

The Emotional Health of a Leader

Dear Rick,

Why would the senior minister of one of the world's most dynamic churches confess that he was full of anxiety and feelings of frustration? Why would he admit that he was *extremely temptable* in areas where he hadn't felt vulnerable before? Why had joy abandoned him? Why couldn't he bear the thought of twenty more years of this! As Bill Hybels related his story, he said, *I was only checking two gauges on my dashboard of life*. While his physical gauge and spiritual gauge were full, he realized that a third gauge, his emotional gauge, was approaching empty.

I can identify with this colleague's story. My husband and I have worked in pastoral ministry for over 30 years. From the beginning, we genuinely desired to serve the Lord and minister to people's needs. But we knew nothing about the world of our feelings. Both of us were taught that anger was sin, and that life must be lived peacefully *at any price*. We had no tools for resolving conflict, no instruction for being honest about hurt, anger or feelings of inadequacy. Our value came from what we were able to produce or perform. These faulty internal messages pushed us both to *near crashes* when we were in our late thirties.

As a result of our experience, I began to search the Bible for the truth about expressing and dealing with human emotions. I studied Jesus' life for clues about developing emotional health. My findings led me to the conclusion that

God created us with a whole range of feelings—for our own good. My first step toward developing emotional health came when I admitted this reality and resolved to monitor consistently all of the diagnostic signals in my life.

Regularly, I check my emotional health by asking myself a few questions: *Am I irritable with the people I love most? Am I becoming more vulnerable to temptation? Do my anxious thoughts stem from hidden perfectionism or unrealistic expectations? Have I directly and positively communicated my needs? Am I wallowing in self-pity, causing me to feel helpless and misunderstood?*

When our emotional gauges are in the green, a personal sense of well-being frees us to experience all of our feelings without judgment, and to express them without defenses. But when we find we are not interacting with openness, freedom and confidence, we should sense a warning that something is wrong, that our emotional reserves are probably running out.

The key to avoiding a crash in ministry (sometimes called burnout) is maintaining a balance between *self-care* and *other-care*. Unfortunately, too often, some mistakenly view self-care as selfishness.

Think about this. Jesus' life verifies that the Son of Man valued *self-care*. Jesus went away alone to pray often, to be renewed in spirit and gain perspective on His purpose. Sometimes He said *no* to a person's request. Several times the gospels tell us that Jesus sent the crowds away. We read that He was tired, hungry, sad, angry, lonely, even disappointed. He admitted it. How else would the writers of the gospels have known?

We also observe that he guarded hang-time with His ministry team of twelve. He had no unrealistic expectations about others or His work. He knew the hearts of people. Still, He communicated God's love and the people's need to believe and make positive change. Jesus was the master of *other-care*, yet, He did not ignore His human need for self-care.

It takes courage to set limits, to move beyond our need for approval, and to examine our own emotions. My husband and I have learned that sometimes our beliefs are not grounded in facts. These *mis-facts* include: If we just do more, the situation will get better; we have the power to change the people in our care; we ought to be available at all times; there must never be any limits to what we can do; and we should not have problems like the people in our congregation. Perhaps you would like to check out your own mis-facts. Do any of yours resemble ours?

So, friend, learn to recognize your own wearing and warning signs. Try not to minimize what is going on for you personally, in your family, in your church and in your culture. Remember, the secret to maintaining emotional health in your role as a Christian leader is learning to balance *self-care* and *other-care*. Develop a respectful *I count; you count* philosophy, and be lovingly gentle with yourself, as well as others.

Michael Lindvall, in his book, *Good News from North Haven* chronicles typical events in the life of a small town pastor. He writes: *The mark a man or a woman makes on this world is most often a trail of faithful love, quiet mercies and unknown kindnesses.* I agree. When we keep a close eye on all our life-gauges,

being loving, merciful and kind to ourselves, we become emotionally healthy Christian leaders. Only then do we have the resources to joyfully give God's faithful love, quiet mercies, and unknown kindness to the people around us.

Sincerely,

Carol A. Travilla

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He has showed you, O man, what is good.

And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8