



# THE **HEALTHY** *Renegade* **PASTOR**

ABANDONING AVERAGE IN YOUR  
HEALTH AND WELLNESS

NELSON SEARCY  
STEVE REYNOLDS & JENNIFER DYKES HENSON



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THE HEALTHY RENEGADE PASTOR

Published by Church Leader Insights U.S.A.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Searcy, Nelson

The Healthy Renegade Pastor : abandoning average in your health and wellness /  
Nelson Searcy; with Steve Reynolds and Jennifer Dykes Henson  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-9885241-1-8

1. Religion – Christian Ministry – Pastoral Resources

The website addresses recommended throughout this book are offered as a resource to you.

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Printed in the United States of America

First Edition 2015

To all of the pastors who are ready to get healthier, live more fully,  
and accomplish the unique purposes God has set before them.

*Authors' Note:* Through the process of writing of this book, the three of us have taken our own health to a new level. As we've collaborated with one another and shared our stories of abandoning average in our physical health, we have learned much from each other's personal journeys. While the thoughts, anecdotes and principles presented in these pages represent the contributions of all three authors, we've chosen to fuse those contributions into one voice for clarity's sake. **Unless otherwise noted, the voice in the pages ahead is Nelson's.**



*Abandoning  
Average*

# *Abandoning Average:* A Tale of Two Pastors

If you want to be successful in life and you have no role models, look at what the majority of people are doing and do the opposite. The majority is always wrong.

EARL NIGHTINGALE

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.

GALATIANS 6:7

*Tired. Stressed. Sick. Overweight.* Do these words describe you? For the vast majority of pastors, they are the norm. Over the course of our years as church leaders, too many of us have sacrificed our health and wellbeing on the altar of ministry. We have lost the vibrancy—and the waistlines—we once had, opting instead for the poor, counterfeit version of health that has become acceptable in our culture. It's no secret that, as a nation, we are facing a health crisis. I'm sure you've heard the statistics, but let me remind you of just a couple:

- Time trend forecasts predict that by 2030, 51% of the population will be obese.<sup>1</sup>
- Researchers predict that such rates of obesity will result in an additional \$66 billion in health care expenditures, 7.8 million new cases of diabetes, 6.8 million new cases

of stroke and heart disease, and 539,000 new cancer diagnoses.<sup>2</sup>

Those are staggering numbers, but they are just the tip of the iceberg for you and me. Among church leaders, the picture is even bleaker:

- A recent Pulpit and Pew study of 2500 clergy found that 76% were overweight or obese.<sup>3</sup>
- Clergy have one of the highest death rates from heart disease of any occupation.<sup>4</sup>
- 40% of pastors say they are depressed at times, and worn out “some or most of the time.”<sup>5</sup>

We tell ourselves all kinds of lies to justify how far we’ve fallen:

- *I’m not that overweight. Lots of people are much bigger than me.*
- *I don’t have time to work out.*
- *I’m busy doing God’s work, so he’ll take care of my body.*
- *When it’s my time to go, I’ll die. There’s not much I can do about it in the meantime.*
- *This condition runs in my family. It doesn’t have anything to do with my lifestyle.*
- *All pastors are stressed out. It’s part of the job.*

At first, we believe ourselves. We convince ourselves that we are doing okay compared to the next guy and we forge ahead, blinders firmly in place. But eventually, the consequences of years of poor health decisions catch up. It’s inevitable. When they do, our bodies suffer and our ministries suffer. We end up fat, chronically sick, dependent on

pills to regulate our bodies' systems, and stressed to the point of burn-out or even depression. None of this is good for us, our churches, or God's greater kingdom. No matter how much we like to try, we can't get away from the truth Paul spelled out so clearly in Galatians:

*Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked.*

***A man reaps what he sows.***

—Galatians 6:7 (emphasis added)

## Two Paths Diverged

The lives of two great pastors I know provide the perfect case study for the slippery slope to ill health that can happen so easily in ministry. If you read *The Renegade Pastor: Abandoning Average in Your Life and Ministry*, then you've met these two before. In case you haven't, allow me to reintroduce them:

Alex and Rob are both faithful, well-intentioned guys whose lives were on similar trajectories when they were young. They were both called to ministry during college and went on to attend comparable seminaries. Now, each of them pastors a mid-sized church in the Midwest. Like you and me, both Alex and Rob started out in ministry with grand visions of what the future would bring. Each was in his prime, healthy and vibrant. They both wanted to change lives and grow the kingdom. Over the years, though, Alex and Rob's paths have diverged—both in terms of the churches and personal lives they have led and in their ability to fulfill their calling due to their different health journeys. (To learn more about how Alex and Rob's ministries and personal lives have taken drastically different paths, read *The Renegade Pastor: Abandoning Average in Your Life and Ministry*, Regal, 2013.)

Alex and Rob both still want to be on fire for God's work and to be filled with the energy and vitality it takes to do that work well, but Alex is beginning to face some health challenges that are slowing



him down. With each passing year, he finds himself thicker around the middle, less energetic and less able to get excited about running after what God has called him to. On the other hand, Rob wakes up every morning feeling strong and refreshed, ready to use the full measure of his life to passionately pursue the visions God has given him. What's the difference?

Maybe the pseudo-last names I've given them for purposes of this case study will be a clue: Alex Average allows the busyness of his days to direct the decisions he makes (or fails to make) about his health. Because he's so consumed with the pressures of ministry and home life, his physical wellbeing is on autopilot. He eats whatever he can grab between meetings; he never has time to get to the gym; and he's constantly stressed as he scrambles to get his message together for the upcoming weekend. (Go to [HealthyRenegade.com](http://HealthyRenegade.com) to learn how to reduce stress by creating a preaching calendar.)

Over the last decade, this reactive health lifestyle has resulted in fifty pounds of unwanted weight, knee pain, high blood pressure and not a few bouts of depression. Alex never planned to get into a position where his health compromised his ability to fulfill the potential God put within him; the problem was, he never planned not to.

Rob Renegade, on the other hand, adopted a different mindset about his health many years ago. Looking around and seeing his fellow pastors struggling with weight, illness and stress, he decided to walk a different path. He began to understand that if he wanted to be fit to serve for as long as possible, he needed to start cooperating with his creator to keep his body ready for the task. So, Rob made some simple changes. He became more mindful about his eating habits; he became intentional about working more physical activity into his days; and he started proactively managing his rest and his stress levels. Now well into middle age, he has more energy and vigor to fulfill his calling than he did when he first graduated from seminary. His health has become a tool that works for him rather than an obstacle that keeps him from God's best.

## Average vs. Renegade

In his classic spoken word recording *Lead the Field*, Earl Nightingale said, “If you want to be successful in life and you have no role models, look at what the majority of people are doing and do the opposite. The majority is always wrong.”<sup>6</sup> When it comes to being a pastor, I couldn’t agree more. If you want to grow a healthy church and have a happy personal life, you cannot do the things an average pastor does (as I discuss in detail in *The Renegade Pastor: Abandoning Average in Your Life and Ministry* and in my ongoing Renegade Pastors coaching network. For more information, go to [HealthyRenegade.com](http://HealthyRenegade.com)). The same truth applies to your health. If you want to live a life full of the physical vitality you need in order to be able to do all that God has called you to, then you must decide to go renegade with your health. In other words, commit to being a healthy renegade pastor.



Are you ready to live a life full of the physical vitality you need to be able to do all that God has called you to?  
Time to go renegade.

A renegade is someone who has abandoned average in favor of excellence; someone who rises up against resistance, mediocrity and conformity. He’s not contrarian for contrarian’s sake. He’s not looking for a fight with other people, but with the devil himself. He’s not critical or cynical, but analytical in his thinking about what works and what doesn’t. A renegade pastor is obedient to the word of God and passionately abandoned for the kingdom. He has made a decision to step out of the status quo and get back to the business of reflecting God’s glory in every single aspect of his life.

On an individual level, the renegade pastor is someone who lives in a state of faithful pro-activity. The renegade’s church is healthy and growing, as is he. The renegade pastor is a hard worker, but he knows how to work efficiently and manage his time for maximum benefit, avoiding unnecessary stress and all of its negative effects. He

has quality relationships in his life. He is intentional about keeping his body—his most critical tool for ministry on this earth—healthy and strong. He knows how to identify godly health goals and pursue them. And, unlike the average pastor, the renegade has peace about his health, his work and his future. He experiences the fulfillment that comes with embracing the life God has called him to.

<div>The Renegade Pastor</div> <div>- Defining Characteristics -</div>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Abandons average</li><li>• Challenges status quo thinking</li><li>• Lives a pro-active lifestyle</li><li>• Stands against resistance and mediocrity</li><li>• Remains healthy and full of energy</li><li>• Passionately abandoned to the will of God</li><li>• Dedicates time to rest and growth</li><li>• Experiences fulfillment</li></ul>

**VERSUS**  
**The Average Pastor**  
**- Defining Characteristics -**

- Frustrated
- Overweight
- Short on time
- Low on energy
- Dealing with chronic, lifestyle-related health issues
- Lives a reactive life
- Unable to say 'yes' to God's purposes
- Not experiencing fulfillment

The differences between an average pastor and a renegade pastor are strikingly clear. So the question then becomes: *Do you want to be average or do you want to be renegade?* And if you are ready to go renegade, how do you bridge the divide between these two dichotomies? What can you do to develop a lifestyle that look less like Alex's and more like Rob's? The answers lie in the pages ahead. (For more insight into what distinguishes a renegade pastor from an average pastor, including a list of the Seven Commitments of a Renegade Pastor, visit [HealthyRenegade.com](http://HealthyRenegade.com).)

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## *Abandoning Average:* Get Unstuck

Though no one can go back and make a brand new start,  
anyone can start from now and make a brand new ending.

CARL BARD

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith.

HEBREWS 12:1-2

Are you stuck in a rut? That's how Alex Average feels most of the time. Maybe you can relate to a typical day for him. See if this sounds familiar: You get up early and check your messages and emails, only to find that there is a problem waiting for you that has to be dealt with immediately. Once you put out that early morning fire, you take a quick shower and kiss your family goodbye while you are stuffing some breakfast into your mouth. There's no time to spare; you are already late for your first appointment. You fight traffic to get to work and settle in for a long, hard day.

After you leave the office (later than you intended to, of course), you swing by the hospital to encourage a sick church member.

Starving, you grab a snack from the hospital vending machine to tide you over. Traffic is a mess and you get home frazzled. You eat a quick, not-so-healthy dinner and spend a little time with your family. Once everyone is in bed, you regroup and put a few more hours of work in. When you finally get to bed yourself, you lay awake thinking about issues in the church and mentally preparing to-do lists for the next day. The following morning, the alarm goes off bright and early. You drag out of bed and do it all over again.



Your present does not have to equal your future.

Maybe you have grand visions in the corners of your mind about losing some weight and getting healthier. But as the days continue to roll by, your plans for eating better, resting more and exercising get pushed further and further down the priority list. Like Alex—like most average pastors—you feel stuck. You are practicing a lifestyle that has predictable health consequences, but you don't have the time or energy to break the cycle.

Here's some great news: your present does not have to equal your future. No matter your current state of being, you can get unstuck and move toward living the life of excellence God has called you to. Change is possible. Both of us (Nelson and Steve) used to be right where you are, but with some key decisions, intentional action and a lot of grace, we were both able to break out of unhealthy lifestyle ruts and start living as renegades in passionate pursuit of God's purposes. Here are our stories.

## Steve's Story

My weight problem started as a child. I (Steve) was more than just a little husky. I was fat. I weighed one hundred pounds in the first grade, which was incredibly unusual in 1963. Unfortunately, I had started developing bad eating habits almost as early as I began eating. Most of the food I ate was either fried or loaded with sugar. The only thing that saved me from debilitating childhood obesity was my love of sports. I got involved with football at an early age and ended up being good at it. So, even though my diet left a lot to be desired, I was able to keep my weight somewhat in check thanks to my activity on the football field.

Football also gave me the chance to go to college. While several small schools wanted to recruit me, I ended up accepting a full scholarship to Liberty University. Stepping onto Liberty's campus as a freshman, I assumed that I would eventually become a coach or maybe a businessman. However, shortly into my first year, I felt a clear call from God to go into full-time church ministry. While I loved playing college ball, suddenly I knew that nothing other than pastoring would bring me contentment and joy long-term.

My life at Liberty became consumed with football training, weekend games and doing all I could to prepare to be a pastor. I discussed my call with my girlfriend, Debbie, who later became my wife. We both agreed that we were meant to go into ministry together. We were young, ambitious, energetic and ready to live out our newfound passion.

After graduation, I made a terrible decision—one that would have negative effects on my health, my calling, my ministry, and my personal life. I decided that I was finished with exercise. After over a decade of football drills, cardio conditioning, and weight training, I was tired of the exertion. And I figured that, since my football days were behind me, I didn't have any reason to work out anymore. My

new passion, my all-consuming drive, was ministry. I wanted to start a church and I threw myself into the process full-force.

The good news is that the new church began to grow. The bad news is that I began to grow right along with it. Even though I stopped exercising like a college football player, I never stopped eating like one. So I kept growing and growing and growing—until I finally topped out a little over 340 pounds.

Letting my weight get out of control was one of the easiest things I've ever done. People in my church brought me food all the time. If I mentioned that I liked something specific (like Hershey's Milk Chocolate Bars), I would be showered with that very thing. My busy, sporadic schedule led to a lot of fast-food meals. Not to mention, I spent most of my days sitting down. I was either at my desk, in the car, or in meetings. Add in an ongoing addiction to ice cream, which I had to have every night to ease the stress I felt, and I was whipping up a recipe for disaster.

In Galatians 6:7, Paul wrote that if you sow to your flesh, you will reap corruption. That is exactly what I was doing. I was sowing to my flesh by overeating and under-exercising. In the process, I was corrupting the body God had given me. I ended up with three major diseases: high blood pressure (aka the silent killer), high cholesterol, and diabetes. Before I realized it, I was facing a future of medications, doctor's appointments and possibly an early death.

My ministry was growing and prospering. I had a beautiful family who loved me. And I was walking around afraid I would drop dead at any moment, leaving both in distress. The worst part is that, deep down, I knew I was responsible for my condition. I felt humiliated, desperate and alone. I wanted nothing more than to change the reflection in the mirror back to that healthy, vibrant man I used to be.



Today, with intentionality and God's help, I have lost 130 pounds, and have completely reversed my high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes. I am disease free! Plus, out of this experience, God has opened the door for me to create a wonderful ministry called *Losing to Live*. In fact, it was through *Losing to Live* that Nelson and I grew closer, as he was struggling with some of the same challenges.

## Before & After



## Nelson's Story

A few years ago, I ranked among the millions of people in America who desperately need to embrace a healthier lifestyle. As a church leader, I had spent my entire career building God's kingdom, but in the meantime I had let his temple—my body—fall into disrepair. My physical health just wasn't of much concern to me, even though I had read Paul's words in 1 Corinthians many times:

*Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body.*

—1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Like most people, I connected these verses with sexual sin and sexual sin only—but they have a much wider implication. I slowly began awakening to the reality that my body is the living, breathing, and walking-around temple of God's spirit. So is yours. And that reality has implications for how we care for ourselves. We are the dwelling place of the Alpha and Omega. Our skin, bones and fleshy guts are home to the Most High. That's a humbling thought, isn't it?

For most of my adult life, I had been able to keep my weight around 185 pounds. Unfortunately, after starting The Journey Church in New York City, that number began to tick up into new territory. I began putting on a few extra pounds every year. Before long, I hit 275. When I saw that number on the scale, I was shocked. I knew I was heavier than usual, but I had no idea I'd let my weight get so out of control.

Even still, the real breaking point didn't come for me until I became a father. After my son was born, I couldn't ignore what I was doing to my body any longer. I remember saying to myself, "I'm not going to be able to chase him around, because I'm so out of shape."

That led me to begin considering everything else my weight and its consequences would keep me from doing in the future, if I didn't make a change. So, I made a decision to take control of my health and then put a definitive plan of action behind that decision.

I started by making simple modifications to my eating habits. Then, I committed to changing myself from being someone who didn't even like to walk very far to becoming someone who could be considered a habitual runner. If you had told me a few years ago that I would start running several times per week and actually enjoy it, I would have called you crazy. But I had left myself little choice. I had to get active. A friend recommended a running program called *Couch to 5K*. As the title implies, the program takes a person who is used to almost no physical activity at all and guides him or her through an incremental process that results in being able to run for thirty minutes without stopping.

The first day I laced up my sneakers and cued up my iPod to give the program a try, I had a hard time running for sixty seconds straight. I remember stumbling back into my New York City apartment—after more walking than running—and saying to my wife, Kelley, “I don't know if I can do this. Maybe it's not for me.” But after a day's rest, I tried it again. And then again. And then one more time. And slowly but surely, my endurance began to build. After about eight weeks, I was running for the full thirty minutes. Now, running has become an important part of my life. I miss it when I don't get it in. I'm not saying that I'm always eager to jump into my running shoes. Sometimes I still have to force myself out the door. But even on those days, I always finish my run with a great sense of satisfaction that I am doing my part to keep this body that God gave me in prime working condition.

As they say, the truth will set you free. Thanks to a new perspective on God's plan for my body, my entire mindset toward physical health has shifted. If God has entrusted me with this earthly

vessel—not to mention all of the work and plans he has for me while living in it—then where do I get off trashing it by eating what I want and sitting around letting it atrophy? Where do you? How can we stomach treating ourselves so poorly that we can't fully engage in God's purposes for us?



God wants us to live full, active lives accomplishing the things he put us here to do. We have a responsibility in cooperating with him to make that happen.

Of course, there are a lot of excuses that have become our defense to these types of questions: we have a family history of hearty eaters and big bellies (I loved using that one); we're just big-boned; we don't have time to exercise; and on and on we build our case. All of these excuses—and the hundreds of others we create in a desperate attempt to stay within our carefully constructed comfort zone—keep us from embracing the truth that God wants us to live full, active lives accomplishing the things he put us here to do. We have a responsibility in cooperating with him to make that happen. Life is too short and too precious, and God has invested way too much in us, for us to sit around squandering our potential and letting little things like poor food choices and lack of exercise hold us back from all that he has in store.

Today, I have lost over eighty pounds and completely changed my long-term health trajectory. If I can get the upper hand on my weight and health issues, so can you. You have everything you need to get from where you are to where you want to be. Decide to honor God with your entire being, including the body he has given you. Speaking from the other side of the (ongoing) journey, I can tell you that taking the necessary action to get your physical health under control is more than worth the effort. There's no better gift you can give yourself or those who love you.

Before & After



## Deciding to Go Renegade

Like both Steve and I, you have to come to a point in your life where you can admit that you are sick and tired of being sick and tired. We were fed up with how we felt, just like you are. We wanted something different for our lives and for our futures, and we want that for you as well. Consider this verse from Isaiah:

*Do not remember the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing. Now it shall spring forth, shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.*

—Isaiah 43:18-19

God says that he will do *a new thing*. Don't dwell on your past. So, you have made some bad health choices. We all have at some point in our lives. God says to forget those things and look ahead to the future.

You may be thinking, "Okay, I went to seminary. These verses don't have anything to do with physical health." Are you sure? God wants to do a new thing in every single one of us *in* and *through* Jesus Christ. He is an *unstuck* kind of God. During his ministry on earth, Jesus constantly met people where they were, forgave them, helped them break free from their current circumstances, and showed them a new way to live. He wants to do the same for you, in every way—even, and maybe especially, in your physical health. Are you ready?

• • •



*Discovering  
Whole Health*

## *Discovering Whole Health: From Stress to Rest*

If you ask me what is the single most important key to longevity,  
I would have to say it is avoiding worry, stress and tension.  
And if you didn't ask me, I'd still have to say it.

GEORGE BURNS

In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.

JOHN 16:33 (NIV)

There's an old story you may have heard about a man who worked for a major grocery store chain. During an overnight shift, he was working in the store's warehousing area by himself. He went into one of the freezer compartments to grab something he needed and the freezer door accidentally closed behind him. He tried to get out, but he couldn't get the door to open. He was trapped.

Panicking, he yelled for his co-worker who was stocking shelves near the front of the store, but she couldn't hear him. He kicked and banged the freezer door until his feet ached and his hands started to crack, but it wouldn't budge. Finally, he sat down on the floor of the freezer and took out a notepad he had in his pocket. He started recording what was happening to him. He wrote that he was beginning to feel cold and weak. He could feel his body freezing, he said. He scribbled that didn't know if he would get out of the freezer alive.



The following morning, two other store employees opened the freezer compartment and found the man lying on the floor, dead. The amazing part of the story? What the dying man hadn't had the wherewithal to notice was that the freezer wasn't working properly. It had started kicking on and off sporadically a few days earlier, so the compartment wasn't actually at freezing temperatures. But, the trapped man believed it was. He believed he was freezing to death—and the stress his body underwent as a result literally turned that belief into reality. The cold didn't kill him; stress did.

## **The Stress-Health Connection**

Being a healthy renegade goes beyond eating well, exercising and getting enough rest. In order to achieve and maintain true physical health, you also have to learn to handle the stress in your life well. Otherwise, it will derail your other efforts, keeping you overweight, sick, and quite possibly taking you to an early grave.

When you begin to get stressed, your body reacts physically by going into what's known as "fight-or-flight" mode. This stress response causes your heart to race, your breathing to quicken, your muscles to contract and your blood pressure to rise. Your body is literally preparing itself to act in the face of danger, even if that danger isn't physical. When you are in this state often, it wears your body down. Constant stress leads to weight gain, low energy, headaches, digestive issues, frequent colds and infections, premature aging and a host of other problems.<sup>1</sup> Over the long term, it can cause heart disease, heart attacks and an increased cancer risk.

While the physical effects of stress are nothing to be taken lightly, high levels of stress also affect your emotional wellbeing—which is another key component of being a healthy renegade. Stress causes you to lose clarity and make poor decisions. In fact, I would venture that the ten worst decisions you've made in your life were made when you were under a lot of stress. Stress causes you to have a sour mood and a quick temper, which leads to relational issues. There's no

margin in your life when you are stressed, so you tend to overreact to everything and hurt the people around you.

Not to mention, stress hinders your spiritual life. Have you noticed that when you are overwhelmed and feel like you have too much to do, your prayer life is one of the first things to suffer? Your time in God's Word usually follows in short order. This creates a vicious cycle. As your stress causes you to crowd God out of your schedule, you begin to lose the sense of his peace and presence—which you need more than ever when you are stressed. This loss causes even more stress, which makes you pull even further away.

Think of stress as something that maximizes whatever is going on in the rest of your life. When you are under high stress, the negative in your life is maximized—health problems, emotional discontent, spiritual distance, relational tension, and the like. On the other hand, when you are managing your stress levels well and keeping them low, the good in your life is maximized. You are able to achieve better physical health, you are more emotionally stable, you have more mental clarity and you are more invested in your relationship with God and with other people.

Stress is an unavoidable part of life, especially for pastors. You are never going to get away from it, so you have to learn to manage it. As Jesus said:

*In this world you will have trouble.  
But take heart! I have overcome the world.*  
—John 16:33 (NIV)

With that in mind, consider these three truths about stress:

- *There is no such thing as a stress-free life.* From the average person on the street to the President of the United States, everyone deals with some level of stress. As long as you and I are on this side of heaven, we are never going to be

able to eliminate this constant companion—but we can learn to manage and minimize it.

- *Ministry is full of stress.* We have been called into a profession that is inherently stressful. Whether it's staffing issues, growth issues, people who are attacking the church or just the push of trying to get ready for another weekend, stress stays right on our heels. But that stress is continually countered by the victories of ministry—great days when we're able to baptize new believers or reach people in a new way.
- *You are never going to get everything done.* One of the greatest sources of stress in ministry is the never-ending to-do list we all have. There is always going to be another meeting to go to and another budget issue to deal with. There is always going to be another wedding, another hospital visit, and another funeral. If you are like me, you could stay in your office twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week and still not get everything done. That is just part of being called to shepherd a flock.

When you acknowledge these three truths, they actually bring a sense of comfort. They confirm that you are not alone. You are not the only one dealing with high levels of stress. You are not the only one facing challenge after challenge in your church. You are not the only one with a to-do list that seems impossible to check off.

Knowing that stress is a common condition of humankind, and especially of our kind, helps bring it into perspective. The difference in those who allow stress to eat them alive and those who stay cool under the pressure isn't the actual level of stress they are under, but how well they've learned to deal with its inevitable presence. (Visit [HealthyRenegade.com](http://HealthyRenegade.com) for a free download of my *Top Three Stress Management Lessons* podcast.)

## Seven Strategies for Successful Stress Management

Since stress is something you and I have to welcome into our lives and commit to managing well, we would be smart to streamline the stress management process as much as possible. Here are seven simple tips for keeping your stress in check and making sure you don't end up freezing to death in a warm freezer:

1. *Understand the difference between good stress and bad stress.* Yes, there is such a thing as good stress. Small amounts of good stress keep you focused and motivated. You grow through certain levels of stress. The stress gravity exerts on you makes your bones denser and your muscles stronger. When you start exercising, your endurance rises as a result of the stress you are imposing on yourself. When you decide to do something like read a book every month so you can be a better leader, you are adding stress to your life, but it's productive stress; stress that will result in reward for you and those around you. Maximizing the good stress in your life is a wise thing to do. In fact, it's necessary for positive change.



You cannot always control the situation you find yourself in, but you can control your perception of and response to the situation.

Stress becomes bad when it passes the point of growing you and causes you distress instead. When the phone rings and suddenly you have a problem you didn't see coming; when you realize that you are way behind budget and there's not much time to get caught up. The key with handling bad stress is to continually grow your threshold for dealing with it. Some people freak out at the first sign of a negative issue while others can take the same issue in stride. The difference is their tolerance threshold for stress. Growing that threshold will

enable you to deal with bad stress without stressing out. The next six tips will help you do just that.

2. *Get clear on the source of your stress.* Lack of clarity raises your stress level. When a difficult situation sends you over the edge into distress, ask yourself exactly what about that situation is so bothersome. Then, address the source rather than wallowing in the stress itself. Worrying is often just a result of being unclear about your next step. When you can identify the source of your problem, you will usually know what to do about it. You cannot always control the situation you find yourself in, but you can control your perception of and response to the situation—and that can make all the difference in the world in your stress level.

3. *Manage your time well.* There's a major correlation between high stress and a perceived lack of time. If you manage your time poorly, you will always struggle under the pressure of having more to do than there are hours in the day. On the other hand, by learning to manage your time well, you will be able to exponentially increase your ability to tolerate stress.

In *The Renegade Pastor: Abandoning Average in Your Life and Ministry* (Regal Books), I discuss time management in great detail. Most of the discussion goes beyond the scope of these pages. If this is an area you struggle with, take the time to pick up that book. (It will only add good stress to your life.) That said, in the name of managing stress for the sake of your physical health, let me mention three top time management tactics that may help:

- **Don't start the day until you finish the day.** Stress is often an indicator that something in your life is out of control. To regain some of that control, make a practice of finishing the day before you start it. That is, before you start your workday (either the morning of or the evening

before), make a list of everything you need to accomplish that day. Sketch out how your day is going to look. Then, review that list, prioritize your most important tasks and tackle those first. Which leads me to...

- **Eat the frog.** As you look at your to-do list for the day, decide to eat the live frog on the list first thing. In other words, do the hardest thing on your list first, so that it won't be hanging over your head and weighing on your productivity for the rest of the day. Otherwise, you will procrastinate on that task. You will let that frog sit on the edge of the desk and blow you kisses all day long while you try to check off other items you enjoy more than frog eating. But getting the live frog out of the way first thing in the morning will lower your stress and skyrocket the overall productivity of your day.
- **Live off peak.** Eliminating wait time in your life will help you eliminate stress. One of the best ways to do that is to commit to an off-peak lifestyle. As pastors, you and I have a certain amount of flexibility in our schedules that most of the working world doesn't have. We can take advantage of this flexibility to cut down on the amount of time we spend doing the things everyone does—like grocery shopping, going to the post office, dining out—and add those saved minutes and hours back into other areas of our days.

For example, if you are planning a lunch meeting at a restaurant, schedule it for before or after the usual lunchtime rush hour in your community. This simple step could save you thirty minutes. If you have to go to the bank, don't go close to 5:00 p.m. when the rest of the world will be there. Go at a random time in the afternoon and prevent line-waiting from eating away at

your schedule. You'll accomplish the task at hand and save yourself a boatload of precious time in the process. Simple steps like these have the potential to lower your stress level significantly.

4. *Practice positive self-talk.* Think of the stress in your life as a flame. When it flares up, you can do one of two things. You can either throw gasoline on it to make it rage even harder or you can drench it with water. The internal monologue you choose will act as one of the two. Again, you can't always control the stressful situations in your life, but you can control your response to them. Part of that is controlling what you say to yourself about those situations. The story running in your head will either make the stress worse than it needs to be or help shrink it down to a manageable level.

You have more power to control your stress than you think. Don't reinforce the chaos in your life by saying things to yourself such as:

- *I'm so stressed out.*
- *I'm just overwhelmed.*
- *I can't believe this is happening.*
- *I'm so far behind; I'm never going to get this done.*

Such negative self-talk keeps the flame raging. Take those thoughts captive and choose instead to see a more positive side of your situation.



The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another. —William James

Praise God for the work he has given you to do. Praise him that he blesses you with the strength and clarity of mind to handle everything he brings your way. Talk to yourself about how good it's going

to feel to eat your next frog. Focus on all that you are getting done. In short, when you talk to yourself, choose your words wisely.

*5. Take mini-breaks throughout the day.* One of the best ways to get ahead of stress is to step back from the situations that are stressing you. When you feel your tension level getting high, take a mini-break. Doing so will slow the momentum of a stressful situation and keep it from spiraling out of control. It breaks the cycle of distress.

Say someone shoots you a not-so-nice email that sends your stress level soaring. Instead of immediately sending an emotionally driven email back or picking up the phone and calling that person while you're upset, step back. Literally push back from your desk and take some deep breaths. Get up and go for a walk in the parking lot. Use the time to pray about the situation. Otherwise, you will just fuel the fire and make things worse. Your mini-break will give you more perspective and allow you to respond from a calmer place.

On a related note, use your transition times throughout the day as mini-breaks—as small opportunities to decompress. In other words, don't carry stress from one meeting to the next. Take a short mini-break in between so you are more refreshed for the next thing coming down the track. Think of your drive home in the evening as a mini-break. It's your chance to step out of the stress and busyness of the day and clear your head before walking in the door to your family. Listen to some praise music as you drive, or do something else that helps you find your way to a more peaceful place. Learn to use these mini-breaks to leave each stressor where it belongs rather than carrying your cumulative tension through your entire day.

*6. Talk to the right person about your stress.* You need someone in your life you can talk to about your stress. A friend of mine, Wayne Cordiero, likes to call this person a lightning rod. Wayne first introduced me to this concept during a Leadership Summit at Willow Creek. Let me explain. A lightning rod is a conductor positioned to



receive electricity that threatens a house. The rod absorbs the electrical current (lightning) when it hits and pulls it away through a wire that runs into the ground. Thanks to the lightning rod, a bolt that could have been disastrous gets easily thwarted.

Wayne explained that we all need to have a lightning rod in our life—a mature friend or mentor with whom we can share difficult situations; someone who can help absorb the stress we’re facing and provide some clear perspective. For many years, I made the common mistake of making my wife my lightning rod. When something was bothering me, I would come home and vent about it to her. For example, if I was having a problem with someone in the church or on staff, I would tell her, “You won’t believe what Joe Blow said to me.” As you can imagine, she would go into protection mode and start feeling resentful toward old Joe. She’s human. But in short order, when Joe and I would work everything out, I would often forget to tell her. So even though the situation may have been resolved, my wife would be walking around on Sunday giving Joe the evil eye. Not good.

Rather than making your wife your lightning rod, you should turn to someone more objective to help ground you—someone who isn’t in your household. The ideal person for this job would be a friend from another church. Sometimes lightning rods come in groups. Maybe you have a group of guys who would qualify. Just make sure these are people with whom you can share the onslaught of stress you are facing and who are spiritually mature enough to give their opinions in a helpful, non-biased way.

*7. Praise God through times of stress.* Praising God when things are going well is easy, but how quick are you to praise him when you feel overwhelmed? When your stress level is high, practice praising God for giving you the opportunity to grow. Thank him for what he is teaching you in the midst of the fire. Praise him that he is there with you in your stress. Follow the example of Jonah who, when he found himself in the belly of the fish, cried:

*But I will offer sacrifices to you with songs of praise, and I will fulfill all my vows. For my salvation comes from the lord alone.*

—Jonah 2:9

Jonah was definitely in the distress zone, but he was committed to praising God and remained focused on fulfilling his calling. As he exercised his trust in the Lord, the fish spit Jonah out and he moved from the distress zone right back into a growth zone.

When you use the strain in your life as an opportunity to worship God for all he is doing in and through you, he will cause it to be a catalyst for growth. By partnering with him and praising him through every stressful situation you face, you will become physically healthier, emotionally healthier, spiritually healthier and be better able to sidestep the negative effects of stress while embracing all that he has for you in the future.

### Small Steps to Life

- Remind yourself today that stress is a natural, unavoidable part of life.
- Practicing eating frogs and living off peak.
- Begin intentionally listening to your internal monologue. When it is negative or self-defeating turn it in a more positive direction.
- Identify a potential lightning rod in your life.
- Read my book, *The Renegade Pastor: Abandoning Average in Your Life and Ministry*.

## ***Healthy Renegade Pastor Profile***

**Harold Phillips**

**River Oaks Christian Church, Jenks, OK**

I am fifty-nine years old and have been in full-time ministry for thirty-seven years. I have struggled with keeping and maintaining a healthy lifestyle all of my adult life. At the age of forty-two, I was diagnosed with Type II Diabetes. Finally, after years of being up and down with my weight loss, I made the decision to not just try to lose the weight, but to change my lifestyle in the areas of my eating habits and exercise—and to focus on the spiritual aspect of health, as well. Since that time, I have lost sixty pounds and have kept it off. I started this weight loss journey weighing 389 pounds. Praise God, I currently weigh 335.

I don't know about you, but my biggest struggle is maintaining the discipline to walk the walk with regard to my health daily. I finally realized that every food and exercise choice I make carries a good or bad consequence. One of the hardest things about being in the ministry and maintaining a healthy lifestyle is the fact that most of the meetings I attend or lead are centered on food. I have had to learn to prepare ahead of time in order to avoid bad decisions that can cost me later. Also, most of my day is spent sitting instead of moving. So it is imperative that I get up, move around, and clear my head.

Life has many stress points. Pastors tend to internalize issues, especially issues concerning members of their churches. Too often we turn to food to either comfort ourselves or fill in a gap that the Holy Spirit should fill. Learning to control those stress points can make all the difference. I have found that the more consistent I am with exercise, the better ability I have to choose good foods. I currently exercise forty-five minutes per day, four days per week. That helps me keep a healthy balance between food and exercise.

Christians need to understand that the body God has created for us houses the Holy Spirit. We need to present ourselves in such a positive way that people will hear our message. I preach about balance in life. I often refer to Daniel and how he chose to eat differently than the

King's men and how God honored those choices. More than preaching, though, I feel that the changes they actually see in me will motivate the people in my congregation to develop better lifestyle choices.

Leading by example is the best method of ministry. So educate yourself on what it takes to eat properly and then develop a strategy that works for you. You may feel like it is hopeless or like it is too late for you to make the changes you need to make. Let me tell you, it is never too late to start. When I started working out, I could not get off of the floor by myself. Now I can. I promise that you will feel better, sleep better and will be at peace knowing that you are doing what you can to promote a healthy lifestyle for those you pastor. Just a few changes in your daily routine can make a huge difference.

You've heard it before, but it is true: if I can do it, you can do it too. I have wrestled with my emotions and stressors all of my adult life. I always said that I just couldn't do what it would take to get healthy. Well, today I am living proof that anyone can. So, get up, get moving, and glorify God in all you do. You will be glad you did.

*Harold's Advice:* God has given you a great tool to work with—your body. You should do the best job you can to return that tool to him for his service.



## *Discovering Whole Health:* Maintain Your Emotional Health

I have chosen to be happy because it is good for my health.

VOLTAIRE

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

GALATIANS 5:22-23

As Alex Average slipped down the slope toward too much weight gain and chronic health problems, he also began to have some emotional difficulties. Nothing major, mind you. He wasn't clinically depressed. His emotional challenges weren't debilitating. Still, he knew that the way he was beginning to feel about himself was interfering with his day-to-day activities. He found himself having a harder time bouncing back when things went wrong. He was plagued with a sense that he wasn't good enough and that people didn't really like him. He began to distance himself emotionally from his wife and a couple of his closest friends—not because he wanted to, necessarily; he just didn't feel like he had what it took to engage with them well. Have you ever felt that way?

Physical and emotional health are inextricably linked. It's not surprising that as obesity rates and the related health problems in

this country have skyrocketed, so have rates of depression and anxiety. The two areas play on and feed into each other. When someone sees his physical health slipping away, he is at a much higher risk of becoming anxious, depressed and pulling away from those he loves. As that happens, he has even less drive to take the necessary steps to regain physical health so the problem builds on itself. Similarly, someone who is already struggling with depression or anxiety issues is more likely to let his physical health go than someone who is emotionally healthy. Either side can be the catalyst, but both roads lead in the same direction.

## Getting a Grasp on Emotional Health

Emotional health isn't quite as easy to pin down as physical health. There are no numbers to measure just how fit you are. That said, psychologists define mental health as an overall psychological wellbeing. It's a combination of the way you feel about yourself, the quality of your relationships, and your ability to manage your feelings and deal with difficulty. People who are emotionally healthy have a sense of contentment and a zest for life. They are able to laugh and have fun with those around them. They rebound from adversity quickly and deal with stress well. The relationships in their lives are good and their sense of self-esteem is strong.<sup>1</sup>

Even though it is more subjective than quantifiable, emotional health is a key component of your ability to be a healthy renegade pastor. When you aren't emotionally healthy, your body will suffer as a result. The negative thoughts and feelings you experience create chemical reactions in your physiology that can lead to weakened immunity, chest pains, shortness of breath, fatigue, back pain, high blood pressure, digestion issues and more.<sup>2</sup> Not to mention, poor emotional health will also make it close to impossible to dive into the healthy lifestyle changes it will take to get your body back where you want it to be. This isn't an issue to be taken lightly. Poor emotional

health can completely derail your physical health, your ministry and your entire life.

Issues of mental and emotional stability are often downplayed within the church, but pastors are just as susceptible to these issues as anyone else. In fact, a recent study reported that 23% of pastors say they go beyond emotional instability and actually suffer from mental illness.<sup>3</sup> You and I face spiritual warfare on many fronts every day. Our mental and emotional wellbeing is not immune. Satan loves to attack us through our minds. He knows that if he can control how we think, and therefore feel, about ourselves, he can influence our actions and our effectiveness in this world.



Emotional health is a key component of your ability to be a healthy renegade pastor.

While the majority of us won't deal with emotional problems that cross the line into diagnosable mental distress, we are all extremely likely to experience some level of functional difficulty as a result of poor emotional health. It's part of the profession. Being aware of some of the most common issues that send pastors spiraling can help you and I avoid overwhelming emotional strain. The top three emotional health hurdles are:

- *Occupational Stress*
- *Hostility/Attacks from within the Church*
- *Personal and Relational Problems*

Let's take a look at each of these—and what you can do to counter them—in more detail.

## Top Three Emotional Health Hurdles for Pastors

1. *Occupational Stress*—Even if you pastor a healthy, growing church, you will still face your fair share of occupational stress. Such is the nature of church leadership. On top of the issues that come with the day-to-day operation of any church, you will find yourself dealing with your congregants' burdens. You know how it is: People call or email you with prayer requests and some of them weigh on you more heavily than you would expect. When a family in your church is hurting, sometimes it's hard to separate yourself from their pain.

The best way to avoid getting pulled down by occupational stress is to have strong systems in place that will help you deal with it at every turn. Building the eight systems of a healthy church into your structure will eliminate the majority of the stress that comes with the day-to-day details of growing and leading a church. I won't go into those systems here, but if you aren't familiar with them make sure you read *Healthy Systems, Healthy Church* at [HealthyRenegade.com](http://HealthyRenegade.com).

When it comes to dealing with the hurt that people in your church are facing without becoming emotionally drained, there are a couple of strategies to consider:

- **Let someone else take the lead.** If you are prone to allowing what's going on in others' lives to affect you emotionally, set someone else up as the point person who handles prayer request calls and emails. You likely have someone on your staff who can share this responsibility with you, so the weight isn't all on your shoulders. You may even want to create a simple system for prayer requests to help you manage them well.

At The Journey, most of our prayer requests come in through our Connection Cards. (For more on utilizing a Connection Card, see *Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests into Fully-Engaged Members of Your Church*, Baker Books.) Our members and attenders write their requests



on the back of their Connection Cards and place them in the offering bucket. During the week, various staff people go through them, pray over the requests and follow up with those who are struggling. When something I should specifically know about comes along, they fill me in. Otherwise, I don't see every prayer request. This small step helps me focus on leading without being too emotionally weighed down by the individual difficulties people in the church are facing.

- **Give it over to God.** Even if you aren't the go-to person for personal troubles within the church, you will still walk with plenty of people through dark times in their lives. To protect yourself from the emotional toll that can take, pray continually. Put the burdens of your people on God's shoulders rather than trying to carry them on your own. Let him use you as a source of comfort, but constantly remind yourself and those you are walking with that God is the ultimate healer for all of life's difficult situations.

2. *Hostility from within the church.* Most of the hostility you and I will face comes in the form of criticism. Criticism, if not handled properly, can take a major emotional toll. By calling us (and/or our actions) into question, it usually causes us to default to the defensive—which is not a healthy place to live. But criticism is part of the pastor package. We can't avoid it, so we have to learn to deal with it.

Early in ministry, I discovered that, if I wanted to do anything to make a difference for God, I was going to be criticized often. As a young pastor, this was a struggle for me. I am a people person. I like people and I like for people to like me. Not to mention, I was an extremely passionate young leader. My heart was wrapped up in every decision I made and everything I did.

When someone would criticize me, the criticism had the potential to throw me into a tailspin. Negative, self-deprecating thoughts would barrage my mind. I would try to tell myself, logically, that I would never be able to please everyone; that I needed to take the criticism in stride and move on. But doing so was a different story. Criticism often left me emotionally drained and unable to make confident decisions. I knew that if I didn't learn to deal with this reality of leadership, it would destroy me. The same is true for you. With that in mind, consider these four ways to keep criticism from throwing you emotionally off course:

- **Strengthen Your Foundation.** For you and me, this means going deeper in our relationship with God through continual prayer and study. James tells us that as we draw close to God, he will draw close to us (James 4:7-8). When we are in constant, deep communion with our Father, we are better able to hear from him in every decision we make. Not to mention, we are able to draw from his truth and example when outside forces come against us.

When I first started dealing with criticism, I remember thinking to myself, "Man, I'm not going to be a very good leader because people's opinions matter too much to me." With growth, I came to realize that my number one concern needed to be to please God, not people. If I was drawing near to him and focusing on pleasing him, everything else would fall into place.

- **Limit Your Exposure.** Limit the criticism that comes across your desk. You are not a trashcan. Negativity will constantly try to push in by way of anonymous emails, unsigned letters or miffed people who want to march right into your office and tell you what they think. If you are serious about protecting your ministry and your personal wellbeing, begin building some "criticism

hedges” around yourself. One great way to limit your exposure is to set up a gatekeeper who takes a first look at all of your email and standard mail before it ever makes it to you. I recommend asking a trusted staff member to take on the responsibility. This gatekeeper will become invaluable to you.

- **Run to Conflict.** No matter how much you try to avoid it, situations will come up that call for confrontation. When they do, you have to have the courage to sit down with the person or group bringing the criticism and address the issue at hand. Otherwise, not only will the issue fester in the church, it will drain you emotionally.

Don't be afraid to confront conflict when necessary. Over the years, I have found that when a pastor is quick to address criticism, the result is positive about 70% of the time. Usually, a simple clarification solves the problem. Still, before you take this step, make sure you are prepared and prayed up. Know what you are going to say and be careful to attack the issue, not the person sitting across from you. Even though confrontation isn't always easy, the end result will go a long way toward keeping you and your church healthy.

- **Focus on the Positive.** When criticism threatens to steal your joy and cause you to get discouraged, shift your focus to all that is right in your life and in your church. Celebrate what God is doing. When you forget to celebrate, you are more likely to let a few critical comments cloud the tremendous fruit all around you. That's not only key to spiritual maturity; it's also key to maintaining your emotional health. (For my free *How to Face Criticism* e-book, go to [HealthyRenegade.com](http://HealthyRenegade.com).)

3. *Personal and relational problems.* The varieties of personal and relational issues that can threaten your emotional health are too wide and varied to number. Marriage difficulties, problems with your children, a physical illness, financial strain... any of these things, given the right combination of circumstances, has the potential to send you spiraling emotionally if you aren't careful. But you can protect yourself and your emotional health by choosing not to be surprised when problems come your way, seeking counsel when you need it and, again, continually strengthening your foundation.

- **Sidestep Surprise.** Again, you and I are constantly under attack. We face spiritual warfare every single day of our lives. As such, we shouldn't be surprised when things go wrong or when problems show up out of nowhere. Choosing not to be surprised by negative circumstances is essential to being able to handle them without slipping into an unhealthy emotional state. When you and I accept that problems and pain are an inevitable part of life, we can avoid the surprise that makes them even more difficult to deal with. God never promised that life on this side of heaven would be easy; he simply promised to be with us every step of the way.
- **Seek Counseling.** Never be ashamed to seek Christian counseling. Being able to talk to a professional about the things going on in your life can help you process and deal with your emotions in a healthy way. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with doing so—in fact, there are many benefits.

Several years ago, before my son was born, Kelley and I went through a rough patch in our marriage. We had been married for a while and thought we weren't ever going to be able to have children. Dealing with that reality wore on us. We began to pull away from each

other emotionally. Knowing that we needed some outside help, we decided to find a good marriage counselor.

At first, I was extremely hesitant. The idea of walking into an office and talking to a stranger about the details of my marriage made me want to run in the opposite direction. Thankfully, I stayed put. Even though some of the sessions were hard, I can honestly say that the entire process was extremely healthy. To this day, our marriage is still benefiting from what we learned.

Our experience with the marriage counselor made me appreciate the value of Christian counseling. I made a personal decision to start going to a counselor regularly whether I thought I needed it or not. I have discovered great benefit in the process. I expect you will, too, if you decide to give it a try. As I have found, talking to a trained counselor will help you deal with emotions that you didn't even realize you were having. Over time, the process raises your emotional health quotient higher and higher, and serves as a great safety net to make sure nothing sends you spiraling in the other direction.

- **Strengthen Your Foundation.** As I mentioned above, the best way to keep yourself on solid emotional ground is to make sure your footing is secured on the strong foundation of God. As pastors, sometimes we are prone to put our relationship with our Father on autopilot. We confuse doing God's work with seeking earnestly after him. We must be careful not to neglect our personal relationship with God and our growth in him for the sake of our ministry.

Make sure you are taking the time to get quiet before God every day. Talk to him about what is going on in your life. Read his Word attentively and listen to how he wants to guide you. When personal and relational issues come up in your life, don't panic. Instead, lean even harder into

the one who gives you the strength and peace of mind you'll need to face them with emotional fortitude.

Keeping a gauge on your emotional health is an important step in improving your overall health and wellbeing. Be on the lookout for the things that can take you down the same path Alex Average has traveled. When you see those things threatening, take intentional action to counter them. Do everything in your power to guard against the attacks being levied at your heart and mind, even as you trust God to do his part to protect you. As you recognize and take responsibility for the state of your own emotional health, you will be well on your way to renegade wholeness.

Small Steps to Life
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify a gatekeeper on your staff who can help keep negativity from crossing your desk.</li><li>• Run to whatever conflict is threatening your emotional health and your church's wellbeing.</li><li>• Find a Christian counselor in your area and establish a relationship.</li><li>• Read my book, <i>Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests into Fully-Engaged Members of Your Church</i> to learn more about using Connection Cards to help with prayer requests and problems/concerns that people in your church may have.</li></ul>

## *Healthy Renegade Pastor Profile*

Stan Pegram  
BMZ Church, Boscobel, WI

I am forty-eight years old and have been a pastor in full-time ministry for twenty-four years. I have struggled with maintaining a healthy weight and lifestyle since I stopped playing college tennis almost twenty-five years ago. Since those college days, I have had some healthy periods of life and some not-so-healthy periods of life. About fifteen years ago, I entered seminary and that was the beginning of the end of an active lifestyle. I still played a little tennis, but for the most part, I pastored two churches, went to class, studied and ate—all on very little sleep.

After seminary, I knew I had to get back on track. In the midst of full-blown ministry, I decided to challenge myself to drop about forty pounds. It wasn't easy but I did it. I was able to keep it off for a number of years. During that time I began running, and ran a number of half marathons. Everything was going well until I hurt my foot. That put me out of running for about three years, which made it hard for me to maintain my healthy weight.

The biggest struggle I have when trying to stay healthy is the crazy schedule and stress of being a lead pastor for eight worship sites. It is hard to eat right when you are always on the run—and by run, I do not mean actually running. I mean getting in the car, eating fast food and hurrying to the next meeting. In our churches, and probably in most churches, there is always food at our meetings. We call it hospitality. If I'm disciplined, this can be great. If I'm not disciplined, it is trouble!

The stress of ministry is definitely still with me, but with accountability partners helping me out, I am getting back to caring for the temple God has given me to use for his kingdom. Without someone

bugging me to stay on track, I have a tendency to get wrapped up in work and push exercise and eating well off of my calendar.

I think that Christians should be concerned with maintaining a healthy lifestyle because first, it is biblical, and second, we have the most important work in the world to do as followers of Jesus. We get to *go into all the world and make disciples*. It's hard to *go* when we can't move. We need to be physically prepared to carry the spiritual load of serving God's kingdom. And as human beings, we are made so that all the different aspects of our being are intertwined. My physical health affects my emotional health, which affects my spiritual health, which affects my relational health, and so on.

We are to be disciples of Jesus. Disciples have discipline. I do not think that there is a much better area to practice being disciplined than with our physical health. Will I have the self-discipline to not eat what everyone else is eating? Will I have the self-discipline to get up early and work out?

Remember that ministry is not a sprint, and it is not a marathon. Rather, it is a series of sprints all connected together. In order to be ready for those very busy, heavy times in ministry, do everything you can to make sure it is not your physical body that lets you down. Just as you work out spiritually by Bible reading, worship, prayer, stewardship and service, do not forget to work out physically. God wants you healthy in this temporary body, so take small steps into an accelerated program for fitness.



*Stan's Advice:* Seek God, because if you truly seek God then you will have a better understanding of the need for physical health.



## *Discovering Whole Health:* Forgive Your Enemies

Never succumb to the temptation of bitterness.

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many.

HEBREWS 12:15

I hate gardening and yard work. I'll admit it. I couldn't care less how green my lawn is or whether or not it looks as good as my neighbor's. Tending the land is just not something I enjoy doing. Since I don't get any pleasure or relaxation from it, I always end up feeling like I could be doing something better with my time. Then I end up frustrated and resentful that not only am I doing a job I don't want to be doing, but I'm also taking time away from other things that are so much more important to me. Oh, and not to mention, I hate pulling weeds.

Weeds are the worst. No matter how often you pull them, there are always more springing up, trying to choke the life out of everything around them. If left unattended, they will devour any healthy growth in their vicinity. A thoughtful grounds caretaker—one much more diligent than me—painstakingly picks the weeds out by their roots, one by one, to make sure they don't have the opportunity to infiltrate the good plants close by.

Still, while I don't enjoy the process of weeding, I do recognize how important it is—and how similar it is to the work we need to do to keep our hearts well-cultivated. If we aren't careful, weeds will begin growing inside of us. Just like the weeds in a garden, they will work to choke out the beauty around them. They can destroy our relationships, our emotional wellbeing, our ministries and, yes, our physical health. Bitterness, or unforgiveness in particular, is a highly deadly type of weed. In fact, unaddressed bitterness is one of the greatest health risks that you and I face as pastors.

You may be thinking to yourself, "I can skip this part. I'm not bitter. Unforgiveness isn't a big problem for me." Hopefully, you're right—but you would be a huge exception. You likely have small weeds of bitterness sprouting in your heart that you don't even recognize yet. Take this little litmus test: How do you feel when people in your church make unfair comments about you? Are you okay with the fact that they talk behind your back about everything they dislike in the church? What about when a trusted staff member abruptly leaves? Do those things just roll off your back? Of course they don't. You may try to say they do, but deep down they hurt. To pretend otherwise would be to deny the reality of your humanity.

Bitterness is nothing to be swept under the rug or taken lightly. A sinful root that produces troublesome fruit, it has the potential to drain the power of God out of your life and mine, and out of the ministries he has called us to. As pastors, you and I deal with a lot of disappointment. We often invest large amounts of time, energy and love in people who end up hurting us. The baggage that people walk through the doors of our churches holding is getting heavier and more cumbersome with every passing year; we can't deal with such hurting, confused people and not end up hurt ourselves at some point. After all, the cliché is a cliché for a reason—hurting people hurt people. Being positioned as you and I are in an institution designed to attract and help hurting people, situations that have the potential to leave us wounded are going to come up.

While in seminary, I became friends with an older pastor who had been in ministry for many years. I was young and on fire for God. I was completely naïve about the problems that pastors face during long years of ministry. While I respected this mentor of mine and learned a great deal from him, he also became a cautionary tale to me. Over the years, he had grown into a negative, bitter man. He couldn't see the bitterness in himself, but it was clear to me. I remember praying, "God, help me stay positive and passionate for you. Don't let me grow bitter." At the time, I didn't realize how pervasive and powerful bitterness could be. Over the last thirty years, I have learned just how easily weeds can spring up and take root in an unexamined heart.



Bitterness is a sinful root that produces troublesome fruit.

Not too long into my ministry, I found myself heading down a similar path as my mentor. I could feel unforgiveness and bitterness getting comfortable within me. I could sense small changes in my attitude that I knew weren't pleasing to God. Thankfully, through many key personal experiences and a lot of prayer, he showed me how to turn my heart back toward grace and forgiveness.

Bitterness is a troublemaker. The Bible goes so far as to call bitterness a root (Hebrews 12:15). In other words, just like a weed, it lodges in your core, begins to choke the good in your life and leads to unwanted consequences. Bitterness causes unsuspecting, well-intentioned pastors trouble in four key ways:

1. **Spiritually**—When bitterness gets a foothold, it gives the devil an advantage in his schemes to render you and your church ineffective. You can't live in a place of praise, grace and forgiveness when bitterness is brewing—and when you leave that place, you are headed for spiritual trouble.

2. **Mentally**—When you harbor bitterness toward someone, it becomes all consuming. It begins directing your thoughts and, before long, your actions. The person that you are having a conflict with may move across the country or even die, but the negativity you feel won't go with them unless you make an intentional choice to uproot it and let it go. Otherwise, it will continue to grow in your heart and play on your mind, choking out your ability to enjoy the blessings God has put in your life.
3. **Emotionally**—Lingering bitterness can cause significant problems for your emotional health. When you fail to truly forgive someone, that unforgiveness taints not only your relationship with that person, but it hinders your ability to authentically give yourself to the other people in your life. Afraid of getting hurt again, you become more guarded. You start constructing walls around your heart. Inevitably, this leads down a path where trust, grace and love take a back seat to self-preservation. When you are troubled emotionally, you can't engage with others as God would have you engage with them; you can't think clearly and be as productive in your calling; and you are more likely to make poor choices with regard to your health.
4. **Physically**—Bitterness acts like poison in your body. While you may think it's just a heart and mind issue, it's not; its effects run much deeper. The negative emotions bitterness produce are a contributing factor to an array of diseases. According to one researcher at Concordia University:

*When harbored for a long time, bitterness may forecast patterns of biological dysregulation, a physiological impairment that can affect metabolism, immune response or organ function and physical disease.<sup>1</sup>*

Bitterness and unforgiveness cause specific biological reactions within the body that include adrenaline and cortisol secretions, immune suppression, and increased blood pressure. Elevated cortisol levels tend to cause fat deposition in the abdominal area, which is referred to as “toxic fat.” As the name suggests, abdominal fat is linked to the development of cardiovascular diseases, including heart attacks and strokes. (See chapter 12.) Since toxic emotions lead to toxic fat, letting go of bitterness and learning to forgive is not only a weight-loss technique, it could also save your life.



Toxic emotions lead to toxic fat.

## How to Avoid and Overcome Bitterness

Your body was not created to house bitterness. Allowing it to linger is like slowly drinking a poisonous concoction. You may not feel the effects at first, but over time it will destroy you. As such, learning to avoid and overcome bitterness is key to living the healthy renegade life. Here are three strategies for keeping bitterness at bay:

### 1. Expect painful relationships.

Your relationships with other people will be the source of both your greatest pleasure and your greatest pain. None of us is perfect. Consider what the prophet Jeremiah wrote:

*The human heart is the most deceitful of all things,  
and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?*

—Jeremiah 17:9

You and I deal with human hearts all day long. Not only is your heart wicked, so is the heart of every person in your family, every person on your staff and every person sitting in your congregation. It shouldn't be surprising, then, that we are going to let each other down. We will disappoint one another. The grace of God is the only

thing that keeps hurtful failings and disappointments from happening any more than they do.

Since we are all flawed human beings, we have to learn to expect that there will be pain in relationships. When we think that relationships are going to be perfect and rosy all of the time, we set ourselves up for huge disappointment. When something hurtful happens, we are surprised so we are more likely to respond with anger—which leads to unforgiveness and plants the seeds for bitterness. On the other hand, when we acknowledge that every relationship is going to have its share of problems, we are prepared when they come along and we can deal with them more effectively. We can address the pain rather than turning against the other person.

While pain from our naysayers and distant acquaintances is easier to handle, sometimes the people closest to us are the ones who hurt us most deeply—and the ones it's most important for us to forgive. This has always been the case. Even King David dealt with the relational pain that can come in a close relationship:

*It is not an enemy who taunts me—I could bear that. It is not my foes who so arrogantly insult me—I could have hidden from them. Instead, it is you—my equal, my companion and close friend. What good fellowship we once enjoyed as we walked together to the house of God.*

—Psalm 55:12-14

David is dealing with the pain caused by a close friend—some scholars believe that he is even referring to his son. If King David, the man after God's own heart, had to deal with pain in his close relationships, why would you and I think we can avoid it? Let's be quick to acknowledge that pain is part of every relationship, just like thorns are part of every rose, so we can be better prepared to handle it well when it shows up.

2. Choose to rely on God and stay the course.

One of the most emotionally difficult seasons I've walked through as a pastor happened while our church was in the middle of a major building project. Due to a series of unfortunate circumstances, I felt like I was being attacked from all sides and wanted nothing more than to give up and run. During that time, God kept bringing this passage to my mind:

*In my distress I prayed to the lord, and the lord answered me and set me free. The lord is for me, so I will have no fear. What can mere people do to me? Yes, the lord is for me; he will help me. I will look in triumph at those who hate me. It is better to take refuge in the lord than to trust in people.*

—Psalm 118:5-8

I wrote these verses on a sticky note and stuck it to my phone, so that I would be reminded of their truth often. Think about the words: *What can mere people do to me? The Lord is for me.* When you are able to keep that perspective, leaning into your reliance on God, hurtful situations with those around you lose much of their sting. He will give you the strength to stand and face whatever you are going through, deal with it as it should be dealt with, and move on with a clear, healthy mind and heart.

As part of this, remember: Nothing gets resolved without humility. As you rely on God in painful situations, you also have to exercise a high degree of humility. Whenever there is strife, our natural tendency is to bow up with pride and try to prove that we're in the right; that our perspective is the one most aligned with the way God thinks. What arrogance. For God to be able to remedy the situation and stop bitterness from seeping into your heart, you must be willing to humble yourself, rely on him and stay the course.



3. Forgive the people who hurt you.

Being able to forgive those who have hurt you is not only essential to your overall health and wellbeing, it's also necessary if you ever hope to experience the fullness of life that God has planned for you going forward. After all, forgiveness isn't a suggestion; it's a command:

*Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so **you must forgive others.***  
—Colossians 3:13 (emphasis added)

Scripture says that you and I must forgive others. There are no quantifiers to be found—just the simple instruction to do it. Here again medical research supports the notion that forgiveness can improve your health. According to a study at Virginia Commonwealth University, chronic unforgiveness causes stress on the body. Every time you think of your transgressor, your body responds with powerful chemical reactions. Forgiving, on the other hand, actually strengthens your immune system.<sup>2</sup> The consequence of not forgiving others and allowing a root of bitterness to grow inside you is too costly to justify. It's just not worth it.

But let's be honest: forgiveness isn't always easy, which is why you and I are hesitant to do it and how it can so quickly lead to bitterness. One of the reasons it's so hard to forgive is because we misunderstand the true nature of forgiveness. We tend to think it is something it's not. Here's what forgiveness is not:

- Forgiving others is not justifying their actions.
- Forgiving others is not denying that you are hurt.
- Forgiving others is not something that hinges on receiving an apology.

Understanding what forgiveness is not always makes it easier to forgive. Given these realities of the nature of forgiveness, who in your life do you need to extend forgiveness to?

In order to offer true forgiveness to someone who has hurt you deeply, you must also understand the process of biblical forgiveness: First, remember how much you've been forgiven. Second, release the person who hurt you. Third, re-establish the relationship (as much as possible). Let's take a closer look at each of the three steps in this process.

***First:*** *Remember how much you've been forgiven.*

Before you can forgive someone who has hurt you, you have to remember how much God has forgiven you. Grasping the extent of God's grace in your own life is the only thing that will give you the ability to offer similar grace to others. While bitterness is a natural response when you've been wounded, forgiveness is supernatural—aided by the recognition of the work God has done in your life and in the lives of those around you.

***Second:*** *Release the person who hurt you.*

Releasing someone who has hurt you means letting that person out of the prison you've constructed in your mind. It means that you stop holding on to the bitterness that has worked so hard to take root; you stop dwelling on how he or she did you wrong. You have to completely hand the situation and all of the emotions associated with it over to God and trust him to deal with it in the proper way. After all, he is much better equipped to handle these things. Once you choose to release your offender, you will experience a great sense of peace and comfort.



As forgiven people, we must forgive.

While you may not feel like releasing the person who has caused you pain, understand that this step is an intentional choice rather than the result of emotion. The only other option is to hold a grudge indefinitely, which is much more harmful to you than to the wrong-doer, as we've seen.

**Third:** *Re-establish the relationship (as much as possible).*

Forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same thing. Forgiveness is a requirement for healthily moving past pain, but reconciliation has to be considered on case-by-case basis. As Paul wrote:

*Do your part to live in peace with everyone, as much as possible.*

—Romans 12:18

You can do your part by remembering how much you've been forgiven, releasing the other person and doing what you can to prayerfully re-establish the relationship, but keep in mind that some relationships can't or shouldn't be re-established. For example, don't reconnect in a relationship that may cause you additional personal harm or expose you to any kind of emotional or physical danger. Be wise. Forgiveness doesn't require putting yourself back in a questionable situation.

If you and I are going to avoid bitterness and all of its negative effects, we are never going to outgrow the need to forgive others. We'll have to repeat the process many times as we move through life and ministry. So one of the greatest things we can do for our health and wellbeing is to make being quick to forgive a habit—a reflex, even. Practice generous forgiveness every chance you get.

*Then Peter came to him and asked, 'Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?' 'No, not seven times,' Jesus replied, 'but seventy times seven.'*

—Matthew 18:21-22

## Keeping the Weeds Away

Do you have a lot of weeding to do in the garden of your life? Do you have some roots of bitterness that need to be pulled? It is not going to be easy. Remember, just like gardening, letting go of unforgiveness and bitterness is hard, backbreaking work, but it is work that must be done; work that is essential to your health on every level; work that will cultivate a beautiful garden ready to showcase God's excellence to the world.

### Small Steps to Life

- Ask God to help you identify specific areas of bitterness in your heart.
- Make a list of the people you need to forgive and pray for the strength to do so.
- Get out in the yard and do some weeding. It will solidify the image of uprooting that bitterness in your mind—and give you some exercise to boot!

...

## Healthy Renegade Pastor Profile

Jamey Stuart  
Believers Church, Chesapeake, VA

I am forty-six years old and have been in full-time ministry for twenty years. I have to be honest and say that weight has not been my struggle. I think I am genetically thin. But, of course, being thin isn't the same as being healthy, and it doesn't mean that I haven't had to work hard at maintaining my health. Also, as a leader and overseer of a church, I have a responsibility to lead my church to understand the importance of wellness and health.

My biggest struggle in maintaining my own health is in maintaining a regular exercise regimen. I'm grateful that while I work long hours as a pastor, I also have flexibility in my schedule. I have learned to leverage that flexibility to put in place an exercise regimen that is very consistent. Consistent exercise and eating right have helped me to maintain a good weight and to be healthier.

I believe that followers of Jesus should be healthy because it's an important aspect of stewarding what God has given us. In order to live effectively for God, and to make a difference in the world, we have to have energy. Energy comes from healthy living and good management of what God has given us. That's why teaching on health and wellness is an important priority for me. I have a responsibility to teach my congregation what the Bible has to say about this important topic. My church also teaches on health in our small groups. I am passionate about having a healthy church, and that has made quite a difference in the lives of the people in my congregation.

When I first preached Steve's *Bod4God* sermon series in January 2012, one of my members really took it to heart. A woman named Lisa Nowalski lost 135 pounds! I thought that it would be beneficial for you to hear her story and to see first-hand the fruit that can come

from teaching your congregation how to honor God with their bodies. This is her story:

*Every Sunday, Jamey taught from the book Bod4God and for a month I sat in church and took notes. I bought the book and read it every day. I went to the YMCA every day. I removed and replaced foods. I changed my thoughts. God was with me every single step I took. By the end of February I had dropped 30 plus pounds. I hired a personal trainer and started working with her March 1st. By August, I had lost 100 pounds, all accomplished through eating clean, with healthy carbs!*

*My husband is now coming to church! He was saved years ago but was never active in church. Now my husband is tithing and giving to the new building fund. He said that he feels like God used Believers Church to change me. He is like a new man. So thank you. God used you to save my life and marriage.*

*God IS the healer! Getting the weight off took all the pressure off my body. I lift weights and build muscle around my problem areas. I started my journey at 285 pounds, 5'9", size 3XL. Today, I am 150 pounds of muscle, and a size four. I pray that the Lord keeps using me. I'm living my **whole** life for him fully.*

Through one sermon series on health, a family was transformed. It is so worth it. I am fully committed to preaching and teaching about the importance of Christians maintaining a healthy lifestyle. I am also counseling other pastors who are currently struggling with their weight.

Even if you are not struggling with your weight or health, I can guarantee that someone in your church is. It is your responsibility to teach the people in your congregation what the Bible says about taking care of their bodies.

*Jamey's Advice:* Start taking steps today. Even little steps are big.



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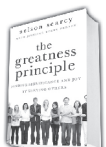
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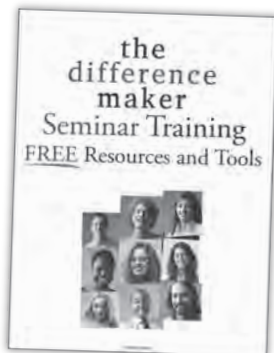


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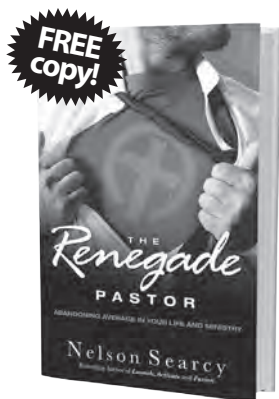
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**Nelson Searcy** is the Lead Pastor of The Journey Church with locations in New York City, San Francisco and Boca Raton, FL. He is also the founder of Church Leader Insights and the Renegade Pastors Network where he coaches and equips thousands of pastors. He is the author of fourteen books, including *The Renegade Pastor: Abandoning Average In your Life and Ministry*.

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ISBN 978-0-9885241-1-8



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