

4 Suggestions on How We Can Improve Clergy Mental Health

As a newly licensed therapist in 1994, I received a call from a nearby clergy.

Speaking in whispered tones, he made specific requests.

Would I be willing to see him and his wife after hours? Could they pay in cash? Did they have to fill out intake sheets with personal information? Yes, yes and yes.

In 1994, clergy did not often seek counseling.

In 2020, however, Bob Dylan's words ring true: "The times they are a changin'."

I believe the trend of clergy having an hour or so once in a while to exhale and unload is a healthy and common trend. I am confident it is a bit more common now than in 1994.

In recent years, when I receive an appointment request from clergy, I am not surprised to hear, "Well, I was talking to my neighbor about it, and his wife sees you so that's how I got your name."

Or a client casually mentions, without gasp or comment, that her minister recommended a book that had been beneficial during the minister's own depressive episode.

Changing times! Nice.

However, we still have miles to go. We've not yet arrived at the place where clergy are allowed to be regular folks in all the ways the rest of us get to be regular folks.

But why the growing trend toward acknowledging and supporting clergy mental health?

Churches are doing a better job of talking about mental health without hushed tones.

A local church recently offered a series on four consecutive Wednesday nights

about depression and anxiety.

Well attended, the sessions crackled with conversation and questions. No blank stares and silences.

The congregants thanked the ministerial staff for scheduling and encouraging the dialogue.

When churches speak openly about mental health issues, they reduce the mystery and stigma for each church member, including their ministers.

Our religious culture is warming to antiquated, unrealistic expectations of clergy.

Podcasts, such as "[The Unstuck Church](#)" hosted by Tony Morgan and team at the Unstuck Group, devote episodes periodically to clergy depression and anxiety. By doing so, they normalize rather than minimize ministerial struggles.

In a 2019 [episode](#) of "The Unstuck Church," Chris Hodges, pastor of a large church in Birmingham, Alabama, reminded us that mental health struggles for clergy are dangerous.

They are dangerous not because of the emotional condition but because the minister feels so terribly alone.

Along with the previous observations, I offer four suggestions:

1. Start with seminary.

Along with Hebrew and New Testament courses, seminaries should require a course focused on taking care of your mental and emotional health.

This course will increase self-awareness, reduce burnout and introduce students to the external and internal stressors common among clergy.

Even knowing the different stressors for introverted clergy compared to extroverted clergy could potentially reduce depression and anxiety.

2. Start with search committees.

Search committees would be wise to begin standard conversations with ministerial candidates this way: "We will offer a salary of X, health insurance,

retirement, vacation and would like for you to take time every week to be attuned to your physical and mental health in ways that will benefit you.”

From the initial relationship of churches or organizations with ministers, professional stresses should be acknowledged. Also, time should be designated to address those stressors.

3. Seek a therapist.

Seek out and secure a relationship with a therapist who is not a church member and whose practice is not in your ZIP code.

Seeing your therapist on the third row of the sanctuary would inhibit your ability to speak freely about your personal struggles, your marriage or your church.

Find someone with candor and insight into your blind spots. Focus on where you need to grow, not what you already do well.

If you aren't a bit sore after a workout at the gym, you may have wasted an hour at the gym. So it is with therapy.

4. Gather with your kind.

We humans like commonalities. Support groups such as AA and Al-Anon began because it feels good to be accepted.

We long to be understood and approached without judgment. We like being around people who “get us.” Clergy understand clergy in a unique way.

They understand the 24-hour-on-call schedule and the unceasing demands. They understand churning out sermons. And they understand ministerial burnout.

Find a group of clergy, whatever denomination, who can support and brainstorm, laugh and recommend, and hold up some of the stress basic to this grand and holy calling.

Editor's note: This article is part of a series this week for Mental Health Awareness Month. The previous articles in the series are:

[*How Coronavirus Affects Your Mental Health and What You Can Do*](#) | Cate Schilling

[*Despite ACA, Not All Insurance Provides Mental Health Care*](#) | Monty Self

[*7 Issues Your Family Must Navigate During COVID-19 Crisis*](#) | Kristyn Arnold

[*Young Adults Face Mental Health Issues in 'Emerging Adulthood'*](#) | Rebekah Gordon

[*Maintaining Clergy Mental Health Proves to be Complex Puzzle*](#) | Elizabeth Denham Thompson

[*Her Fight: How Many Pastors' Spouses Deal with Depression*](#) | Patrick Broaddus