expect yourself to perform at the same level you did before a crisis period. You’re likely exhausted, so is everyone else. That’s normal with prolonged stress. Cut people (including yourself) some slack.

Start and end each day refueling your soul. (James 1:21)

According to the Message paraphrase, the Bible says: *“I was up before sunrise, crying for help, hoping for a word from you”* (Psalm 119:147). When you’re looking for hope, you need time in God’s Word. Recent studies have proven that the attitude you have for the entire day is set during the first few minutes of your morning.

One way to keep from burning out is to put your Bible near your bed and leave it open. (We’re likely to overlook a closed Bible but not an open one.) Before you do anything else, read a passage from God’s Word and reflect on it. Read until God speaks to you—whether it’s one verse or a chapter.

Set and stick to a routine. (Ephesians 5:15-16)

Predictability is an important stress reducer, especially when everything is changing in your life. A routine gives you the stability you need to help you refuel your tank. Putting together

a new routine when you're going through a difficult season may take some creativity, but it will be worth the effort.

Reduce your media consumption. (Matthew 6:22-23)

It's easy to spend extra time watching television or scrolling through social media when you feel overwhelmed. But if you fill your mind with constant images of negativity, you'll only raise your stress level.

You don't need to hear the same negative story on repeat. You become what you allow into your brain. Years ago, the computer industry had a phrase—GIGO, "garbage in, garbage out." The computer can only give you the data you put into it. The same is true with your brain. A stressful period is a great time to build new routines that include less media consumption.

Schedule a daily time to connect with the people you love. (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

One of the most meaningful things you can do during a difficult season is to listen carefully to people. It doesn't take long to lift someone's spirit, but it does need to be intentional. You won't drift into meaningful connections. It'll take a commitment—and likely a consistent spot on your calendar.

These meaningful connections aren't simply ministry connections. Neither are they another task on your to-do list. They're opportunities to reach out to dear friends, family members, or neighbors. Encourage them, listen to them, and open up to them. You need meaningful connections to refuel emotionally—and so do the people you love.

Share your feelings instead of stuffing them. (Galatians 6:2)

Feelings are meant to be felt—not stuffed. You have emotions during these stressful periods because you're made in the image of God. They are neither good nor bad. They are simply emotions.

Paul gives us a great example of sharing our feelings instead of stuffing them in 2 Corinthians 1:8, when he writes, *"Brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the trouble we suffered in Asia. We had great burdens there that were beyond our own strength. We even gave up hope of living"* (NCV).

Pastor, if the greatest Christian next to Jesus could be open about his emotions, don't you think you can as well?

Sharing your feelings leads to health. It's crucial during a stressful time.

Seek advice before making major decisions. (Proverbs 15:22)

When you're under stress, your brain power drops to lower levels. You're never thinking your best when you're under constant stress. You simply can't access the smartest part of your brain during these tough periods. You're much more likely to make bad decisions.

That's why it's wise to check with others when you're making major decisions while under stress.

Proverbs 15:22 reminds us: *"Plans fail when there is no counsel, but with many advisers they succeed"* (CSB).

Schedule renewal breaks throughout your day. (Isaiah 40:30-31)

Neuroscience is showing us that it's much better to take multiple short breaks throughout the day rather than one long one. Your productivity will actually increase if you take five-minute breaks throughout your day. We don't need a long time to recharge, but we need multiple breaks to recharge emotionally, physically, and spiritually. It isn't much different than what you do with medicine. For example, you don't usually take one large pill when you're sick. Instead, you take smaller pills two or three times a day.

Figure out what renews and recharges you. Maybe it's reading, gardening, or shooting hoops—and try to take several of these breaks daily.

Serve someone struggling more than you. (Proverbs 11:25)

No matter how much you're struggling right now, someone always has it worse. For your own mental and emotional health, you need to get the attention off yourself and onto someone else's pain. You need to give back and recognize that life doesn't revolve around you.

Pastor, you'll find many promises in Scripture about this. Proverbs 11:25 says, *"A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed"* (NIV). When you serve others, God refreshes you.

Control what's controllable, and trust God for the rest. (James 2:22)

God is active in your mental, spiritual, and emotional health. He wants you to make wise choices based on his guidance from the Bible and through prayer. And then, when you encounter something out of your control, you can surrender it to God and trust him to work it out for good.

It's easy to go to extremes with this. For instance, you can say it's all up to God and become passive to the point where you do nothing. On the other hand, you can act like God doesn't play a part in your life and assume everything depends on you.

Find a balance that helps you recognize what's in your control and then make wise decisions. You can't control the circumstances of life, but you can choose how you will respond—and that will make all the difference. God is always there to help you make that choice.