

# 10 Ways to Fill Your Cup

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Which Bible character, story, or teaching do you think about when you consider the importance of being healthy as a pastor? Often, those called to serve in pastoral vocations struggle to name even one. Unfortunately, this disconnect between faith and health may be adversely impacting pastors. Pastors are often pulled in many directions while caring for the needs of their congregation, family, and community. When you do not make time for yourself, your mind and body don't have time to rest. In addition, making time for practices such as preparing healthy meals, being physically active, enjoying a hobby, and spending time with family and friends becomes increasingly difficult. It may feel like taking time for yourself is selfish, but *not* taking the time now can set you up for poorer health later.

Data collected in 2022, by Barna, found Protestant pastors are dealing with high levels of burnout (due to stress, loneliness/social isolation, and political divisiveness, among other factors). Other research suggests burnout among pastors may be similar to what is seen among social workers and teachers; however, these data were collected pre-COVID. Burnout is of concern, as it is linked to poorer physical and mental health as well as a lower quality of life. Also impacting the health of pastors are conditions such as depression and obesity. When the prevalence of depression and obesity among pastors is compared to the general population, both groups show concerning high numbers, with some groups of pastors having a higher prevalence of both conditions than the general population.

We know that factors such as eating healthy and being physically active are beneficial for overall health, but other practices may be just as important. Dr. Jean Watson has been looking at the connection between caring for oneself and being able to care for others with nurses for many years. Like nursing, pastoring is a caring profession where pastors seek to help the spiritfilled person. Among nurses, Dr. Watson identified 10 caritas that align with better health outcomes and better care for patients. Caritas is defined as divine love and, in this context, the 10 caritas are facets of love that can be directed towards oneself and others. Here we explore the caritas and how you can use them to care for yourself.

- 1. Practice loving-kindness:** Matthew 22:39 says, "Love your neighbor as yourself," but to love others, we have to first love ourselves and treat ourselves with compassion. Practicing loving-kindness by actions that meet the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of others may be familiar to you, but equally important is regularly practicing loving-kindness towards yourself. Filling your cup in this way gives you the capacity to then love those around you.  
**Putting into Practice:** Place a note somewhere you see regularly that reminds you there are things you are proud of about yourself. Show yourself the grace and compassion you show others through positive self-talk.
- 2. Instill faith and hope:** As a pastor, you interact with a variety of people in a variety of settings. It can be hard to be authentically present and honor each person's lived experience and worldview while helping them find faith and hope.

**Putting into Practice:** Write down the thoughts and emotions that come up as you prepare for or debrief from counseling sessions, meetings, and other interactions with those around you. This type of writing helps us process our emotions and be more present. You can put your thoughts in a journal to reflect on over time, or tear them up after each writing session.

- 3. Creative problem-solving/decision making:** As you work to regularly care for yourself, think outside of the box when solving problems. Continuing a practice that no longer serves you can increase stress. Try tapping into new methods or ways of understanding. You may find you need to evolve routines or habits to meet your current needs. Don't be afraid of evolving, calling on others in times of need, and finding creative solutions to problems.

**Putting into Practice:** Reflect on your current schedule and self-care practices. What no longer serves you and your current needs? Do you need to rearrange your schedule to find time for physical activity, healthy eating, or sleep? Do you need to bring in outside help (a group of close friends, someone from your congregation, a trainer, an organizer) to solve a current problem?

- 4. Cultivate your own spiritual practices:** Do you have time set aside each day in which you work on your own spiritual practices? This is not time for developing sermons or Bible study for others, but your own personal time with God. This gives you time to offer prayers to God and listen for God's word, which Dr. Watson has found moves us past our ego and allows us to be more present for those around us.

**Putting into Practice:** Set aside time for reflection. The time may vary daily and so may the practice (Bible reading, prayer, listening for God's word); that's okay. Finding time for reflection outside can double the impact (combining Caritas 4 and 8).

- 5. Increase knowledge and understanding of self:** Part of our faith journey is to learn and grow in our understanding of God's creation and path for us. Seeking out opportunities that let you grow and evolve as a person also helps you find wonder in the world and God's plan.

**Putting into Practice:** Perhaps start by taking a different route to church or home. You could also find a few minutes to try something you have not done since you were younger (jump rope, throw a ball, or skip stones). If you feel more adventurous, take a class, learn a new skill or hobby, or visit a place where you have never been.

- 6. Holistic care for yourself:** To be at your best, you must think about yourself holistically (physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional health). It is not uncommon to gravitate towards one aspect of health and prioritize it over others or to neglect an aspect of health that we find difficult to practice, but we can all work towards holistic health.

**Putting into Practice:** Reflect on how you care for yourself. Are you neglecting one of these health practices: eating healthy, resting, getting regular activity? Can you take one small step towards establishing or re-incorporating this aspect of health into your routine: keep fruit in the refrigerator, go to bed 15 minutes earlier, or schedule some sort of movement (walking, biking, or chair stretches) in your calendar for two days this week?

- 7. Develop and sustain helping, trusting, and caring relationships:** Relationships where you feel safe and have trust are invaluable. These relationships provide an outlet for stress reduction, allow us opportunities to be vulnerable, and increase our emotional caring abilities. It may feel daunting trying to create trusting relationships, but establishing them is an important part of being a good steward to your mind, body, and spirit.

**Putting into Practice:** Cultivating relationships you trust can come in various formats. They may develop through a pastor's only exercise or Bible study group. You may reach out to another pastor to serve as a mentor. You could also cultivate online support systems through social media groups or reconnecting with past friends.
- 8. Create healing environments around you:** As part of caring for yourself, it is important that the environments around you are healthy and fulfilling to your mind, body, and spirit. Your social (friends and family), home, and work environments (the people and physical setting) can create stress or be places of healing. Taking stock of the health of your environment is an important part of self-care. Also important to our health is engaging with the natural environment. In the 1980s, the term *shinrin-yoku*, "forest bathing" emerged in Japan. Since the '80s, we have learned much about the mental and physical health benefits of being in nature.

**Putting into Practice:** Eat lunch outside, move a meeting outdoors, or walk through a park, trail, or other green space. Use this time to consciously connect with what's around you as you "bathe" in the natural world.
- 9. Support the expression of positive and negative feelings:** You may feel you can only show positive feelings to the world based on your position and the lessons society teaches us. However, God created us with both positive and negative emotions. When you do not allow yourself to feel or process negative emotions, they can manifest as physical health problems (high blood pressure, headaches, insomnia, anxiety).

**Putting into Practice:** Cultivate a relationship with a group of trusted peers or find a pastoral counselor with whom you can discuss your vocational joys and concerns openly.
- 10. Support your belief in a Higher Power:** It can be hard to let go and not micro-manage the world around us, especially when the news, social media, and events in our communities make life feel very out of our control. When we tap into our belief in God, allow the unknown to act, and are open to the miracles around us, we have better mental and physical health.

**Putting into Practice:** Reflecting upon scripture such as Acts 2: 42-47 or Matthew 5:1-12 or miracles you have experienced can be helpful during times of uncertainty.

Our research group continues to examine how these 10 facets of love apply to pastors and can be used to improve their health. We recently adapted a survey of the 10 caritas for use with pastors and have several other projects underway. If you are interested in learning about pastoral health or research on pastoral health, contact Dr. Brook Harmon at [harmonbe1@appstate.edu](mailto:harmonbe1@appstate.edu).

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