



Foundation Stone #3: Stress Management July 2006

The “Thriving on Chaos” Syndrome: Hooked on a Feeling

You know them: they are the “movers and shakers” of their denominations and circles of ministry, ministers who love getting things done. They rise to the top and lead the fastest growing ministries in America. Others ministers look to them in amazement and desire to emulate their success. Of course, they aren’t just found in mega-ministries. These highly productive clergy are everywhere. They would say, “I love working under high stress because I’m more productive. It’s like I thrive on chaos.” If this describes you, be very careful. While this may work for the time being, there may well be a dreadfully dangerous monster lurking beneath your “type A” personality – namely, an addiction to adrenaline.

“You mean you can become addicted to your body’s own adrenaline?” Unfortunately, the answer is “yes”. In times of crisis, God has so fearfully and wonderfully made you that your body is equipped with a mechanism to temporarily operate in overdrive. Its primary job is to help you survive in the face of grave danger or possible death. During such times, your body adapts to give you every possible advantage: increased heart rate, blood pressure directed toward your lungs and muscles, flared nostrils, and dilated pupils. These temporary enhancements give you more strength, increase your intake of oxygen, improve your vision, and help you face whatever life-threatening event may be present.

All these changes are thanks to a complex system in your brain that produces (among other things) adrenaline. It’s also known as epinephrine, the brain chemical after which the drug morphine was patterned. However, your body’s natural epinephrine is about 100 times more powerful than morphine. The adrenaline rush temporarily numbs the body’s sense of pain, producing a general sense of excitement most people find pleasurable. This is typically followed by a relaxed state.

There’s no problem when this mechanism is triggered only in true emergencies. Unfortunately, some find the numbing and pleasurable effects of their own brain chemistry so alluring they subconsciously create frequent “emergencies” in order to experience the rush of excitement and subsequent relaxed state on demand. It becomes a drug many ministers use for anything from self-medicating pain to creating an artificial zeal for life. And this “happy” drug is readily available in the pharmacy of your own brain without having to risk life and limb in the back alleyways of CrackTown.

Here’s the problem: frequent and prolonged abuse of this mechanism wears down the system and creates a state of “tolerance”, meaning it will take a greater and greater amount of adrenaline to produce a similar “buzz” the next time. This is the essence of compulsivity and addiction. Instead of relying on the system for true emergencies, adrenaline junkie “use” their own brain chemistry as a drug to numb pain and provide excitement to their otherwise monotonous existence. This is why workaholics are compulsive about work. It’s the same reason others may be compulsive about extreme sports, working out, shopping, running, or other behaviors. These behaviors aren’t bad in themselves. But when the primary reason for them becomes the “buzz” from the adrenaline rush, it becomes compulsive – and potentially harmful.

In addition to the excitement it brings, some use adrenaline to anesthetize emotional pain. They report the euphoric feeling from the buzz as something that creates a god-like illusion of immortality and invincibility, helping them transcend real-world problems. For others, it gives a false sense of meaning to life.

Thoughts to Ponder:

- Is it possible your high-functioning style of ministry might, in actuality, be merely a “thriving on chaos” syndrome?
- What one person could you share your concerns with that might help you move toward a healthier style of ministry?

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