

# CONTENTS

<b><i>Foreword</i></b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Section One: The Impact of Stress</b>	<b>15</b>
1. How Stress Affects Us as Persons	17
2. How Stress Affects Us as Families	35
<b>Section Two: Five Key Stressors that Impact Ministry Health and Well-Being</b>	<b>51</b>
<i>Section Two Introduction</i>	53
3. Significant Stressor: Role Ambiguity	58
4. Significant Stressor: Performance Anxiety	83
5. Significant Stressor: Bivocational Complexity	100
6. Significant Stressor: Financial Scarcity	115
7. Significant Stressor: Situational Adversity	129
<b>Section Three: Strategies that Can Reduce Ministerial Stress</b>	<b>147</b>
<i>Section Three Introduction</i>	149
8. Five Secrets of Stress-Resistant Pastors	151
9. Coping Mechanisms: Four Habits that Can Lower Your Stress	169
<b><i>About the Authors</i></b>	<b>181</b>
<b><i>Notes</i></b>	<b>185</b>

# **SECTION ONE**

## **THE IMPACT OF STRESS**



# 1

## HOW STRESS AFFECTS US AS PERSONS

After serving almost five years in a difficult and conflicted pastoral setting, Allen knew he needed to make a change. His heart for ministry, always at the core of his personal identity, was beating very faintly. His love for God, usually among his primary passions, didn't feel intense or strong. Week after week, Allen dreaded the arrival of Sunday mornings. He grew tired of standing in the pulpit trying to preach God's truth to people who either didn't pay attention to him or simply didn't care.

In the downward spiral of disappointment and disillusionment, Allen lost his energy, worried about his performance in the pulpit, and began to wonder if he had misunderstood the divine call. Sometimes in his weaker moments, Allen even considered whether he had completely lost his faith.

"I didn't feel anything at all," Allen remembers. "I didn't feel close to God, and sometimes I wondered if God was listening to my prayers. I didn't feel like I could trust anybody in the congregation. In the midst of all that, my strongest supporter on the church board resigned suddenly, without telling me in advance. He also withdrew from all his ministry roles in the church, leaving some huge gaps for us. My kids could see that I was struggling, my wife knew that I was

## SECTION ONE

struggling, and I realized that I was struggling, but I couldn't see any real solution to the problems. I felt like I was drowning or suffocating, but slowly.

"I had been trying for months to get a new assignment elsewhere. I had called a few district superintendents, brushed up my résumé, and talked to other pastors at conferences and conventions. Everyone knew I was looking to make a change, but no doors opened up for me. Every once in a while something seemed like a good prospect, but somehow my name never got to the top of the stack.

"One day I realized that doors weren't going to open for me, so I needed to make a new plan. I called my dad, who was still on the family farm where I grew up. It was early spring, and he was getting ready to work the fields. I asked him if my family and I could move there. I asked him if he would let me help him with tilling and planting and tending the crops, if we could live there and I could work through the summer until harvesttime. I hoped that by harvesttime I could figure out what to do next."

Allen's father welcomed the help, realizing that his son was struggling to find his way. So on a crisp spring morning in the upper Midwest, Allen resigned his pastorate, gave two weeks' notice, and made plans to move south with his family. The congregation seemed surprised by Allen's abrupt announcement, but no one made any effort to change his mind or to persuade him to stay.

A mere seventeen days after he submitted his resignation, Allen arrived and unpacked at his parents' farm. He and his family moved into a mobile home near the old barn and prepared to spend a few months living there, doing temporary work. The sudden move was a huge change for everyone. Allen recalls worrying about how his wife and children would react to the new reality.

"I felt like a failure," Allen tells us over coffee and muffins. "I felt like everyone saw me as a failure, like everyone knew I was a failure. Plus I hadn't just failed in a business or in my career—I had failed

God himself. I had failed in my spiritual duties. I had failed in my calling. I was at low tide in every part of my life, the lowest I had ever been. I was sick, tired, overweight, and stressed out. I felt defeated in every sense of the word, like I couldn't do anything right.

"If my dad hadn't let us come there and live on the farm, I don't know where I'd be right now. I don't know what else we could have done."

### Removing the Stressors

By God's grace, farm life was invigorating—right from the start.

Within a month of arriving in the new setting, Allen was sleeping better than he had slept in years. He was losing weight without making any noticeable changes to his diet. If anything, Allen notes, he was probably eating more food, more often, than he did before. Yet the excess weight was dropping away rapidly, and Allen was sleeping all night long on a regular basis.

"I hadn't slept well in years, basically the whole time we served at [name of former church]. I had gained thirty or forty pounds in five years of ministry there, mostly from using food as therapy. I would come home from a board meeting or from spending time with a difficult person, and I would eat some food to calm down. Even if it was nine or ten o'clock at night, I would make myself a huge meal and just eat. Eating was about the only vice I allowed myself—I always felt a little better after a snack or a big meal."

While serving as a pastor in a conflicted church, Allen had slept poorly, gained weight, and experienced frequent bouts of cold and flu.

"I was sick a lot," Allen says in describing that season in his life. "I didn't blame my sickness on the church—it wasn't the fault of the congregation—but looking back I never realized how often I was sick with colds or flu or sore throats or some combination of that."

While feeling like a failure or when returning from a difficult conversation, Allen had used food as his therapy—feeling a bit better in the moment, yet adding even more pounds to his already-over-

## SECTION ONE

weight physique. He was eating too much, sleeping too little, and coping with near constant bouts of physical illness.

Allen was a poster child for stress disease, a living example of the ways that prolonged stress can impact our physical and emotional health. The more time he invested in a conflicted and challenging situation, the more stressed he became. Allen was trapped in a vicious cycle of conflict, stress, and poor health.

Then a move to the farm changed all of that, almost from the beginning.

“For one thing, I slept all night long,” Allen says with a grin. “I slept like a baby at night. We were living in a trailer, with most of our furniture and clothes stored in a nearby barn. You wouldn’t think I would sleep well at all under those conditions, but I slept great. We had our two young sons sleeping on bunk beds in a tiny room, but even they seemed to sleep well after we got to the farm.

“Things were so quiet at night, so different from our life in the city. We didn’t have a phone in the trailer. I had a cell phone, of course, but I got in the habit of just turning it off at night. Who was going to call me? I wasn’t on duty anymore; I wasn’t anybody’s pastor. If my parents needed me for an emergency, they were just a few hundred yards away in the main house. So I just shut my phone off at night.

“I started sleeping like a rock,” Allen sighs. “Maybe for the first time in my life, or at least for the first time since seminary. I wasn’t on call, nobody was depending on me; there just wasn’t any reason to be tense at night when I laid down to sleep. Plus, I was exhausted from working the fields all day or repairing a broken fence. I got in the habit of coming back to the trailer about sunset, having a big meal with my family, and then just playing with my kids for a while. After an hour or so of running around with my boys, I was so tired that I could sleep through anything.”

Allen started sleeping well, losing weight, and feeling better about his life. It was perhaps a month or so before he noticed that

there was a new spring in his step, a frequent smile on his face, and a lot more relaxation in his schedule—despite his busy days of physical labor on a working farm.

“My wife looked at me one night as we ate dinner,” Allen said, smiling, “and she grinned and told me I was a new man. Until she said that, I hadn’t been paying attention. I was just taking one day at a time, enjoying the outdoor work and loving the fact that I had a lot more time with my kids. All of a sudden, when my wife told me I was a new man, I realized how much my life had changed—for the better.”

### Stress and Physical Health

Looking back at Allen’s experience from a safe clinical distance, we can watch as he moves from a high-stress environment into a context with much less stress—and we can track significant changes in his physical health, emotional responses, and overall wellness. These differences are visible and quantifiable in several major categories. It becomes clear that there were negative physical changes in Allen during his pastoral ministry, while he was dealing with stress factors in his daily life. Later, there were positive physical changes when his stress levels decreased as he moved to the family farm.

We watch stress impact Allen through five years of difficult life in ministry, as Allen gains weight, loses sleep, and experiences frequent illness. Then as Allen removes himself from most of the stressors in his environment, we watch again as quite different physical changes develop and emerge. Allen begins to sleep better, starts to lose his excess weight, and is described by his wife as a new man.

With Allen’s case as a backdrop, let’s look at the way stress affects physical health and well-being. We’ll discover that our stress can be positive or negative, and that either way, our body moves through much the same cycle in response.

Positive stress, which is called *eustress*, describes the way our bodies respond to external stimulation, such as cheering for our



daughter's soccer team when she scores a key goal or her team wins a game. We are excited and “buzzed”—our physical bodies respond in a variety of ways, which we'll discuss soon. This is a form of stress to our physical systems, even though the stimulus or trigger event is positive. Eustress might also describe our response when we begin dating a new person, caught up in a rush of hormones as we experience attraction or arousal.

Most of us would not consider a soccer victory or a new relationship to be “stressful,” yet, in fact, our bodies experience significant stress in these situations. Because the stress is essentially positive, the term *eustress* is used to describe it.

Some of our physiological responses during eustress—an accelerated heartbeat, times of rapid or shallow breathing, a sudden burst of adrenaline—are identical to our body's responses during times of negative stress. From our body's perspective, in terms of physical responses and cycles, stress is stress.

When stress is a response to negative conditions or factors, the proper term to describe the situation is *distress*. In common usage, many people use the term *stress* when what they are experiencing is actually *distress*. Most people don't describe scoring a soccer goal, dating a new person, or winning a big game as being “stressful.” For the purposes of this book, as we will make clear in later sections and chapters, we will mostly use the term *stress* in a way that would be more clearly understood, from a clinical perspective, to be *distress*.

In either case—eustress or distress—our body's response is similar. We experience a range of physical reactions to what begins as either a mental or physical stimulus or trigger event. We begin a cycle of stress response that is predictable and observable.

There are three primary stages of our body's response to instances of stress. While the situations or issues can vary, our body essentially moves through each of these three phases when confronting a stressful event or experience.

## How Stress Affects Us as Persons

Here is a quick, simple overview of the three stages:

1. **Trigger event or stimulus.** Our body alerts us to something that needs our immediate and specific attention. For example, if we happen to step on a thorn, a sharp pain stabs at us and demands that we notice and resolve the problem. The purpose of the pain is to alert us to the issue and to elicit an appropriate reaction, such as taking our foot off the thorn and bandaging the wound. Without the trigger event, our body might not notice a serious threat or a looming problem. Some who write about stress call this trigger event an alarm or an onset. Perhaps the term *detonator* might also be appropriate. Something explodes or erupts so that we pay attention, notice the problem, and respond appropriately.
2. **Response or resolution.** Our body releases essential hormones that speed up our reaction to the problem or issue. Adrenaline, one of two key hormones released in response to stress, sets us up for a “fight or flight” reaction to the stressor. For the purposes of understanding this cycle, think of adrenaline as being similar to a jolt of caffeine—as if your body, making up its own mind on the matter, grabs an extra-large energy drink and slams it down fast. Adrenaline gives you a “rush” of extra energy and extra speed so that you can respond to the threat or the trigger. In our daily lives, as we cope with the small and large crises that occur during a busy day, many of us receive these sudden jolts of adrenaline. The release of adrenaline into our system helps us move faster, be more decisive, and move forward with clarity.
3. **Recovery phase.** Having faced the threat and dealt with the problem, our entire physical system needs time to repair, recuperate, and recover. This is the body’s “downtime” to restore health and vitality to all of its systems. As you might guess from the term and this brief description, sleep or rest

## SECTION ONE

is a major part of the recovery phase. Your body's physical health and well-being depends on getting enough sleep and receiving enough rest. Without rest, the body cannot repair itself properly. During this phase there is a general "letdown" of energy and enthusiasm, which is often accompanied by a feeling of slight or general depression. This phase of our stress response is very similar to what happens when our body winds down from the "buzz" of a highly caffeinated energy drink or multiple cups of coffee. We enjoy the sharpness of the buzz, but we also realize that an eventual letdown will occur. In terms of our response to stress, this letdown is a necessary and essential part of our wellness.

Whether the stress in question is positive or negative, our body responds in the same way, working through all three of the phases we have just discussed above. For example, as you watch your daughter score a key soccer goal, you leap up in the stands, raise your arms high above your head, and scream out loud, yelling her name. You're excited and everyone knows it!

There has been a trigger event (goal!) and now there is a response (jump; cheer). As your cheer subsides and you return to your seat, your body begins a recovery phase in order to stabilize your system. Thankfully, soccer goals don't happen continuously. If they did, your body would be under constant stress, despite the "happy" reason for it. In the aftermath of an adrenaline jolt, your body needs time to recover and recharge—and happily, most youth soccer games allow plenty of time for this to occur.

When our daughter's soccer team scores a goal, most of us don't think of this as being a "stressful" event. Yet our bodies are responding with exactly the same cycles and system as if we had suddenly met a bear in the woods or accidentally stepped on a sharp tack we didn't see. First there is a trigger event; then, there is an accelerated reaction or response, and after our response subsides there is a tangible hor-

more lag as our body takes steps to recover, recuperate, and restore. This letdown or lag is vital to our overall health and well-being.

### Adrenaline Junkies

Type A personalities, always striving and achieving, might be described as consciously or unconsciously seeking out “trigger” events in order to sustain the rush of their physical response systems. Some observers have talked about Type A persons as being “adrenaline junkies,” and this term may be apt in its description. Type A personalities do, in fact, have a constant flood of adrenaline in their systems, often overwhelming the body and depriving it of sufficient time to recover. This is why phrases like “burnout” can apply to Type A’s at a later stage, and why physical ailments such as heart disease or stroke often befall a driven, Type-A adult.

Too much adrenaline is a harmful thing. It turns out that your mom was right all those years ago when she insisted that you get enough sleep. Mom knew that your body needs rest in order to fully recover and fully protect you from future threats. Your immune system—your body’s primary line of defense against unwanted invaders—depends on the recovery phase in order to function properly. When you deprive yourself of adequate recovery time, your immune system is weakened. And when your immune system is weakened, your body is more vulnerable to threats such as germs, disease, and chronic or terminal illnesses.

We need not be a Type A personality in order to be at risk for stress disease. All of us, if facing prolonged stress or unresolved issues, are impacted by the changes in physical health that result from overextending the response phase. Simply stated, our bodies are not designed to experience extended seasons of ongoing stress. Instead, our systems are designed to protect us from occasional stress, the surprises of daily living, and the chance encounters we have as we go about our daily business and family life.

Modern lifestyles, particularly in Western cultures, have the effect of exposing us to extended periods of stress. Unknowingly, we overdose on the response phase while never fully experiencing enough restoration and recovery. The result of this consistent and systemic exposure to ongoing stress is a breakdown in health, both individually (microcosm) and in our society (macrocosm). Western society is beset by a wide range of illnesses and diseases that can be traced or linked to stress—especially prolonged, unresolved, ongoing distress. Increasingly, as Western ways impact other cultures and civilizations, the diseases of modern life are impacting even the more remote reaches of our spinning planet.

### **Physical Responses to Stress (Bodily Systems)**

The onset of stress (trigger event or alarm) sets in motion a wide range of changes in our body's physical systems. Listed below are some of the ways that our body's systems are impacted by a stressful situation or environment:

**Brain.** As our brain processes the signals that trigger a stress response, there is an increase in blood flow to our brain cells. We may feel more energized or mentally alert. We may believe that we can “think better” or “think more clearly.” In reality, our mental processes are no better or worse than before—they are simply being sped up or accelerated by the onset of increased blood flow.

There is a reverse of this process when we eat a big meal, and there is a resultant increase in blood flow to our digestive system. This inevitably causes us to feel sluggish or like we are “thinking less clearly” when in reality, this is once again a matter of simple physics. More blood flowing to the brain increases our awareness and heightens our experience of thinking, choosing, and deciding. Less blood flowing to the brain has the opposite effect—we may feel inclined to take a nap, believing that our mental processes have turned to sludge.

**Lungs.** There is often a breathing response to stressful triggers. There may be an initial sharp intake of breath, or we may begin breathing more rapidly. As this response occurs, we are also receiving an increase of blood flow to the lungs. The increase of blood flow increases the amount of oxygen available via our blood. Oxygen energizes us and activates a higher level of functioning. At the same time, our lungs are expelling harmful emissions at a faster rate, clearing our systems. There is an uptake in oxygen received and a quickening of the expulsion process for other unhelpful substances.

If, for example, we are going to run away from danger (fight or flight), our lungs will need the extra capacity in order to fuel our running. So the brain begins to signal to increase blood flow to the lungs and also may signal the lungs to breathe more rapidly, setting off a two-pronged approach to increasing the amount of oxygen that is available for our lungs to process. Result: more energy that the body can use to successfully respond to the stressor.

**Heart.** As you might expect, given the fact that blood flow increases to the brain and to the lungs, your heart is working harder. Almost immediately, your heart moves into high-alert status, raising your blood pressure and speeding your pulse. This response is not dangerous to the heart when it happens in small doses, or in occasional responses to stress. Your heart was designed to function in exactly this way—even if caught by surprise, your heart can quickly ramp up your pulse rate and blood pressure, rushing needed blood and oxygen to your brain and body.

Yet when the heart is asked to function this way for an extended period of time, or when blood pressure is raised for a long time, a wide range of dysfunction can and does occur. We will say more about this in the following section. For now, it is enough to know that the heart responds to stress by speeding up and/or by increasing the blood pressure toward the same purpose (faster response). These are normal and natural heart functions and these functions occur by

design. It is only when these functions are overused, or the heart is overtaxed, that a wide range of difficult health issues come into play.

**Muscles.** It's no illusion: in the moment of sudden need, the rush of blood to our muscles actually does increase our strength. This may explain, at least in part, the anecdotal stories about someone lifting a fallen tree limb or a heavy car so that a friend or family member (or fellow soldier) can escape certain disaster. While under normal circumstances, a person would not have enough strength for this task, the body's stress response makes it possible by rushing extra blood to the muscles, including an extra supply of oxygen via the blood system.

If we are surprised by a sudden threat and we need to run away, our muscles receive an extra boost to make this possible. This is why we may be able to run long distances, or for extended periods of time, when we are responding to a perceived threat. In "real life," our slow speed would doom us to be mauled by the bear or captured by the person chasing us. Yet due to our body's stress response and the increased flow of blood to our muscles, we may get an extra boost that lets us escape, run away, find safety, and survive.

Once again, this is exactly how our bodies are designed to function. Yet also once again, we are not meant to be constantly running, constantly evading capture, or constantly rushing away from angry bears in the woods. Our body's defense systems are designed to get us some quick help in urgent situations, not for coping with extended seasons of nothing but flight or escape. Eventually—or in some cases fairly quickly—we reach our limits and "hit the wall" in terms of our body's ability to evade or flee.

**Stomach.** A rush of excess acid reaches our digestive systems as we respond to a stressful encounter. The purpose of this acid boost is to speed up our digestive system. Again, if our need is for escape or flight, our body needs to be done with digestion so that maximum energy is available to us as we flee.

Excess acid, or some form of gastrointestinal distress, is one of the most-reported symptoms of stress. We may or may not be aware of changes in our breathing or even our pulse, but if we get heart-burn—that, we notice. This symptom is at or near the top of any list of self-reported symptoms of stress. Related issues include acid reflux, ulcers, bloating, gas, and a host of symptoms that stressed-out workers experience frequently.

### **Harmful or Helpful: It's a Question of Degree**

As we review the ways in which our body responds to stress, it's clear that the purpose of each response is to provide us with the energy and alertness we need in order to avoid harm or danger. Our stress-response systems are in place for a reason—in times of emergency, we need the extra boost that our rapid heart rate, oxygenated blood, and stronger muscles can provide.

Simply put, our stress-response system isn't bad—it is very, very good.

The problem is that we are not designed or intended to live in constant stress and under ongoing duress. When the body's stress-response system is triggered over and over again, and the stress-response system responds exactly as it is designed to, the same chemistry that usually helps us becomes an enemy of our health.

A little adrenaline for a sudden emergency is a very good thing. A constant rush of adrenaline through our systems leads to a wide range of ailments, including cholesterol damage. Although reporting on heart conditions and cardiac disease often mentions cholesterol and statins, there is not enough reporting on the linkage between high levels of adrenaline and the many kinds of damage that cholesterol can do.

An ample body of evidence confirms that having a high level of adrenaline in your system contributes to having higher levels of LDLs—low density lipoproteins—which have a harmful impact on



heart health. If you've had your cholesterol checked recently (and if you haven't, you should), you know that you received two numbers in the rating—one number for HDLs (high-density lipoproteins) and the other number for LDLs.

Having higher levels of HDLs appears to offer some protection against the prospect and impact of heart disease. Having higher levels of LDLs appears to be a risk factor of critical importance. What's missing from this conversation is the reality that high levels of adrenaline are implicated in higher levels of LDLs.

Here's another way of thinking about all of this.

Your body was designed with an intricate, helpful emergency-response system that protects you in a time of danger. Although it's somewhat of an exaggeration, your emergency-response system can give you “warp speed” or “superhuman strength” in times of crisis or emergency. Nearly every major system in your body is designed to be able to function at a higher state of alert and to produce impressive results in performance.

Yet your body was never designed to live in “panic mode” on a regular basis. The whole point of an emergency-response system is to respond to emergencies. Instead, modern life creates “emergency” conditions on a regular basis. When you live in a continuous state or season of stress, you tax and overload your body's natural line of defense against disease and poor health.

In the case of our body's emergency-response system, too much of a good thing is definitely a bad thing. Our body's emergency-response system was designed to be helpful occasionally—when needed. It was not designed to be permanently in the “on” position—constantly juicing us with adrenaline or cortisol, constantly revving up our blood pressure, breathing, or energy levels.

Many of the diseases and ailments of modern life can be traced to an overfunctioning of our body's stress-response systems, with the result that our immune systems are weakened, our body chemistry

is impacted negatively, and our health suffers accordingly. We experience cardiovascular, respiratory, and digestive issues and problems that are a direct result of our overtaxed, overfunctioning stress-response systems.

From heart disease to liver conditions, from cancer to coronaries, an increasing body of evidence implicates stress and the body's natural response to it as a contributing factor to many of our most prevalent health problems.

### Treating the Symptoms—Not the Causes

As we look back at the various ways our body is impacted by stress, it's interesting to note how many modern remedies target the symptoms of these issues without treating or responding to the underlying causes. We notice the symptoms, complain about the symptoms—and in response an army of medical researchers goes to work trying to treat or mitigate the symptoms with a new “miracle drug.”

Got gastric distress? Pop an antacid. Planning to eat an unhealthy, unwise meal in the near future? Swallow a prescription antacid prior to dining. Advances in medicine and medical technology allow us to treat many of the troubling symptoms of modern life while continuing to make many of the lifestyle and dietary mistakes that are staples of our modern lifestyles. We like our mistakes, and we plan to keep right on making them. Please pass the pills.

Got a headache? We have pain relievers for that—generic, brand name, and prescription. Aches and pains throughout your body can be targeted with very specific analgesics and pain relievers that mitigate your symptoms—while doing nothing at all about the underlying causes. Thanks to these miracle medicines, we can literally “get on with life” while a pharmaceutical breakthrough helps us mostly ignore our symptoms. Back to work; we are feeling better and no longer distracted by our pressing ailments and pains.

Ah, relief. Now—where was I?

Our bodies must be highly confused by all of this. Our bodies are busy triggering our stress-response systems while we blatantly ignore the warnings and simply pop more pills. The more loudly our body speaks to us about our high levels of stress, the more often we dissolve a fizzy remedy in a glass of water or reach for a capsule or a tablet. We hear the warning, but we rush to treat the symptom instead of stopping to diagnose or understand the root problem.

There is nothing wrong with these amazing, often-used remedies—they help us feel better and get back to work. Yet the underlying problems we face remain unaddressed and unresolved. While Western and Eastern nations rush to accomplish more, achieve more, and succeed in a highly complex and competitive marketplace, personal and individual health suffers. Trapped in a vicious cycle, we work harder, medicate more, and put even more strain on the very systems that were designed to guard our health—not to attack it.

How much of the strain on our health-care system could be alleviated if we would stop, look, and listen to the many ways our body tries to alert us to danger? As the writer of Psalms observed, we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14), and part of that intricate design is a stress-response system that alerts us to problems so that we can take appropriate actions.

All too often, instead of learning from our stress and taking wise actions to correct the issues, we simply medicate the symptoms of our stress so that we can go right back to the behaviors, anxieties, and choices that put stress in our lives. At some point, perhaps our Creator might wonder whether we’ve noticed that, among his other gifts to us, he gave us brains—hoping we might use them.

## Lessons from Allen

Allen, who fled the pastoral ministry to till the fields of his father’s farm, learned a wide range of lessons as he watched himself regain physical health. Along with the physical changes he experienced,

## How Stress Affects Us as Persons

Allen noticed that his emotions were rebounding. He was laughing more loudly and more often. Instead of anxious thoughts flooding his mind as he began each day or as he attempted to fall asleep, Allen found himself surrounded by a calm and tranquil environment that soothed his nerves and restored his composure.

Allen's stress began to ebb and recede.

His body and spirit began an extended season of recovery.

"He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul" (Psalm 23:2-3, NKJV) is how the Psalmist describes this process. Once again, the wisdom of the divine Creator is much in view. It is not good for persons—including pastors—to live with so much tension and anxiety, constantly engaged in conflicted and challenging situations. The toll on the pastor's health, which may also include damage to the pastor's marriage and family, is too great. God's design is not intended to lead us to burnout but to lead us to still waters, calm repose, and the restoration of our souls and spirits.

"I had been ignoring the Sabbath, among my many other sins," Allen says now as he reflects on his pastoral season. "I preached the Ten Commandments but I took some liberties with them, especially God's command that we should honor the Sabbath.

"Although obviously Sunday could not have been a Sabbath for me, I believe God intended for me to have another full day as Sabbath rest, and I never really tried to achieve that," Allen admits. "I believed that if I tried harder, worked harder, and kept on trying to resolve the issues, things would get better. Instead, what actually happened was that my own health kept getting worse.

"I was losing my perspective about God, about pastoral ministry, about the worth and value of people, about many things," Allen said, sighing. "I don't know how close I came to having a complete breakdown of some kind, but there were days when I felt pretty close to that. And there were days when I would have welcomed that, quite frankly, because it would have been a way of escape."

## SECTION ONE

Allen's candor points us in helpful directions.

We are “fearfully and wonderfully made,” and the design of our body includes a stress-response system that is helpful and good. However, the contours of modern life expose us to stressful situations and challenging personal environments, such as pastoral ministry. If we remain in a state of constant exposure to stressful persons and stressful contexts, we overtax and overactivate our God-given emergency-response systems. The result is an erosion of our personal health, triggered and activated by the very responses that were designed to save us.

Of all the phases and cycles of our body's responses to stress, the “recovery” phase is most often ignored. Yet we ignore this recovery at our own peril. Pushing past any reasonable boundaries, we hit the wall, reach our limits, and begin to break down physically or emotionally. We need the recovery phase just as often as we need the trigger and response phases—each cycle needs its own recovery.

Perhaps this is one of the many reasons why our Creator gave us a Sabbath and then told us he was absolutely serious about how—and how often—we observed it. He placed this instruction in the “Big Ten.”

Christ tells us about this in his own analysis of God's design. “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27), Christ explains. In other words, Sabbath rest is not a rule to follow but instead a divine prescription given for our own health and well-being. God gave us the Sabbath so that our bodies and spirits could rest, recover, and be restored.