

The following article is from "The Professional Christian Educator in the Local Church" which was published by the Office of Children's Ministries of The Episcopal Church in the 1990's in cooperation with Christian Educator's Fellowship of The United Methodist Church.

Naming Stress

Does your back ache, your head pound, are your shoulders knotted? Does your stomach hurt, is your digestion out of whack? How's your blood pressure, your cholesterol, your heart rate? Do you get colds often, catch every little "bug" that's going around? Do you find yourself irritated, depressed and agitated more often than you would care to admit?

If any of this fits - or if you just get one of these areas under control and another one pops up - then, in the spirit of Christian concern, let me invite you to consider the possibility that you may be over-stressed and / or burned out!

A definition or two: over-stressed is the result of too much change or too much to do; burned out is the result of too much doing / giving. They feel pretty much the same - crummy.

Why? Church Educators are Human Beings who function in the world, a very tempting place. Being called by God is not any kind of immunization against the pressures of the world. It's true that your place of work is likely to be smoke-free and alcohol / drug-free, but:

- How many hours a week do you work? Is the work . . . ever done?
- Who's in charge - you, the senior pastor, the governing board, the "Joneses"?
- Who really cares about your work - your family? the church leadership? the parents? the staff? the children? the youth? your denominational leaders?
- How's the pay? Comparable to those in your community who have similar years of experience and education and responsibility? Comparable to other ministry professionals on staff?
- Is the benefit "package" non-existent? inadequate? comparable to the other ministry professionals?

And, what about your own personal work ethic?

- Be perfect, competent at all times, and, never share what's really happening in / for

you?

- Work until everything is in order; take a day off when nothing will stack up on your desk? Take a vacation if one happens to materialize?
- Be almost all things to all people - they'll like you better. Be sure to do everything for everybody else . . . after all they're pretty busy, and, what have they hired a Christian Educator for anyway?
- Exercise when you can find the time? Eat on the run? Schedule everything, lest anything be omitted? Work now, relax later?

Christian educators are human, and they work in the world. Any one of the above-mentioned human / world flaws is probably not fatal; but certainly any combination of them - and others like them - is likely to lead you into serious difficulty because, you are human, you have human limitations, you cannot "save the world" all by yourself - or even just the church school, and anyway, over-stress produces over-stress chemistry in your system which, if produce long enough and not dealt with will create physical problems; serious difficulty, unless . . . you begin to deal with the over-stress.

Dealing With Stress

No matter what: Eat-sleep-play-work right. Count the calories, count the hours, incorporate a triage approach to your "to do" list, develop a stick-to-itiveness about R & R, exercise, and time off for you. If you need guidance in this area, seek it through a denominational counseling center or your local medical/counseling clinic. If you need support, seek it through the proper channels which are likely to include your pastor and/or personnel committee. (This implies knowing "the system" - and that's important!)

Learn to identify and deal with your feelings of anger and frustration. Sometimes just knowing that "this too shall pass" will do it. In any case, develop appropriate outlets; learn to communicate clearly and openly with the appropriate folks; seek professional assistance, and be patient with yourself! (and maybe others, if they are affected by a change - no matter how healthy - in you).

Even if your Myers-Briggs points to extreme introversion, no matter what, seek out a support network of folks YOU can depend on. You might find them in the local community of educators or network (such as APCE, Forma, CEF, LACE). You might develop a support network at the local YMCA/YWCA or among the folks you do aerobics, yoga, rumba, golf, tennis, volleyball, etc. with . . . No matter what, get your support network in place and nurture it.

Stay in touch with God, however YOU do that: pray, meditate, listen, dance, discern, share, journal, garden, yoga, reading. Go into “the wilderness” on a regular basis, study the Desert Fathers and Mothers, or the mystics . . . or any faith figure who speaks to YOU, but no matter what, commune with God.

YOU be in charge:

Understand that you are human and work with inherent human limitations - and that's okay! John 15:12-17

Take good care of yourself, including getting help if you need it. Mark 7:24-30

Become an expert with emotions. John 8:32

Identify, connect with, maintain a support group. Hebrews 12:1-3

Walk with God. Micah 6:8

I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. Choose life.

Deuteronomy 30:15, 19b