

How Pastors Get Compassion Fatigue (Plus Ways to Overcome It)

by Sam Rainer

You've likely heard of decision fatigue, when someone makes several decisions in a short amount of time and then struggles to make additional decisions. However, compassion fatigue among pastors may be more prevalent.

Compassion fatigue is an excessive weariness due to the cumulative effect of caring for, listening to, and helping people with emotional and spiritual problems. The issue is more pervasive than most realize because pastors are the first spiritual responders in moments of crisis. They experience repeated exposure to deep and troubling matters. The result is detachment, leading to reduced compassion. Guilt then surfaces because of an inability to serve others, and a vicious cycle forms.

What are some ways pastors get compassion fatigue?

Messiah Complex: You cannot be everything to everyone. You cannot attend to everyone's needs. You cannot possibly solve everyone's problems. Pastors still try, and churches welcome the effort. No pastor would claim to be Jesus, of course. But, misguided empathy can lead to an elevated sense of self, a belief that proper care will not happen without your presence. This form of a messiah complex has one end—exhaustion.

Isolation: Burdens are heavier when carried alone. A listening friend can relieve a lot of tension simply by hearing you express frustration. The ear often has a stronger healing property than the mouth. A struggling pastor needs someone to hear words and not say words. When pastors serve in isolation, they receive words from their congregants but have nowhere to share their own words. Tension builds when you have no outlet to share.

No Margin: The calendar fills quickly with requests for time—counseling, weddings, and meetings. Each is important because they come from people in your church. Then, a couple of emergencies occur, and you are at the hospital late. A teen runs away. You help find her. A spouse confesses adultery. You are on the phone for two hours on Saturday. After a few sleepless nights, you're drained. Sounds like a tough week? No, it's every week.

Gatekeeper Effect: Pastors are usually the gatekeepers of information in the church. They are the ones who decide what information is passed to others. The problem with gatekeeping is you also become the repository for everyone's issues and complaints. When you choose not to mention the funeral announcement (or forget), people criticize while at the same time expecting you to serve. It's an odd dynamic that produces burnout over time.

Pastors with a strong sense of empathy are more susceptible to compassion fatigue. Still, exhaustion can happen to anyone carrying a heavy burden of care over long periods. Some are more sensitive to vicarious traumatization, but no pastor is immune.

How can pastors overcome the problem of compassion fatigue?

Have a strategy for your empathy. Perhaps this suggestion seems odd or nuanced. But it might be a game-changer for you. Empathy can be emotionally exhausting. The goal is to find a way to sustain empathy without it wearing you down. Try to have more empathic concern (improving someone else's well-being) and less emotional empathy (internalizing someone else's feelings). Use emotional empathy when others experience joy and empathic concern when people are experiencing distress.

Schedule your boundaries. Pick a day for your Sabbath and stick with it. For me, it's Saturday. Unless it's an extraordinary circumstance, I'm saying "no" to a request for my time on Saturdays. If you don't schedule your boundaries, you won't have any.

Stop counting on your vacation to be an annual recharge. Your weekly rhythm of a Sabbath is supposed to be how you recharge, not your vacation. Your soul is like a battery, requiring periodic recharges with regular use. You can't shove more power into a battery and expect it to last a year. In the same way, your vacation recharge will not last an entire year.

Have less screen downtime and more outdoor activity. I know the temptation after a long day. You just want to veg and scroll on social media, travel down the YouTube rabbit hole, or binge-watch a new series. What do we really need? Exercise and time outside. The studies on mental health are too numerous to ignore. Spend less of your downtime in front of a screen and more time doing an outdoor activity.

Determine a realistic workload and delegate the rest. Consider this exercise my father did many years ago as an experiment at his church in St. Petersburg, Florida.

I gave a survey to the twelve deacons in the church (I jokingly said we had eleven good deacons and one Judas!). I listed several congregational responsibilities and asked them to share the minimum amount of time I should average in each area each week. I listed about twenty areas, but they were free to add other responsibilities to the blank lines.

I'm not sure exactly what I was anticipating. I just know that I was shocked when I tallied the results. In order to meet the minimum expectations of the deacons, I had to fulfill the following responsibilities each week:

- Prayer at the church: 14 hours
- Sermon preparation: 18 hours
- Outreach and evangelism: 10 hours
- Counseling: 10 hours
- Hospital and home visits: 15 hours
- Administrative functions: 18 hours
- Community involvement: 5 hours
- Denominational involvement: 5 hours
- Church meetings: 5 hours
- Worship services/preaching: 4 hours
- Other: 10 hours

Total: 114 hours per week

This simple exercise reveals a reality almost every pastor intuitively feels. You will never fulfill the minimum expectations of your church. There will always be someone (or many people!) who thinks you should spend more time in a particular area. What can you do? Set a reasonable weekly workload and delegate responsibilities as you train and equip your congregants. Will you please everyone? No, but trying to please everyone is precisely how compassion fatigue begins.

You should expect seasons of tiredness. All vocations produce them. But you can mitigate the problem of compassion fatigue in ministry.