



Care & Grow Groups - Leadership Formation Series
The Inner Life of Leadership

**When Ministry Feels Heavy:
Recognizing, Responding, Preventing
Burnout in Ministry**

When Ministry is Heavy: Recognizing, Responding, Preventing Burnout in Ministry Leaders

- Ministry leadership is meaningful but demanding work.
- Leaders carry responsibility for people's
 - spiritual lives,
 - relationship, and
 - emotional struggles
- Over time, as ministers push through and serve faithfully, if they don't care for themselves properly they begin to experience increasing levels of:
 - fatigue
 - emotional strain
 - mental overload
- Because ministry culture values perseverance and sacrifice, these experiences are frequently dismissed and leaders continue to press on, often leading to what we call "burnout."

When Ministry is Heavy: Recognizing, Responding, Preventing Burnout in Ministry Leaders

As leaders press on, **prolonged stress** can begin to influence brain, body, emotional capacity, and spiritual life. We begin to see the symptoms of a strained nervous system and a loss of emotional reserves.

- **Motivation** may feel harder to access
- **Thinking** may feel slower or foggier
- **Patience** becomes short
- **Joy** in ministry begins to dim
- **Fatigue** sets in
- **Emotional** capacity diminishes
- **Spiritual** life feels dry

When stress continues for a long time without adequate restoration, leaders begin to experience ***burnout***.



Biblical Insight

In Exodus 18, Moses tried to carry the responsibility for everyone on his own and became overwhelmed. Through Jethro's counsel, he learned that leadership was not meant to be carried alone, but shared with others, with dependence on God and sustainable rhythms of rest.

Exodus 18:17–18

“What you are doing is not good... You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone.”



Clinical Insight

Prolonged stress without restoration:



- strain the nervous system
- reduce emotional capacity, and
- impair clear thinking,



- eventually leading to burnout.

Recognizing Burnout

Burnout rarely begins with a sudden collapse. More often it develops gradually through subtle changes in motivation, clarity, emotional capacity, rest, and joy. Recognizing these signals early allows leaders to respond with wisdom before strain deepens into more serious exhaustion

- ➔ Lacking Motivation
- ➔ Cognitive Fatigue & Reduced Mental Clarity
- ➔ Mental Fog, Decision Fatigue & Cognitive Exhaustion
- ➔ Irritability & Emotional Numbness
- ➔ Loss of Joy & Spiritual Dryness
- ➔ Disrupted Rest & Chronic Exhaustion

The Impact of Chronic Stress on the Brain

Under sustained strain, neurotransmitters that regulate drive, focus, and pleasure can become dysregulated.



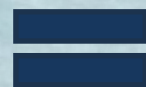
Serotonin



- Mood Instability



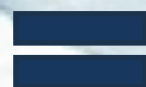
Dopamine
(motivation & reward)



- Brain becomes less responsive
- Tasks that once felt meaningful and energizing require significantly more effort to initiate



brain begins to
conserve energy



- Initiating efforts feel heavy
- Procrastination

The Impact of Chronic Stress: Cognitive Fatigue & Reduced Mental Clarity

Chronic stress activates the HPA axis and keeps cortisol elevated, which disrupts the prefrontal cortex—the part of the brain responsible for planning, focus, impulse control, and emotional regulation.

- ➔ Focus
- ➔ Impulse control
- ➔ Emotional Regulation
- ➔ Loss of Joy & Spiritual Dryness
- ➔ Disrupted Rest & Chronic Exhaustion
- ➔ Struggling to concentrate
- ➔ Struggling to organize thoughts
- ➔ Losing train of thought
- ➔ Difficulty tracking conversations
- ➔ Feeling mentally slow
- ➔ Feeling mentally drained

The Impact of Chronic Stress: Mental Fog, Decision Fatigue & Cognitive Exhaustion

Constant decision-making without adequate rest exhausts mental energy, leading to decision fatigue, where the brain begins to avoid, delay, or feel overwhelmed by decisions that were once manageable. Over time, decision fatigue can lead to avoidance, delayed responses, reduced leadership clarity

- ➔ You delay responding to emails because you don't want to decide
- ➔ Small decisions feel unusually draining
- ➔ You avoid decisions you would normally handle quickly
- ➔ You feel overwhelmed when presented with too many options
- ➔ You feel mentally exhausted by leadership responsibilities
- ➔ You find yourself saying:

“I’ll decide later.” Or, “I don’t want to think about this right now.”

The Impact of Chronic Stress: Irritability & Emotional Numbness

Prolonged stress affects the limbic system — the brain's emotional center — and alters serotonin regulation. When activation remains high for too long, the brain reduces emotional intensity and range to conserve energy, which can lead to irritability, emotional numbness, or reduced emotional engagement.

- ➔ Patience become short
- ➔ Worship feels more routine
- ➔ Leaders emotionally disengage.
- ➔ Good news doesn't stir excitement
- ➔ You feel physically present but not fully engaged emotionally
- ➔ Difficulty tolerating interruptions
- ➔ Compassion Feels Harder
- ➔ Once Meaningful conversations now feel draining.
- ➔ Almost anything & everything irritates

The Impact of Chronic Stress: Loss of Joy & Spiritual Dryness

Under prolonged stress, the brain's reward system becomes less responsive due to dopamine dysregulation, leading to a reduced ability to experience pleasure, known clinically as anhedonia.

- ➔ Underactive reward pathways make meaningful activities feel muted
- ➔ Ministry may feel mechanical rather than life-giving
- ➔ Emotional engagement may feel flat
- ➔ Activities that once brought excitement, joy, or pleasure may feel routine

The Impact of Chronic Stress: Disrupted Rest & Chronic Exhaustion

Rest and sleep are essential for restoring the brain, emotional capacity, and stress tolerance, and when rest is consistently reduced, nearly every symptom of burnout begins to intensify.

- ➔ Sleep and rest restore the brain and nervous system
- ➔ Inadequate sleep increases inflammation and disrupts serotonin stability
- ➔ Thinking becomes less clear and stress tolerance decreases
- ➔ Emotional regulation weakens and irritation increases
- ➔ Small frustrations feel larger and it takes longer to return to calm
- ➔ Fatigue increases and burnout symptoms intensify
- ➔ Rest is not optional; it is essential for sustainable leadership!



Reflection - Noticing the Signals Within Your Own Leadership

In your handout starting at the bottom of page 5 and into page 6, you'll find a reflection exercise called 'Noticing the Signals Within Your Own Leadership' to help you recognize areas of strain. Take 10 minutes to fill that out, and then we'll come back to discuss two practical tools you can use to restore balance and sustain healthy leadership.



Tool #1: Sleep

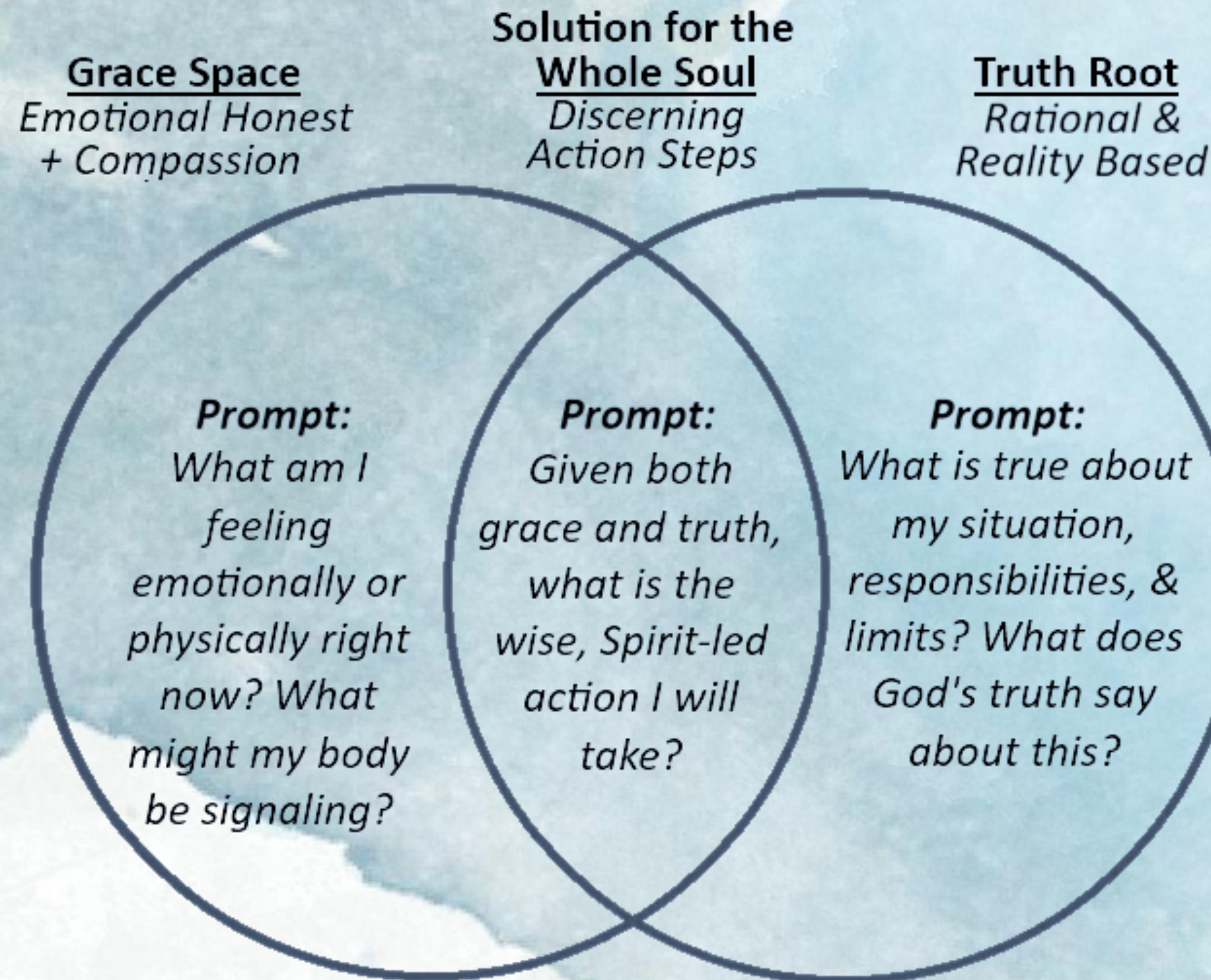
Intentional rest is one of the most vital yet overlooked tools for sustaining leadership. Both biologically and spiritually, rest restores the brain, supports emotional regulation, and reflects trust in God's provision—making it essential for sustainable leadership.

- ➔ Deep sleep clears metabolic waste, aiding mental function
- ➔ Rest restores the brain and cognitive clarity
- ➔ Without rest, irritability, mental fog, and burnout symptoms worsen
- ➔ Healthy leadership balances engagement with intentional restoration
- ➔ Rest supports emotional regulation, decision-making, motivation, & stress tolerance
- ➔ Spiritually, rest reflects trust in God, as Jesus modeled rhythms of withdrawal and restoration



Tool #2: The Whole Soul Flow

A Clinical & Biblical Framework for Spirit-Led Living



Whole Soul Practice Exercise

In your handout you'll find a Whole Soul Practice Exercise on page 9. Choose one of the burnout signals you identified earlier in the reflection exercise to complete this exercise.

Take 10 minutes to fill that out, and then we'll come back to finish our last section of this study, "When to Get Help."

When to Get Help

- ✓ Exhaustion that does not improve with rest
- ✓ Withdrawing from people or responsibilities
- ✓ Ongoing Loss of Motivation or difficulty starting tasks
- ✓ Increasing irritability, frustration, or emotional numbness
- ✓ Persistent mental fog or difficulty making decisions
- ✓ Sleep problems lasting several weeks
- ✓ Sustained loss of joy or sense of purpose in ministry or life in general
- ✓ Feeling overwhelmed by responsibilities you once managed well
- ✓ Feeling discouraged, hopeless, or emotionally depleted most days



*Any
Question?*



Care & Grow Groups - Leadership Formation Series
The Inner Life of Leadership

**When Ministry Feels Heavy:
Recognizing, Responding, Preventing
Burnout in Ministry**