

Emotional Wellness: Holistic Care for God's Workmanship

Reactor's Comments

Thank you for sharing your unique perspectives with us today. They are unique because the majority of those present today are pastors or future pastors and do not have a background in clinical counseling. I found your insights not only helpful on a personal level but a professional one as well.

In their book, *The Counseling Shepherd*, the authors note the three main tools that pastors use as they counsel their flock—the Word and sacraments of God, prayer, and the proper use of reason. You have done fine work in helping us with all three of these. As an example of how the proper use of reason can help us in our pastoral care is the IS-Wel model. I appreciate how you walked us through each of the five components and how they play a part in our emotional wellness. As pastors, we would do well to use this outline to evaluate our present emotional wellness and enhance our future emotional wellness. You offer helpful counseling comments along the way. For example, on page 7 you comment that “when you do a thing with the intent of managing stress, you are more likely have the thing manage stress.” On that same page you remind us where our self-worth needs to be based—not on our accomplishments but in our identity in Christ. This is a truth that is readily confessed but easily forgotten by us pastors. You remind us that in our fallen state we will never master any of these skills perfectly and “that our wellness does not hinge on our proficiency” of these skills.

Your comments regarding the continuum of wellness and how wellness is fluid offer us some new insights. We recognize that “when faith is nourished it will grow, mature, and flourish, even in times of significant pain and hardship” (10). We often fail to apply this same principle to our emotional wellness. We think it will flourish and remain healthy even when it is not cared for. Or we think that if we use the right tools, we will be fine. You help us see that the way we do this is a little different: “We must use these tools in the proper context of our status as redeemed children of God. The pivot that we need to make is away from our to-do list and onto God's done list” (10). Your use of Psalm 13 to reinforce this point is invaluable.

The reason why emotional wellness is so important for pastors is because we are in a helping profession. And that can take a toll on our emotional wellness. You explain, “Understanding the components of compassion fatigue related to experiences of burnout, secondary traumatic stress, vicarious traumatization, as well as the essential positive factors and helping skills associated with resiliency are of critical importance to helpers in any field” (12). In this section you provide comments from pastors that illustrate what all of us as pastors feel.

We hear much in our present culture about empathy or the lack thereof. Your insights on the two types of empathy broaden our understanding and help us apply appropriate levels and forms of empathy that can aid our emotional wellness. Your encouragement to lean more toward cognitive empathy rather than affective empathy is helpful. “Learning to use cognitive empathy instead of affective empathy will help a pastor manage their dosage, reduce risk for burnout, and promote a sense of satisfaction within their helping role” (16).

With the compassion fatigue resilience sector, you walk us through some of the things we can do to foster emotional wellness in our helper role as pastors. Your example of how Jesus reacted to the death of his cousin, John the Baptist, shows that our suffering Savior not only cared for others but also took time to care for himself. Prayer played an important role in that self-care. Your personal reflection questions provide a practical framework that can not only draw us closer to God in prayer but also help us contemplate a word of Scripture. The personal prayer you offer is one we can all model (20).

In the section on self-care you share how the practices of spiritual, emotional, and physical wellness all work together: “Contemplative practices, such as prayer, devotionals, and meditations on Scripture, are often paired with other forms of physical and emotional self-care” (24). This self-care “is not based in a worldly form of self-love, but in the assurance of God’s love for his children.” This is an important point to remember when the devil gets us to focus more on the statement, “I am a poor miserable sinner,” rather than on the truth, “I am a forgiven and redeemed child of God.”

Thank you, Brother Kohls, for giving us much to consider as we grow in our emotional wellness.

John D. Schuetze

Questions

- 1) Could you help us understand more fully how we as pastors can apply cognitive empathy when we care deeply (affective empathy) about those we serve?
- 2) Over the years we have seen many pastors resign from ministry. You point out that emotional wellness and building resilience is not a recipe to be followed. Can you expand on some helpful ways to build resilience?
- 3) Many of us not only listen to the pain and suffering of others, but we may have our own personal traumas as well. Why is it important to recognize our own vulnerabilities as we minister to others who are hurting?
- 4) As pastors we often focus on spiritual wellness, which is vital. How can we help our brothers do a better job in taking a holistic approach to wellness, recognizing that spiritual, physical, and emotional wellness are all connected?