Strategies for Self-care

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Each person requires a unique balance of these different strategies, depending on particular circumstances and on which areas come more naturally or pose challenges consistently. Here are some tips from military ministry with families under great stress.

a. ***Spiritual care*** – We should engage in whatever practice gets us to the point where we feel loved by God and can pray from our most honest emotions. This is different for each person in terms of disciplines, but I think the end result is the same: to build an intimate relationship with God where we really can be honest, vulnerable, and open to love, a relationship which allows us to go through some awful situations. If Morning Prayer does the trick, great. Most of us offer Morning or Evening Prayer for our priestly ministry to lift up our congregation’s needs. We need an additional practice, like centering prayer, lectio divina, or Ignatian imaginative prayer, to enter into intimate time with God to hear God say we are the beloved.

b. ***Physical care*** - Since we are embodied spirits, we each have our way of caring for our bodies when stressed. No one can overemphasize the need for good aerobic exercise to prepare for stressful times to build resilience as well as to use exercise as a way to burn off chemicals when stressed. Our nervous system gets aroused when we feel under threat. Those chemicals, like adrenaline and cortisol, need to be burned off through exercise. Also, sleep is very important. If you are having long-term sleep issues, seek the help of a doctor and avoid self-medicating. Too many people have started bad habits with alcohol and other chemicals when they were having sleep problems when stressed. The alcohol offered them short term relief which turned into a chronic dependence.

c. ***Mental care -*** A famous and long-term study on military families during WWII and Viet Nam was called the A-B-C-X or double ABCX theory of stress. These studies looked at the most stressed out families dealing with war and loved ones deployed. They found that the old model of matching stress with resources was not working. They discovered that resilient families could actually live with fewer resources and adapt better to stress if they had a sense of meaning to what they were asked to do. The key to meaning was that they were able to see where they had some power (locus of control). In other words, for things to be ok, they did not have to depend on something outside of their control to rescue them. If you want to handle loads of stress, you need to discover a positive meaning in the situation and what you have control over. Focus there and you won’t feel like a victim to your circumstances.

d. ***Emotional care -***  Having a counselor, a spiritual director, and a confessor helps. Build your support team before stress kicks in. Use the basic emotions of happy, sad, angry, or afraid to check in to see how you are feeling and then communicate those feelings in your journal and to those close to you. It’s important to let someone close to you like a spouse or confidante know your feelings so they don’t take your moods personally. You can also let them know what you need while you are feeling your feelings. Do you need space, conversation, touch, reassurance…?

e. ***Ratio -*** Couples research has shown that healthy couples have 5 times more positive interactions than negative. If this ratio dips, they drift into negative sentiment override and interpret even good things in their relationship negatively. By analogy, a pastor’s relationship to life benefits when the pastor builds up lots of good encounters with life for every negative. Bottom line is that fun is very serious business to counter burn out. Get out in nature, spend time with hobbies, friends, etc. When you are exposed to crises, death, loss, anxiety make sure you build up your emotional ratio reserves with as many positive experiences as you can. Also, this helps when you try to convince yourself and spouse that you need a boat or sports car! You’re not being indulgent, just preventing burn-out by building a reserve of positive life experiences.

f. ***Systemic wellness -*** Having good boundaries is key to good ministry always. Beware the shaky bridge. The shaky bridge experience was used on college students. They kept their eye on a person standing across the bridge, walked across the stable bridge, and rated how attractive the person was. Then they removed the supports and had the person walk across the shaky bridge, keeping their focus on the person on the other side. They rated the person much higher on attractiveness when they walked a shaky bridge. The warning is for all people in helping professions to beware when they are in shaky situations and providing care for others. Chances are the care receiver will find you more attractive when they are afraid and looking to you for support. And the same is true for the care giver in crisis. We may find an adoring congregant or stable colleague to be way more attractive than we noticed before. Watch yourself on shaky ministry bridges.