

## Presbytery Central – Ministry Engagement and Burnout

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### **King David needs a break** (2 Samuel 11)

It was late Spring, about 3000 years ago, and King David was heading off to war. After crops were planted there was a battle waging window for political advantage and David, the famed warrior king, continued his campaign in modern Syria, Israel and Palestine. He was tired – I wonder if some of his commanders pointed it out to him – and it was time for some furlough. While the battle raged David returned to Jerusalem and the solitude of the castle roof. Standing on the parapet I wonder if it was a proud look over his kingdom stretched before him or thoughts about jumping.

As he looked out from the roof he saw a shepherd boy sitting watching his small flock and he fondly remembered those days of his youth when his responsibilities were few. In another direction he looked and saw an old man pausing for breath as he walked down the street and wondered about his future. Then he looked at a neighbouring rooftop and saw a woman having a bath.

I want to point out that it was perfectly normal for Bathsheba to have a bath without any clothes on (most of us do it). It was also perfectly acceptable for her to bathe on the roof top – it would have been flat with a parapet around it and simple drains out to the pathway. Absolutely okay. Just for the curious – bath has nothing to do with Bathsheba, completely different linguistic roots.

So David is up on his palace roof and sees the naked Bathsheba. Wooohhh he says – that's a rough translation from the Hebrew. Now, there is nothing wrong with seeing a woman naked. There is no blame on David for this. Seeing such a sight is not wrong, and taking a second look is a bit greyer, but not wrong. It does get a bit less right when the binoculars and zoom lenses come out though.

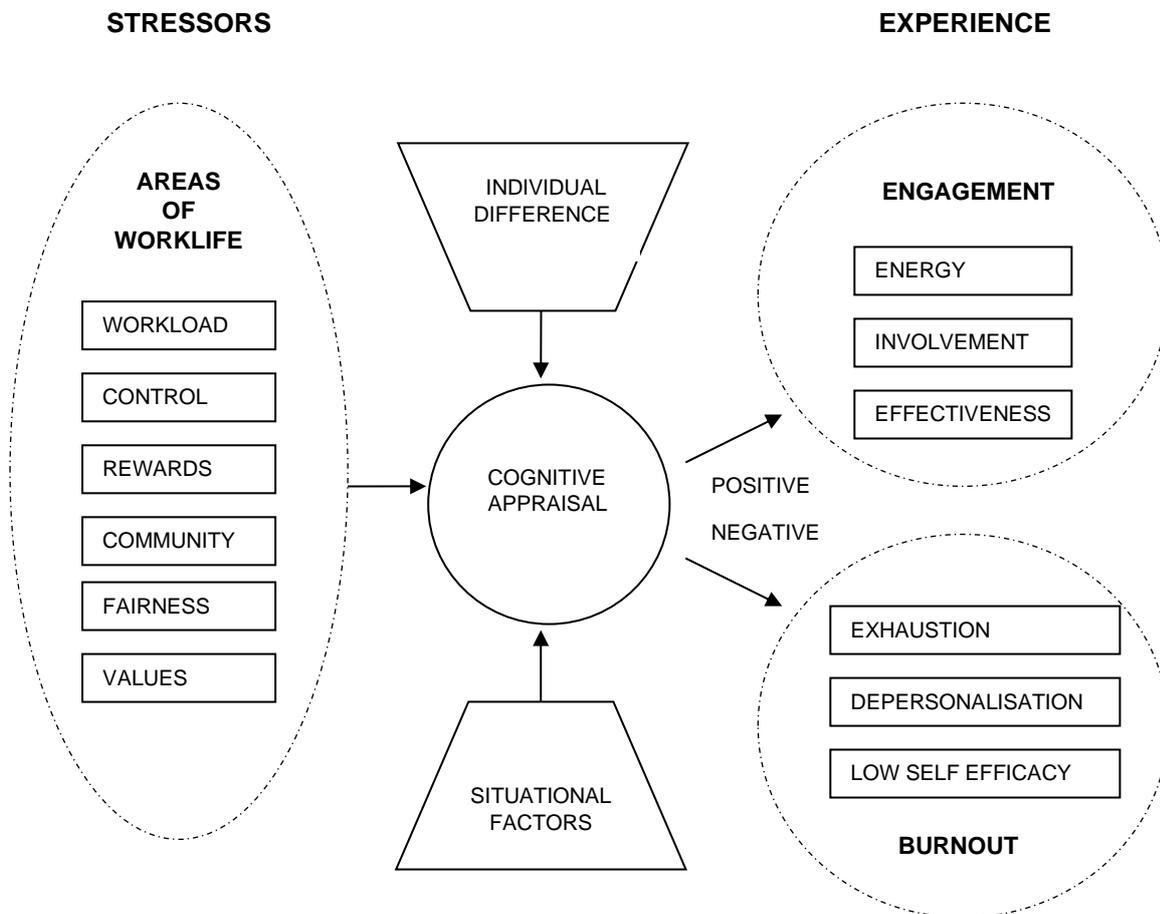
And then David sends his troops down to bring Bathsheba to his bedroom. Again, there is no fault on Bathsheba. There is a power differential going on here. The king is making a request, by force of arms, over a somewhat powerless woman – and the wife of a soldier under his command too.

Why? David's not a bad person. He's not stupid – although he acted stupidly. Why? I want to suggest that David was burnt-out, stressed to the max, not in his right mind. It is not an excuse but it helps to explain this episode.

A few years ago I did some research on ministry burnout through Massey University's School of Psychology – the evidence I found showed that ministers suffer from burnout in the same way and at roughly the same rate as other helping professions. I do want to note the continuum that exists between engagement and burnout – the positive side of work is being fully engaged with all that is happening and at the other end of the spectrum is burnout. Engagement is when the cogs align with each other and wheels turn – burnout when cogs are worn off and slip.

Give here a cognitive map or model for what is happening.

## Stress Model



1. Cognitive Appraisal – is this a threat?
  - a. fight, flight or freeze
  - b. eustress/distress, adrenalin/adrenal fatigue
  - c. resources/abilities – can I cope?
2. Individual difference; personality, IQ, age, ambition
3. Situational Factors; Covid, meeting, other people, home life
4. Engagement (like cogs on a device)
  - a. Energy, waking up ready to go
  - b. Involvement, holding the pieces together
  - c. Effectiveness, making a difference
5. Burnout (cogs worn down, no grip to drive)
  - a. Exhaustion, low energy for the task (wake up ok on Saturday)
  - b. Depersonalisation, lack of empathy, low sociability
  - c. Low self-efficacy, loss of self-worth, JITting, imposter syndrome
    - i. Burnout feels awful, compensate with alcohol, sex, other activity
6. Stressors (get back to this). And buffers – positive areas
  - a. example of buffer – funeral, feedback, valued, accomplish, distraction
  - b. primary, secondary and tertiary stress

## Areas of Ministry Worklife

### Workload

In a factory – workload can be easily measured. Not so in ministry  
Perception of busyness – workaholic thrives on work, timelines, availability (phone, day off)  
Kind of work relevant – pastoral vs worship, eustress vs distress, room for dessert  
About % of invigorating vs boring  
Not enough work is equally stressful – Cheviot – shallow end  
With age/experience – work smarter, not harder (sermons/services)

### Control

Funeral director and what happens in church  
Sense of autonomy and not being micromanaged.  
\*fill out timesheet for every half hour of ministry!  
Not having effective leadership or people following through on tasks.  
Note – having too much independent control can be a stressor too!  
Declining church numbers and societal change – not totally in our control.  
Covid – social impact due to lack of certainty/control

### Rewards

Is (low) stipend a source of stress? Not at all – sign up to it.  
Reward in social status, respect, philanthropic virtue, sense of call  
Balance – criticisms outnumber appreciations, bouquets/brickbats.  
Don't work for appreciation – but it helps. Clichés don't count – good sermon v debate.  
Need reward for stuff that matters personally (criticism hits what matters most)

### Community

Being part of a team is important – a sense of belonging.  
Inherent challenge between minister and friend – invited to party or not.  
“we didn't think you'd be interested”  
Divisiveness in congregation impacts everyone, including minister  
Also in wider community – as an individual rather than minister (theatre group)

### Fairness

Systemic stressors – implemented by individuals  
Interaction with Rewards – not fair to not be valued. Disrespect, discrimination, favouritism  
Stress – not being asked when qualified and suitable.  
Extends often to spouse or children perceived to not being treated fairly

### Values

In study – not statistically validated – ministers choose parish- theology if appointed.  
Stressor – being required to do something you disagree with.  
Whistle-blower – outs the value inconsistency  
But – covid vaccine challenged that sense of values and added stress.

## WHAT TO DO

Really hard to fix the outcomes of stress without looking at the stressors. Prayer, counselling, exercise, hobbies all look at the response, not the cause.

### Workload

Organise day to reflect priorities – thinking, emails, creative, physical

Learn to say no, but pick and choose for your self-interest.

Take time to refresh, weekly, annually.

But beware, can be route to shirking duties

### Control

Servant Leader – oxymoron

Organise what is in your sphere, leave others to control theirs

But beware, also path to underhand politics (especially blame)

### Reward

Be thankful to others

If all else fails – reward yourself. Wine, break, chocolate ...

but beware, also road to fraud and theft

### Community

Nurture sub-community that is affirming

But beware, also slippery slope to opting out

### Fairness

Speak up. Most bullies are not really aware that they are bullies. Usual response – I never knew you felt that way.

But beware, side path to tearing down the system in spite

### Values

Stand up for your values.

But beware, rocky road of shaming others