

From the Director's Desk

Greetings, and peace! I hope you find the information shared in this edition of UpDate helpful personally and professionally. The topics covered in this issue were chosen based on the needs expressed by ministers with whom Sr. Therese Anne or I have served.

The topic of the feature article is resilience. No matter the particular problem, all of our clients in The Program for Psychology and Religion benefit from the development of resilient traits. It is not enough to focus only on reducing symptoms and unhelpful habits, we must also enhance positive characteristics; we do so by applying the cutting edge psychological science to assist clients' behaviors and cognitive patterns that build resilience. If you or a member of your community is struggling with burnout, depression, or even more serious symptoms of trauma, I hope you will consider allowing The Program for Psychology & Religion to be of help. We offer a comprehensive assessment with recommendations for a program of recovery.

We have been out and about in recent months. Sr. Therese Anne welcomed many of you to her table at the Leadership Conference for Women Religious. I enjoyed the opportunity to share fellowship with attendees at the Vicars for Priest Conference in Mundelein. It was so nice for both of us to be able to meet many of you in person and to learn more about your ministry. We hope to be at both gatherings again next year; if we missed you this year, make a point to stop by then.

Till then, as always, we welcome your calls for consultation or support. Our goal always is to be responsive to your needs; let us know how we can be helpful to you. We are blessed in providing service, as health care providers and spiritual directors, with sensitivity to the dynamics of clerical and religious life.

Toward this end, we are in the process of completing a survey of religious leadership to determine what the most prominent needs in the current environment are. We will use the information collected in this survey to develop new programmatic resources in service of our mission to provide the highest quality care to clergy and religious. We will share the fruits of this survey in the next issue; stay tuned!

May our Lord continue to bless your ministry.

Christopher S. M. Grimes, Psy.D.

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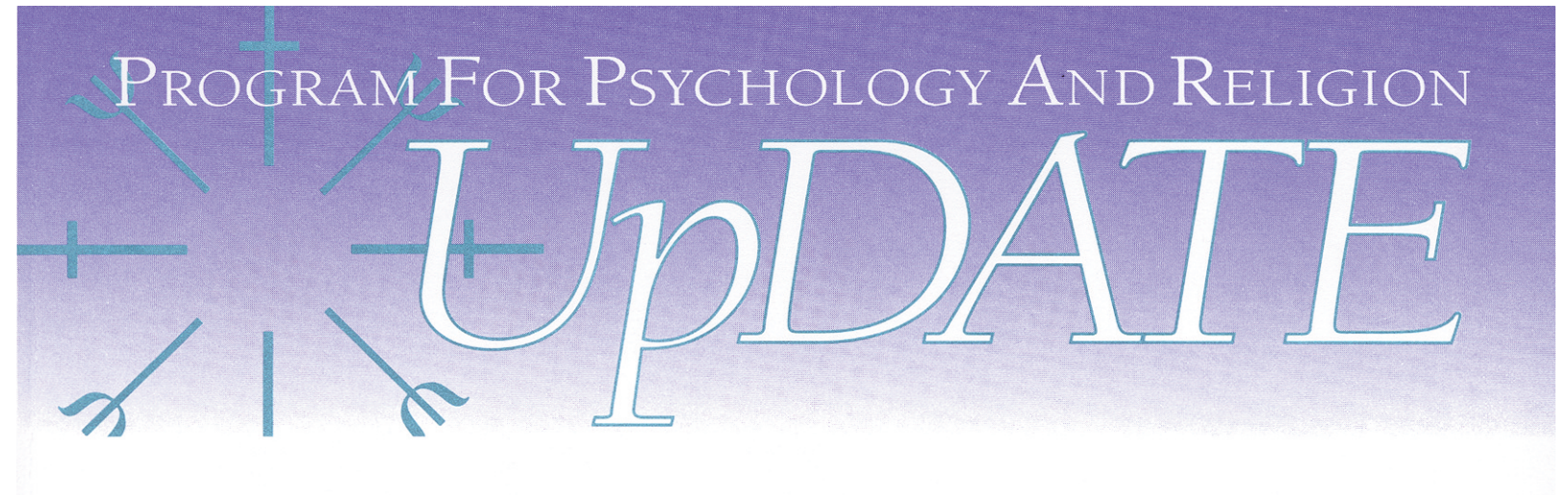
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Building Psychological (and Spiritual) Resilience in Ministry

by Christopher S. M. Grimes, Psy.D.

“We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed.

We are perplexed, but not driven to despair.”

(2 Corinthians 4:8, New Living Translation).

As I finalized this article on resilience in the life of ministers, my mind was drawn to Paul's assertion of faith to the Corinthians, faith in the Lord he served who worked through and even in his weakness.

Paul was no stranger to the trials and pressures of ministry. He knew emotional distress and confusion. Yet, he remained faithful and hopeful. Paul's life is a great example of resilience.

Those who devote themselves to a life of ministry to others naturally experience many and diverse challenges along the way. Certainly, there are opportunities to celebrate. Certainly, the overall feeling for most ministers is deep joy and gratitude. But ministers also encounter great sorrows, frustrations and confusion in their ministry and in the administrative work that often is inextricably intertwined with it.

It is not wrong to call the experience traumatic, the trauma of the caregiver. While some experiences might be overtly traumatic (for example, ministering at the scene of a gruesome accident or assisting victims of violence), many others are more subtle.

The latter include empathic responses to persons in pain and determined efforts to respond to persons whose complaints seem petty or even vindictive. Even these more subtle wounds can have a profound impact when they are compounded over time.

Ministering to people day after day who are dealing with life's sorrows while having to manage one's own emotional reactions to these stories can result in what psychologists call vicarious trauma. Symptoms of vicarious trauma are not dissimilar to those associated with what is commonly called “burnout.” Vicarious trauma or burnout can cause serious impairment over time, impairment that may include depression, anxiety, and addictive behavior.

Psychologists have long recognized the benefit of treating individuals who have experienced direct trauma with methods that reduce intrusive thoughts and feelings associated with their traumatic experiences. The treatment for those suffering from vicarious trauma similarly includes opportunities for the processing of thoughts and feelings associated with the stories they have heard in such a way that they can be rid of their burden without losing their sensitivity.

In the process of treating traumatized individuals, psychologists have observed that not all individuals respond in the same

way. In particular, some individuals seem more successful in the face of trauma or stress. I have observed in my own work that this is no different for ministers. Whether faced with an acute trauma or the compounded effect of vicarious trauma, some ministers appear more prone to develop unhealthy coping strategies, while others appear to cope more effectively.

The latter quality has been referred to as “resilience,” and in recent years psychologists have been giving it much more attention.

Resilience is defined as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources

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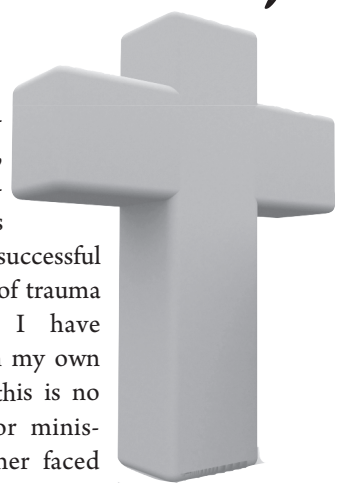
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of stress. It is important to note that resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have. Resilience can be developed through education and practice.

The American Psychological Association (APA) offers several pointers compiled from research as to how to develop or enhance resilience. I want to share a few of those pointers that I believe are most applicable to ministry:

Make connections: The importance of a strong support system has long been emphasized in the training and formation for ministry. Yet, more and more ministers, especially clergy, seem to be living without such a system. Professionally, too few have strong or regular connections with fellow ministers; they lose the opportunity to relate with others who understand the particular stresses and strains they face. Personally, too many ministers struggle to maintain healthy family relations; instead of a respite from the difficulties of ministry, family becomes yet another source of tension.

Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems & keep things in perspective: Ministers cannot change the reality that highly stressful events are part of ministry, but the way ministers think about stressful events can change the way they respond, cognitively and emotionally, to what is happening. One suggestion from the APA is to look beyond the present to potentially more satisfying future circumstances. Ministers have a great resource to do just that; faith is a wellspring of hope. Scripture is rich with promises of what is to be and with the testimonies of people who believed those promises, faced challenging circumstances and ultimately prevailed.

Accept that change is a part of living: Change is an inevitable part of life, and some change may make certain goals no longer attainable. Reversals of fortune may be responded to with a prayer many ministers are familiar with: the Serenity Prayer. It begins: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.” Reciting this prayer often from

heart makes it a lived reality; greater resilience is part of that reality.

Take decisive action & move toward your goals: Sometimes stressful situations may psychologically paralyze ministers as they contemplate how best to respond. Taking time to make an informed decision is important, but it is not helpful to ruminate and dwell on problems for prolonged periods. In the second line of the Serenity Prayer, one asks God for the “courage to change the things I can.” Resilient ministers will take decisive action to address adverse situations as well as they can. When there is no one obvious optimal response, they do not let the perfect become the enemy of the good. When the route to be taken appears difficult, even dangerous, they will not avoid it or wait for someone else to figure it out. Being active and decisive will help ministers more effectively manage adversity. When a task appears too big, it can always be taken “one bite at a time.”

Look for opportunities for self-discovery: Growth from struggle is one of the great paradoxes of life; the APA notes that many people who have experienced tragedies and hardships have reported better relationships, greater sense of strength, increased sense of self-worth, enhanced spirituality, and heightened appreciation for life. The notion that challenges can result in growth is intrinsically familiar to the Christian minister. Scripture provides many examples of God using difficult circumstances to promote spiritual growth. The spiritual path in general holds the same wisdom in many forms; the often referenced “dark night of the soul” is just one example. Resilient ministers will look for opportunities to learn something about themselves in the aftermath of difficult situations, and sometimes right in the midst of the struggle.

Take care of yourself: Ministers spend much of their time caring for others, and in doing so too often overlook the need to attend to their own needs. This very human but unfortunate predilection only serves to magnify the experience of vicarious trauma and burnout. Resilient

ministers spend time cultivating greater awareness of their own feelings and needs for relaxation, exercise, healthy eating and spiritual practices. They find ways to talk about feelings and live in a manner that allows time for healthy eating, relaxing activities, exercise and prayer. Taking care of themselves in this way helps keep their mind, body, and spirit primed to deal with situations that demand so much attention and energy.

Life is difficult in any form, but the life of a minister is filled with challenges that can take a toll on personal health: physical, psychological, social and spiritual. However, the Christian minister is also well equipped. He or she can draw upon the Scriptures, the teaching and tradition of the church, the stories of the saints, and the example of colleagues who are living a life of resilience in the Lord. Nor are these resources static; they are alive and responsive in the person of the Holy Spirit who walks with all those who serve others and among all those with whom we form community.

It is the work of the psychotherapist to help the minister who has lost connection with those resources to find them again, to become again persons in whom the virtues of faith, hope and love are lively sources of energy in the face of every difficulty.

It is the work of the psychotherapist to help the minister who is struggling to call to mind the ways in which God has been present in the difficult times of their lives, and to rekindle the belief that God will always be so.

It is a great ministry in itself, and we of the Program for Psychology and Religion are so very grateful to be called to it, to have the opportunity to respond when you call.

“We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair.” So it is; so may it always be.

¹ FYI: *Building Your Resilience* A Publication of the American Psychological Association is available online through the APA Help Center. I have adapted their suggestions to the dynamics of ministry. You may find their 14 tips for resilience at: www.apa.org/helpcenter.

Just Ask Q & A

Q: *Could you please explain what is meant by “intensive outpatient program?” If your program is not a residential or inpatient program, where do religious stay when they come for treatment?*

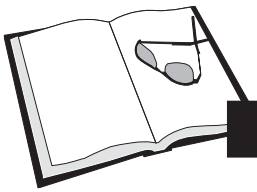
A: Thanks for asking. We do get those questions, especially when we take our outreach material to various meetings.

Not everyone needs the control inherent in a residential program, and certainly few need the 24/7 intensity of an inpatient unit. The initial assessment can determine with confidence the level of intensity needed to insure the safety of the client.

The Program for Psychology and Religion offers an intensive outpatient program, which is characterized by structured group and individual treatment sessions held during the day and private time in the evenings for reflection, rest and recreation. For many clients, this is a preferred model of treatment. It is much more economical and reinforces a sense of personal responsibility and autonomy that will enhance the retention of gains after the treatment period.

Housing options abound. We have agreements with women’s and men’s communities in the area that offer hospitality for persons who come to St. Louis for care. The particular contract is arranged directly by the future client and his or her leadership with the respective religious community.

If you have any more questions, please call Dr. Christopher Grimes at 314-289-9407.



BOOK REVIEW

“Transforming Our Painful Emotions”
by Evelyn Eaton Whitehead & James Whitehead

Reviewed by S. Therese Anne Kiefer, ASC

Evelyn and James Whitehead have given more than 40 years to the education of students at the Institute of Pastoral Studies, Loyola University in Chicago. As a psychologist (Evelyn) and pastoral theologian (James), they have combined their talents in prolific publications, offering much in wisdom and skills to pastoral ministers of all types.

The present book, published in 2010, deals with the emotions of anger, shame, grief, fear and loneliness. Tellingly, fully one-third of the book addresses the emotion of anger. At the end of each section the authors offer reflection questions and many, many other resources. With the help of these experts, we go beyond the problems and “discover the positive potential hidden” in each of the emotions.

Although the book is not a fast read, it is engaging; the Whiteheads intersperse stories they have gathered in their workshops and presentations. It is worth your time.

*Published by Orbs Books, Maryknoll,
New York 10545 \$20.00*



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