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Testing the effect of a stress management programme on perceived levels of clergy burnout in Brazil: The balanced affect approach

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Abstract

The balanced affect approach to clergy burnout operationalised by the Francis Burnout Inventory suggests that negative affect (emotional exhaustion) and positive affect (satisfaction in ministry) operate as partially separate systems, leading to the hypothesis that stress management workshops should lead to a reduction in negative affect measured by the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry rather than to increase in positive affect measured by the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale. The hypothesis is supported in a study conducted among 43 clergy in Brazil who participated in a series of stress management workshops. The data support both the effectiveness of the workshops and the construct validity of the Francis Burnout Inventory.

Keywords: balanced affect, clergy, Brazil, exhaustion, stress, satisfaction

Introduction

In spite of a growing literature on the nature, assessment, and correlates of burnout among clergy (Hydinger et al., 2024; Jackson-Jordan, 2013; Picornell-Gallar & González-Fraile, 2024) and a variety of intervention programmes designed to mitigate the problem (Abernethy et al., 2016; Frederick et al., 2021) studies on the effectiveness of intervention programmes specifically focusing on burnout remain very limited. Only slightly better evidenced are studies concerned with the effectiveness of interventions focusing on the wider field of clergy wellbeing and clergy health.

Assessing impact on clergy wellbeing and health

The most sophisticated and professional attempts to monitor the impact of intervention programmes on clergy wellbeing and health are located within the Duke Clergy Health Initiative (CHI) under the directorship of Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell. In their paper 'A 2-year holistic health and stress intervention: Results of an RCT in clergy' Proeschold-Bell et al. (2017) assessed the effect of the two-year Spirited Life intervention (consisting of personal goal setting, encouragement to engage in monthly health coaching, an online weight loss programme, a small grant, and three workshops) among 1,114 clergy who consented to participation. The trial employed both physiological measures (metabolic syndrome data) and two self-report measures: the 10-item Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen et al., 1983) and the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ; Spitzer et al., 1999).

In their paper 'The Selah Trial: A preference-based partially randomised waitlist control study of three stress management interventions', Proeschold-Bell et al. (2025) assessed the effect of three interventions (mindfulness-based stress reduction, daily examen prayer practice, and stress proofing) among 255 United Methodist clergy in North Carolina by means of both self-report measures and physiological measures (heart rate variability across 48 hours). In this study, the self-report measures comprised the subscales of anger,

muscle tension, cardiopulmonary arousal, neurological/gastroenterological, and cognitive disorganisation from the Calgary Systems of Stress Inventory (C-SOSI; Carlson & Thomas, 2007). Secondary analysis of data from the Selah Trial was reported by Rash et al. (2025).

Other studies concerned with monitoring the impact of intervention programmes on clergy wellbeing and health include work reported by Kim et al. (2015), Muse et al. (2016), Noullet et al. (2018), Captari et al. (2023), and Trammel et al. (2025). In their paper 'Dynamics of a wellness program: A conservation of resources perspective', Kim et al. (2015) assessed the effectiveness of a 10-day off-site wellness programme among a sample of 160 Episcopal priests. In this study, effectiveness was measured through the development of a new instrument assessing self-efficacy in the four wellness areas the programme was designed to improve: physical, spiritual, financial, and vocational.

In their paper 'Intensive outpatient therapy for clergy burnout: How much difference can a week make?', Muse et al. (2016) assessed the effectiveness of the week-long Clergy in Kairos programme among a sample of 23 clergy, comparing test scores prior to the beginning of the programme with test scores six months following. This study employed two measures: the three scales of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach et al., 1996) and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-11; Beck et al., 1988).

In their paper 'Effect of pastoral crisis intervention training on resilience and compassion fatigue in clergy: A pilot study', Noullet et al. (2018) assessed the effectiveness of formal training in pastoral crisis intervention among a sample of 39 clergy who completed a three-day course. In this study effectiveness was measured by two instruments: The Connor Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC; Connor & Davidson, 2003) and the Professional Quality of Life Scale, version 5 (ProQOL; Stamm, 2010), comprising two measures of Compassion Fatigue and Compassion Satisfaction.

In their paper ‘Supporting chaplains on the frontlines of the Covid-19 pandemic: A mixed-method practice-based pilot intervention study’, Captari et al. (2023) evaluated a novel spiritually integrated support group intervention for chaplains across multiple industries, consisting of five Zoom-based sessions cofacilitated by psychotherapists among a sample of 55 participants. This study employed four measures: the emotional exhaustion scale of the abbreviated Maslach Burnout Inventory – Human Services Survey (aMBI-HSS; McManus et al., 2002), the Primary Care Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Screen for DSM-5 (PC-PTSD-5; Prins et al., 2016), the Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale-Short Form (RSS-SF; Exline et al., 2023), the Flourishing Index (FI; VanderWeele, 2017), and the 10-item version of the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC-10; Campbell-Sills & Stein, 2007).

In their paper ‘A wait-list control study on the effectiveness of a Christian mindfulness intervention for pastors on mindfulness state and burnout’, Trammel et al. (2025) assessed the effectiveness of ten audio-based Christian mindfulness modules delivered by email on a weekly basis among a diverse sample of 141 pastors. This study employed two measures, the 15-item Mindfulness Attention and Awareness Scale (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003) and the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI; Kristensen et al., 2005).

Three main conclusions emerge from the foregoing review of studies designed to assess the impact of intervention programmes on clergy wellbeing, health and burnout. The first conclusion affirms a body of research on which new studies can usefully build. The second conclusion recognises the variety of outcome measures so far employed within this limited field. The third conclusion notes that only three of these studies employed a measure of burnout and that each of these three studies employed a different measure: Muse et al. (2016) employed the three scales of the Maslach Burnout Inventory; Captari et al. (2023) employed just the emotional exhaustion scale from an abbreviated form of the Maslach Burnout Inventory; and Trammel et al., (2025) employed the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory.

This third conclusion is a salutary reminder that there is no one clear conceptualisation and operationalisation of the psychological construct identified as burnout. Attention, therefore, now needs to be directed to this issue.

Conceptualisation and measurement of burnout

Currently the two measures of burnout most frequently employed in studies among clergy are the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach et al., 1996) and the Francis Burnout Inventory (FBI; Francis, Kaldor, et al., 2005; Francis, Laycock & Brewster, 2017). These two measures conceptualise burnout in quite different ways. The Maslach Burnout Inventory conceptualises and assesses burnout by three scales: emotional exhaustion (9 items), depersonalisation (5 items), and personal accomplishment (9 items). Maslach (2003) conceptualizes the connection among these three indices as developmental or progressive. Burnout is initiated by emotional exhaustion; emotional exhaustion leads to the depersonalization of clients; the depersonalization of clients leads to withdrawal of affirmation and a sense of less personal accomplishment. While this may be an attractive theory, it is not a theory that easily suggests preventative strategies. There is an inevitability about the relentless progression. Although the Maslach Burnout Inventory has been used in a number of studies conducted among clergy (for recent review see Crea et al., 2024), during the 1980s Rutledge and colleagues questioned the relevance of some of the items for application among clergy and proposed a reworking of these items for clergy studies (see Francis & Rutledge, 2000; Francis, Louden, & Rutledge, 2004; Francis & Turton, 2004a, 2004b).

The Francis Burnout Inventory was designed *ab initio* specifically for use among clergy and is rooted in a different conceptualization of the nature of burnout. The Francis Burnout Inventory conceptualises and assesses burnout by two scales: emotional exhaustion in ministry (11 items) and satisfaction in ministry (11 items). Francis, Laycock, and Brewster

(2017) conceptualise the connections between these two indices in a development of the theory of balanced affect as originally proposed by Bradburn (1969). The theory of balanced affect conceptualizes positive and negative affect as partially independent systems. According to the theory, it is possible for individuals to experience at the same time high levels of negative affect (emotional exhaustion in ministry) and high levels of positive affect (satisfaction in ministry). According to this theory, burnout occurs when high levels of negative affect are accompanied by low levels of positive affect, whereas high levels of positive affect can mitigate the deleterious effects of high negative affect. The important implication of this model of balanced affect is that it proposes an intervention strategy, namely, to work on the development of positive affect in order to soften the consequence of negative affect.

Two strands of research have been of particular importance in supporting the construct validity of the balanced affect approach to psychological wellbeing and burnout. The first strand of research has supported the construct validity of the independence of the two measures of positive and negative affect by demonstrating that individual differences in the two measures can be explained by distinct predictor variables. For example, while scores on the measure of positive affect (satisfaction in ministry) are not related to age, scores on the measure of negative affect (emotional exhaustion) decrease with age. This is evidenced by recent studies among Catholic priests in Italy (Crea & Francis, 2022), Methodist ministers in Britain (Francis, Village, & Haley, 2023), and Catholic priests in Portugal (Fabri et al., 2025). A second example provided by Crea and Bampoyiki (2026) shows that religious coping strategies were associated with enhanced positive affect (satisfaction in ministry) but were unrelated with negative affect (emotional exhaustion in ministry). A third example shows that narcissism as operationalised by the Short Dark Triad (SDT; Jones & Paulhus, 2014) is positively correlated with both negative affect and positive affect. In other words, higher

narcissism scores are associated with higher scores of emotional exhaustion in ministry and higher scores of satisfaction in ministry, a clear indication that positive affect and negative affect are not functioning as opposite poles of a single continuum (Francis & Crea, 2021).

The second strand of research has supported the core theory that increased levels of positive affect mitigate the deleterious consequences of negative affect. This second strand of research requires the identification of an outcome (dependent) variable (or set of variables) that may approximate an hypothesised deleterious consequence of poor work-related psychological wellbeing or burnout. Multiple regression is then employed to examine the cumulative effects of negative affect (SEEM), positive affect (SIMS), and the interaction of negative affect and positive affect on that dependent variable. A series of nine independent studies employing a range of outcome measures has tested and supported this core theory. These studies have been conducted among 744 clergy in The Presbyterian Church USA (Francis, Village, et al., 2011), 658 clergy in the Church of England (Francis, Laycock, & Brewster, 2017), 155 Catholic priests in Italy (Francis, Laycock, & Crea, 2017), 95 Catholic priests and 61 religious sisters in Italy (Francis, Crea, & Laycock, 2017), 358 Anglican clergy in the Church in Wales (Village et al., 2018), 99 Anglican clergy in England (Francis, Laycock, & Ratter, 2019), 287 Catholic priests in Italy (Francis, Crea, & Laycock, 2021), 803 Methodist ministers in Great Britain (Francis, Village, & Haley, 2023), and 266 Catholic priests in Portugal (Fabri et al., 2025).

Research aim

Against this background, the aim of the present study is to assess the impact of a series of stress management workshops conducted among clergy in Brazil and to employ the Francis Burnout Inventory as the outcome variable. The Francis Burnout Inventory conceptualises burnout as the presence of high levels of negative affect (operationalised in terms of emotional exhaustion in ministry) aligned with low levels of positive affect (operationalised

in terms of satisfaction in ministry). In light of this conceptualisation, the specific hypothesis can be advanced that stress management workshops (that is to say workshops concerned with reducing negative affect) should be reflected in lower scores of emotional exhaustion in ministry but not in enhanced scores of satisfaction in ministry.

Method

Procedure

The Emotion and Stress Management Workshop was designed to teach strategies for preventing stress and promoting wellbeing. For six weeks, Protestant clergy from various regions of Brazil attended hour-and-a-half-long online meetings. Each week, the first hour was dedicated to a class, and the remaining thirty minutes were for questions, comments, and sharing the practical activities suggested the previous week. At the end of each session, an exercise was prepared to foster reflection on lifestyle choices and to improve quality of life (see Appendix for the manualised description of the programme). A total of 62 clergy participated, although only 43 completed the two surveys administered before and after the workshops. These surveys were voluntary and confidential.

Participants

The 43 clergy who provided data comprised 17 men and 26 women; five were in their thirties, 20 in their forties, 13 in their fifties, and five in their sixties.

Instrument

Burnout was assessed using the Brazilian translation by Fabri et al. (2026) of the two scales of positive and negative affect from the Francis Burnout Inventory Revised (FBI-R; Francis, Crea, & Laycock, 2021). Positive affect was assessed by the 10-item Satisfaction in Ministry Scale (SIMS), and negative affect was assessed by the 10-item Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry (SEEM). Each item is assessed on a five-point scale from agree strongly (5) through not certain (3) to disagree strongly (1). In their foundation paper,

Francis, Crea, and Laycock (2021) reported the following internal consistency reliabilities: SIMS, $\alpha = .89$; SEEM, $\alpha = .89$). For the Brazilian translation, Fabri et al. (2026) reported as follows: SIMS, $\alpha = .83$; SEEM, $\alpha = .85$.

Analysis

The data were analysed by means of the SPSS statistical package, using the frequency, reliability, and t-test routines.

Results

- insert table 1 about here -

The first step in data analysis involved testing the reliability of the two scales of the Francis Burnout Inventory among the participants. Table 1 presents the internal consistency reliability of the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry and the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale in terms of the alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951) at time one and time two. On both occasions, the two scales recorded alpha coefficients within the expected range for these measures. Table 1 also presents the test-retest reliability. Test-retest reliabilities have not been previously published for this measure.

- insert table 2 about here -

The second step in data analysis compared the mean scores recorded on the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry and the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale at time one and time two. Table 2 presents these mean scores and tests the statistical significance of the difference between them. These data show that over the period of the Stress Management Workshop, there was a significant reduction in the mean scores of emotional exhaustion, but no significant difference in the mean scores of satisfaction in ministry.

Discussion

The present study was designed to assess the impact of stress management workshops conducted among clergy in Brazil on scores recorded on the two scales proposed by the

Francis Burnout Inventory. The effectiveness of the workshops was assessed by administering the two scales before and after the workshops, and the statistical significance of the scores at these two occasions was calculated using a paired t-test. Grounded in the balanced affect conceptualisation of psychological wellbeing proposed by Bradburn (1969), the specific hypothesis was advanced that the effectiveness of stress management workshops (that is to say workshops concerned with reducing negative affect) should be reflected in lower scores of emotional exhaustion in ministry, but not in changes in scores of satisfaction in ministry.

This specific hypothesis was tested using data from 43 of the 62 participants who completed both surveys administered before and after attending the workshops. The data were consistent with the hypothesised outcome of the stress management workshops, finding a significant decrease in levels of emotional exhaustion reported before and after the workshops, and no significant difference between the levels of satisfaction in ministry reported before and after the workshops. These findings can now be set alongside the findings from the earlier studies reviewed in the introduction to this paper that employed different psychological self-report outcome measures. For example, Proeschold-Bell et al. (2017) employed the 10-item Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983) and the Patient Health Questionnaire (Spitzer et al., 1999), Muse et al. (2016) employed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach et al., 1996) and the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck et al., 1988), and Trammel et al. (2025) employed the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (Kristensen et al., 2005). What is novel about the present findings employing the Francis Burnout Inventory (Francis, Laycock, & Brewster, 2017) is the clear theoretical differentiation between measuring negative affect and measuring positive affect and the clear empirical finding that an intervention designed to assess the impact of stress management workshops

achieves the specific aim of lowering negative affect without showing effect on positive affect.

Limitations

There are two clear limitations with the present study. The first limitation concerns the participation rate within the study, with only 69% of those taking part in the programme returning both sets of surveys (N = 43). The second limitation concerns the fact that the data reflect only one cohort of participants engaging with the programme. Nonetheless, the findings are sufficient to commend further implementation of the programme and to commend the Francis Burnout Inventory for further application in assessment of programmes of this nature. Replication studies are now needed.

Conclusion

Two conclusions can be drawn from these findings. The first conclusion supports the construct validity of the claim advanced by the balanced affect approach to the conceptualisation and measurement of burnout, that negative affect and positive affect, although correlated, operate as partially independent systems. In this case, while participation in the stress management workshops was associated with significantly lower scores of emotional exhaustion in ministry, it was not associated with significant changes in satisfaction scores in ministry. This new finding can stand alongside earlier findings: that religious coping strategies are associated with increased levels of satisfaction in ministry but unrelated to levels of emotional exhaustion in ministry (Crea & Bampoyiki, 2026); that older clergy report decreased levels of emotional exhaustion in ministry, but no difference in levels of satisfaction in ministry (Crea & Francis, 2022; Fabri et al., 2025; Francis, Village, & Haley, 2023); and that higher narcissism scores are associated with both higher scores of emotional exhaustion in ministry and higher scores of satisfaction in ministry.

The second conclusion supports the targeted influence of the stress management workshops among the participating clergy. The emphasis on stress management was reflected (as hypothesised) in lower scores of emotional exhaustion in ministry but had no significant impact on scores of satisfaction in ministry. This finding supports the conclusion that the workshops achieved their intended aim.

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Table 1

Reliability

	Time 1 α	Time 2 α	Test - retest
Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry	.86	.87	.62
Satisfaction in Ministry Scale	.86	.79	.70

N = 43

Table 2

Change over time

	Time 1		Time 2			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	*t*	*p* <
Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry	27.95	8.91	25.47	9.21	2.06	.05
Satisfaction in Ministry Scale	41.79	6.81	42.21	5.73	-0.55	NS

N = 43

APPENDIX

The six-week intervention programme

Themes	Main Topics	Practices
Week 1 General Aspects of Pastoral Ministry: Personality Factors and Burnout	- Global Overview - Lifestyle and Factors Contributing to Burnout and Job Satisfaction - Examples of Religious Leaders Who Have Experienced Exhaustion - Biblical Figures Who Suffered from Exhaustion - Breathing Technique	- Practise conscious breathing in three steps (inhale, hold the breath and exhale, each for five seconds), at least twice a day. - Practise mindfulness for three minutes.
Week 2 Self-Compassion and the Promotion of Mental Health	- Compassion and Self-Compassion - Biblical Principles of Self-Care - Healthy Boundaries - Promoting Mental Health - Types of Self-Care	- Choose one enjoyable activity to carry out during the week, preferably a task in which the beneficiary is also the person performing it. - Reflect on the healthy boundaries necessary to promote physical and mental health.
Week 3 Managing Emotions and Stress	- Biblical Requirements for Pastoral Ministry - Emotional Intelligence - The Concept of Stress and Marilda Lipp's Four-Phase Model - Symptoms of Stress and Burnout - Mentoring - Preventive Measures and Proposed Interventions	- Coin Exercise: to prompt reflection to understand the two sides of the coin. - Reflect on which of the proposed interventions can be adapted to one's own life.
Week 4	- Multiple Pastoral Demands	- List the aspects that promote connection with oneself, with others and with nature, and

Meaning of Life and Spirituality	- Existential Essence (Dimensions): Physical, Social, Emotional and Spiritual - Spirituality and Religiosity - Connection with Oneself, with Others and with Nature - Suicide Prevention and Postvention	recover and integrate them into one's routine. - Practice of Gratitude: for each challenging situation, write five reasons for which one is grateful.
Week 5 Renewal Habits and Strategic Time Management	- Self-Leadership - Ministerial Sustainability - Renewal of Personal Energy - Regulation of Sleep, Diet and Stress - The DARE Method (Planning)	- Identify the activities that drain personal energy and those that renew it; establish tactics for achieving and prioritising the latter. - Draw up a weekly prototype in which renewal habits are protected.
Week 6 Effective Delegation and Circle of Trust	- Strategic Prioritisation - Distinction between Urgent and Important Activities - Pareto Principle - Covey's Time Management Matrix - Investing in Healthy Relationships as a Means of Easing the Burden - Investing in Leadership Training	- List the roles that each person plays in society and identify the essential tasks of each area. - Prioritise the essential tasks. - Promote training for the ministry's support team.