

Clearing the Channel: How to save ourselves from burnout

By Jeff Jay

“Make me a channel of your peace....” —Prayer of St. Francis

We can all admire the prayer attributed to St. Francis, no matter what our pastoral, teaching, or care-giving role. But what can I do to keep my own channel clear? Having worked as an addiction counselor for decades, I know something about crisis management and unrelenting stress. For most of us, they're part of the job description. What can I do to keep the channel clear and avoid burnout?

The neglect of this question killed a co-worker of mine, shocking everyone in the organization. It was early in my career, and burnout was not yet well understood. As a staff, we dismissed the notion of self-care, but our nonchalance withered as his funeral approached.

I had worked with Fr. Kiley (not his real name) at a large residential treatment center. Our offices were right next to each other on the main hall of the counseling wing. I saw him every day, but he barely returned my greetings in the morning, making it clear he was too busy for conversation. It was my first job in the addiction recovery field, and I was eager to learn from his experience, but his door was usually closed.

Besides being a Catholic priest, he had been a colonel in the Marine Corps, and he thrived on precision and duty. He taught his patients to make their beds with military corners, and loaded them up with reading and writing assignments. Fr. Kiley stayed late every night to give his men extra one-to-one sessions, and usually came in on the weekends, too. He demanded a lot from his patients, but he always gave them more.

I tried to get Kevin Kiley to come to lunch with the other counselors, but he was chronically over-booked. When his doctor confronted him about smoking, he started cutting his filterless cigarettes in half.

“I'm only smoking half as much,” he said. His defiance was palpable.

Like most of the staff, he was a recovering alcoholic; and while he was undeniably a good counselor, something seemed to be missing. He was clear about his faith in God, but what channels did he open up for God to work in his life? In the end, we all dismissed the issue, and besides Kevin wasn't about to entertain our concerns.

In August, Fr. Kiley took a vacation to visit a relative six hundred miles away. He went off for a leisurely drive and never returned. On the way back, he locked himself in a desolate motel room and drank himself to death. All of us on the staff were all stunned. How could the toughest and most disciplined man among us have been the one to self-destruct? How could the man of steel crack?

Easy clichés come to mind, of course. If you don't bend, you break, and so on. But Fr. Kiley was a highly educated man, and surely too smart to fall into such trap. Had he not warned his men about taking their recovery for granted? Now he was a cautionary tale.

Ordained clergy and religious, along with teachers, counselors and healthcare professionals, are notorious for not taking care of themselves. We may be adept at guiding others through their difficulties, but how are each of us faring with our own challenges? Visit any of the places we work and have a look at the staff. Most of us are far from shining examples of wellness, and many of us struggle with the effects of chronic stress.

Burnout comes from giving more than we've got, on a continuing basis. Defined more precisely: burnout is likely to occur when emotional and psychological demands exceed a person's emotional and psychological resources. The indicators of burnout and chronic stress often begin unnoticed. Not all symptoms may be present at any one time, and only a few are needed to cause major problems. Some symptoms are shared with anxiety and depression, either or both of which can follow from more advanced cases. Here are seven warning signs to watch for:

1. Irritability and hopelessness about your profession
2. Unhealthy changes in eating habits and weight
3. Feelings of emotional or physical exhaustion
4. Getting sick more often

5. Insufficient rest and poor sleep habits
6. Emotional isolation from friends and family
7. Increased use of alcohol, mood altering drugs, or sleep aids.

The prayer of St. Francis shows that I can be a channel of God's peace, consolation, and joy. However, I do not have the power to confer those things on other people. My greatest ministry is to keep my channel clear, so I can be a more effective instrument. A clogged channel leads to burnout.

My profession can remain rewarding, and I can be more effective in my work, if I make the time to renew and refresh myself. There are physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions to burnout, but here's a pragmatic approach to addressing the immediate problem.

1. **Accept the Job.** The goal of taking better care of myself can only be done by me. Acceptance must be wedded to action to be meaningful, so I must be prepared to follow through. Paradoxically, it is best if I do not try to do it all by myself.
2. **Talk to someone.** Start by bringing the issue into the light. Talk to a friend, therapist, or mentor. An open discussion will help reveal the next steps you should take. This person may also become your accountability partner, to help keep you on track. In the case of a friend, you may agree to help each other.
3. **Start Small.** Do not make sweeping resolutions. Take it one step at a time, and keep it simple. For example: do not say you are going to join a gym and lose thirty pounds. Instead, make a date for a yoga class or a therapy session. Do not let anything get in the way of this appointment. It will be easier the second time, and you will start building momentum.
4. **Check your fuel.** Your body has specific needs, and it cannot manufacture blood cells from refined sugar. Many of us rely on caffeine and sweets to jump-start our day, with a predictable crash a few hours later. Get smart and adjust your diet to a more

sustainable fuel mix. Cake is for celebrations, not for dinner. Your body will reward you with better physical and mental health.

5. **Reconnect.** Make time for people you enjoy. Go to a movie with a friend, or get in with a group. Accept the invitation you might decline, like a relative's birthday party. Volunteer for something outside your field. Stay a few minutes after your class or meeting, and strike up a little conversation. Join a choir, a bike club, or a cooking class. Isolation breeds depression.
6. **Rest.** If you are glued to a TV, social media, or games before going to sleep, your brain will suffer. In order to fall asleep naturally, try reading a book before bed—not the news. For a change of pace, try a historical novel. Reduce or eliminate the use of mood-altering chemicals to relax. Discontinue the use of sleep aids. Discuss the long-term effects of any medications with your doctor. Stress cannot be managed chemically. Take a walk and you will rest easier.
7. **Move from Me to We.** You can add spiritual power to your plan by joining a group. God works through people, and our emotional jail cell opens from the inside. Most of us qualify for a Twelve Step group of some kind, whether Al-Anon, Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACoA), or another group. Healing happens when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable. Where can I find my fellow travelers? Take a risk and check it out.

One woman embodied this plan, and inspired me to take better care of myself. I met her long after she'd completed her transformation, but her story left an indelible mark on my heart. When I knew her, she was a slight, spry seventy-year-old, with a penetrating intellect. I found it almost impossible to believe that her 5'2" frame used to weigh two hundred pounds.

Sister Clarice Martin (not her real name) had been the dean of a Catholic university. A brilliant Ph.D., she had risen through the system for twenty-five years, until she had the top job at age 50. But she found isolation and frustration, as she tried to balance the innumerable needs of the institution with the constant demands for fund-raising. If she ever found relief, it was late at night in her rooms with an abundance of sugar. After five years as dean she gained

eighty pounds, and became a type 2 diabetic. Her legendary energy was flagging, and she was on the verge of double knee replacement surgery.

Her doctor—an old friend—finally confronted her. “You’ve done a fine job of manufacturing these problems,” he said. “I can schedule surgeries, and I can prescribe medication, but if you don’t make some changes, you’re going to get sicker.”

Sister Clarice was about to dress him down when he asked a question.

“Do you know how much a bowling ball weighs?”

“No,” she said.

“17 pounds,” he said. “You’ve got four bowling balls in your lap every time you stand up, and you’ve got four around your waist every time you walk down the stairs. You’re destroying yourself.”

Sister Clarice was fuming, but decided not to respond so she could get out of the examining room.

“I’m giving you a prescription,” he said. “You can either follow it or find a new doctor.”

The dean was too smart to avoid the inevitable, but what she found most egregious in his list of remedies was that she begin attending meetings of Overeaters Anonymous (OA). The very words seemed humiliating to her, especially in light of her accomplishments. But one thing the doctor said convinced her to give it a try.

“Do you want to meet your maker after committing suicide on the installment plan?”

It took eighteen months, but Sister Clarice did it all. She began by working with a dietician who helped reform her eating habits. Sr. Clarice was known to skimp on breakfast and lunch, and then overeat in the evening. A more balanced diet improved the way she felt, even before the weight came off.

She also started working with a trainer, who slowly got her moving again. The dean was never going to be an athlete, but she became an inveterate walker, which dovetailed nicely with her new lunch schedule. Instead of staying in her office, she started walking around the campus, visiting the various departments, and joining people for lunch. She refrained from talking about work while eating, and got to know her faculty and staff personally.

Instead of isolating in her rooms at night, Clarice began to reconnect with old friends and family. She started to look forward to holidays, weddings, and birthdays, instead of dreading them. She found the pressures of her job evaporated at her grand-niece's wedding. She rejoined the stream of life.

At the same time, Sr. Clarice began attending meetings of Overeaters Anonymous. Of all the changes she made, this was perhaps the most revolutionary. In a Twelve Step group, distinctions of class, education, and religion are dismissed out of hand. Instead, the group focuses on helping each other through their shared difficulties, with more experienced members leading the way. Ironically, Sr. Clarice found comfort in being a beginner again. She didn't need to have all the answers. Instead, she learned to focus on doing the next right thing. She found herself to be one among equals.

Sr. Clarice retired from the university at 60 and went back to school for a master's degree in counseling. She had nothing more to prove, and decided to do what she loved. I met her at the same organization where Fr. Kiley and I had worked. Her insights during clinical case conferences were legendary. She was able to synthesize therapeutic techniques with Twelve Step spirituality effortlessly, always as a channel of love. At 70 years of age, she was healthier than I was at 35, and quietly practiced the program that had saved her life. It was almost impossible to believe she had once come so close to self-destruction. She was a walking testimonial, whose actions spoke even louder than her eloquent words.

Sr. Clarice and others helped me develop small routines to avoid burnout. One of the most important is beginning every day with quiet time. Instead of having my coffee with social media, news, or music, I have my daily readings and a time alone with God. I do a spot check on my channel and get honest about any blockages. What do I need to change? What do I need to accept? As I look to the hours ahead, I know I'm not alone: we are all channels with and for each other.

Jeff Jay is an interventionist and addiction consultant in private practice. He is the author of *Navigating Grace* (Hazelden, 2015) and *Love First* (with Debra Jay; Hazelden, 2008). Learn more about his work at lovefirst.net.