Who Ministers to the Minister?
Caring for Yourself as You Care for Others in Light of the Coronavirus Crisis

Ministry leaders are spiritual first responders during uncertain times. But who ministers to the ministers? Brent Stenberg, PhD, and Leila Todd, LPC-MHSP, of Christian Psychological Center discuss the impact and ways to navigate the stress and exhaustion that ministry leaders may face during COVID-19.

How is the stress of COVID-19 different than natural disasters?
Natural disasters or events of human evil, such as terrorism, are devastating, but they take place at a brief period of time and in a specific place. Then it’s over, and the recovery begins. We can gather information, assess need, support each other, and turn things around. Accurate information and social support make the difference. COVID-19 is worldwide and right now hitting our entire country in an acute way. We don’t have all the information we need. We are separated from each other socially for our physical safety. And we don’t know how long this will last. We are not wired to live with this kind of uncertainty. The experience produces unique stress.

What particular shape does the stress clergy feel take?
We all know the stress that comes with preparing for a project or task and then when it’s over, we go back to normal. We also know the acute stress that comes with the unexpected, usually bad news or danger, and adrenaline shoots through us. A third form of stress is vicarious stress or trauma. As clergy seek to connect with people who are suffering during the COVID-19 outbreak, to be present for them, they themselves are subject to the same stress—they are also worried about loved ones who might become infected or suffer economic impact or whether their own finances will collapse. It is complicated to close the gap for others while suffering the same exhaustion others feel.

How can clergy care for themselves so they can care for others?
1. Because the stress produces more adrenaline and cortisone in our systems, exercise is essential.
2. Because there is so much uncertainty and anxiety is inevitable, create predictability in your day. Plan for sleep, exercise, regular meals, a day off, something purely fun.
3. Because social distancing means we don’t see each other in the usual ways, look for ways to give back to the community around you: post recipes online, create group workouts on Zoom, drop flowers off, play interactive games over the internet.
4. Because you can’t solve the big things, find things you can solve. Break larger issues into smaller tasks you can accomplish.
5. Because worrying creates mental load, write down what you worry about, then close it and set it aside so you’re not walking around with that open mental file all the time.
6. Because you will want to serve others in this stressful time, learn to recognize “false guilt” and set boundaries to keep yourself and your family safe.

Church Health hosted a webinar called “Who Ministers to the Minister?” It is available for viewing on our website, https://churchhealth.org/fce/.