



PASTORAL WELLNESS SERIES

What to Do When **Depression** and **Ministry** Overlap

by Dr. Mark Dance, GuideStone Director of Pastoral Wellness

After pastoring in a fog of clinical depression for several months, I came very close to walking away from the church I was pastoring – and the ministry altogether. I had been pastoring for 22 years at the time and was burned out and fed up – mostly with myself. At first, I was determined to figure it out and fix it myself, which would have been a monumental waste of time. Fortunately, I instead sought counsel from my family physician as well as a local therapist who worked together to help me get healthy again.

A significant Barna study shows that I am not alone: **22% of pastors are at risk for burnout or depression.** Because most ministry leaders are not mental health professionals, we are typically unsure of how to help people – including ourselves – through dark seasons.

Here are **FOUR LESSONS** I learned through my experience that I pray will be helpful to you both personally and professionally.

1 DON'T SELF-DIAGNOSE

When I realized the dark clouds in my head had set in for too long, I naively asked my wife Janet if she thought I was clinically depressed. It occurred to me the next day that this question put both of us in awkward positions since neither of us was a mental health professional, so I did something radical for a pastor – I asked a professional for help.

Our family physician asked me a few questions about my thoughts, feelings, sleep, concentration, eating, work routines, etc. Then, he almost casually diagnosed me with clinical depression. He prescribed some changes in my routine and some medication that I took for almost a year, both of which were very helpful.

Almost a week later, a licensed therapist, who was a member of our church, came to my office to make sure that I knew that I was clinically depressed and getting help for it. Within a week, I was double diagnosed by two people who had not even met each other!

2 LET OTHERS PASTOR YOU

Understandably, the perceived stigma of depression makes it harder for ministers or their family members to seek ongoing help within the community we serve. Just don't let the stigma become an excuse to ignore your mental wellness. During that season of depression, I met monthly with a therapist, 3-4 times a year with my physician and quarterly with a handful of deacons who called themselves The Pastor Support Team. These deacons just wanted to know how I was doing personally, not professionally. Deacons have been a part of God's plan for pastoral wellness since the day they showed up to help in Acts 6.

It is humbling to be on the receiving end of pastoral care, but it is not humiliating. Jesus surrounded me with caring, qualified people who were helping me get healthy again. He and His people will do that for you as well if you simply ask for help. ►

Perhaps you picked this brochure up because you are stuck in a dark place and are unsure exactly what to do about it. My advice is to start by reaching out to your doctor or a credentialed mental health care worker who loves the Lord. If you would like to speak to someone on the phone, call the confidential Southern Baptist Convention Pastoral Care Line (provided by Focus on the Family): **1-844-727-8671**. This service is supported by both the North American Mission Board (NAMB) and GuideStone.

3 TRUST THE LORD FOR HEALING

“Simon, Simon, look out. Satan has asked to sift you like wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And you, when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” Luke 22:31-32 (CSB)

Satan has a plan for your life, but so does Jesus, who has already won the battle for your soul. God obviously allowed Peter to go through the sifting and refining process so that he could grow in both strength and humility, both of which he would need later. We also know that God has plans for your life and ministry!

“... For I know the plans I have for you”—this is the Lord’s declaration—“plans for your well-being, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope ...” Jeremiah 29:11 (CSB)

Jesus is the hero of your story and mine. The same God who called us promises to finish what He started, so let’s trust Him together.

4 HELP SOMEONE ELSE OFF A CLIFF

I am so glad that I did not commit ministry suicide by hastily running away from my problems. Little did I know that right around the corner would be my favorite season of ministry as a pastor, then as a pastor-advocate for people like you.

Pastor, please get healthy for the sake of your family and ministry, as well as for yourself and the Kingdom. **Self-care is not self-centered**; it is strategic for pastors and ministry leaders.

Pay close attention to your life and your teaching; persevere in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers. 1 Timothy 4:16 (CSB)

Once you have gotten healthy, help other pastors off that same cliff.

“... And you, when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” Luke 22:32b (CSB)

**Serving Those Who Serve the Lord... with the integrity
of our hearts and the skillfulness of our hands.**

Psalm 78:72



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Mark Dance is the director of pastoral wellness at GuideStone. He served as a lead pastor for 27 years before launching Lifeway Pastors and the Care4Pastors Network. He earned degrees from Howard Payne University (B.B.A.), Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (M.Div.) and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (D.Min.). He and his wife Janet live in the Dallas area.