

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Maintaining Mental (and Physical) Health

A missionary asked, “What do you do when there are so many things to do and not enough people to do them, and there’s no way to prioritize because everything’s a priority? This seems like a no-win situation and can lead to quick burnout. Because of such a high level of ministry responsibilities on the field, there’s no time for rest, renewal, or recreation, much less trying to be proactive and keep the body in shape, or to have quality time with the family.”

In this one paragraph the missionary has touched on the most important factors relating to maintaining your mental and physical health. Let us consider what we can do by considering our priorities.

Schedule your priorities.

The missionary was right in talking about priorities. Some people may tell you to “prioritize your schedule,” but it is much more important to “schedule your priorities.”

When you prioritize your schedule, you constantly feel under great stress, but you may accomplish little of lasting value. You may become one who is constantly putting out fires, rather than preventing the fires in the first place. Prevention is better than cure.

What is most important?

Jesus was asked this question in Matthew 22 when an expert in the law asked

him which commandment was the greatest. Jesus told him to love God with all his heart, soul, and mind. Of course, Jesus was quoting Deuteronomy 5 where Moses had told the people to love God with all their soul, heart, and strength. The command to love God motivationally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively has been around for centuries, and it is still valid today.

You may say that this command is certainly relevant to your spiritual condition, but what does it have to do with your mental and physical health. Consider the following quotes from an article by Harold Koenig in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in October, 2000.

- “More than 850 studies have now examined the relationship between religious involvement and various aspects of mental health. Between two thirds and three quarters of these have found that people experience better mental health and adapt more successfully to stress if they are religious.”
- “An additional 350 studies have examined religious involvement and health. The majority of these have found that religious people are physically healthier, lead healthier lifestyles, and require fewer health services. The magnitude of the possible impact on physical health—particularly survival—may approximate that of abstaining from cigarette smoking, or adding 7 to 14 years to life.”

The best thing you can do to maintain your mental and physical health is to place your relationship with God on your schedule first. This should be time for at least the following.

- Spending time with him
- Talking to him in prayer

- Listening to him through meditating on his Word

• Seeking forgiveness and reconciliation
Like missionaries Daniel lived and worked in a culture different from the one in which he was reared. With his packed schedule of doing an outstanding job as one of the three top administrators in the nation, one might think that Daniel would not have much time for God. However, his custom was to be on his knees thanking God for what he had done and asking for his help three times a day (Daniel 6).

What is second most important?

When asked what was most important in Matthew 22, Jesus went on to say that the second most important was much like the first, to love your neighbor as yourself. Of course, this had also been around for centuries as Jesus was quoting from Leviticus 19. This is especially relevant for missionaries as Jesus emphasized, in John 13:34-35, that people will know we are his disciples by how we love each other.

No recent evidence is needed to support this. We have known for years that a positive social support system is one of the most important factors in maintaining your health, both physical and mental. This includes a variety of people. The specific persons depend on your situation in life, but probably include some of the following.

- Your spouse
- Your children and teenagers
- Fellow missionaries
- Nationals
- Aging parents

To maintain your mental and physical health, place your relationship with fellow

Christians as the second thing on your schedule. This should be time for at least the following.

- Spending time with them
- Talking to them
- Listening to them
- Seeking forgiveness and reconciliation

When faced with a crisis of life and death proportions, Daniel had a long-term relationship with three other expatriates to whom he could turn to ask for urgent prayers. Their prayers were answered (Daniel 2).

What is third most important?

Jesus said we should love our neighbor as we loved ourselves. Like loving God and loving our neighbor, loving ourselves means at least the following.

- Setting aside some time for yourself
- Thinking correctly about yourself (your self-talk, as a person made in God’s image)
- Generally taking care of God’s temple (our bodies)

God dwelt in the tabernacle, then in the temple, and now dwells in us. The apostle Paul pointed out that our bodies were the temple of the Holy Spirit, so we should honor God with our body (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). So the question becomes, how are we doing in taking care of God’s temple? That includes at least the following.

- **Eat right.** At creation (Genesis 1) God gave us all the seed-bearing plants and fruit trees to eat—that is grains, vegetables, and fruits. That is very much like the recommendations of the US Department of Agriculture’s food pyramid. After the Fall when we began eating meat, God put a number of restrictions on what kinds of meat and

what parts of the animals we could eat. As a college student in a culture very different from home, Daniel questioned the food in the cafeteria. He proposed and conducted an experiment showing that vegetables and water are healthier than rich food and alcohol, an experiment repeated with the same results many times over the centuries (Daniel 1).

- **Get rest.** God instituted a day of rest in each week in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). This was a day in which no one in the household was to do any work, a day of restoration in each week. Jesus later pointed out that the Sabbath was made for us, not us for the Sabbath (Mark 2). New research points out that sleep (rest) is an essential component of a long and healthy life. There is no indication that Daniel ever had problems getting rest or sleeping even though his circumstances were far more dangerous than others who had difficulty sleeping (Daniel 2 & 4).
- **Exercise regularly.** Although not mentioned as much as food and rest, Paul wrote that physical training is of some value (not as valuable as godliness, which is valuable for both this life and the next). When he wrote that, there were not so many “labor saving” devices so that people got sufficient exercise in the tasks of daily living. Today we do not, so it is best for us to schedule exercise in our day. We have to stretch things somewhat to find an example of exercise in the book of Daniel. Although we do not recommend walking in fiery furnaces (Daniel 3), we do recommend walking, running, playing your favorite sport, etc. past the point of perspiration for at least a half hour several times a week.

You may wonder what eating, rest, and exercise have to do with mental health. Our General Psychology textbook lists three major categories to help cope with stress.

- Social support (Priority 2)
- Aerobic exercise (Priority 3)
- Time for relaxation (Priority 3)

Our General Psychology text also lists six characteristics of happy people.

- A meaningful faith (Priority 1)
- Close friendship or a satisfying marriage (Priority 2)
- Good sleep and exercise (Priority 3)
- Work and leisure that engage their skills (Priority 3)
- High self-esteem (created in God’s image)
- Optimism

What is new about all this?

Nothing. For thousands of years people have known these things. The problem is in doing them. When the expert in the law asked Jesus about important things in Luke 10, Jesus asked him what the law said, and he replied that one should love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus told him he was right—that he should just go do it. Then, to justify himself the expert asked who his neighbor was. Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, and then he asked the expert who was the neighbor. Again the expert answered correctly, and again Jesus told him to go and do it. Like the expert in the law, we know what we should do, we often just do not do it and try to justify our not doing it.

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