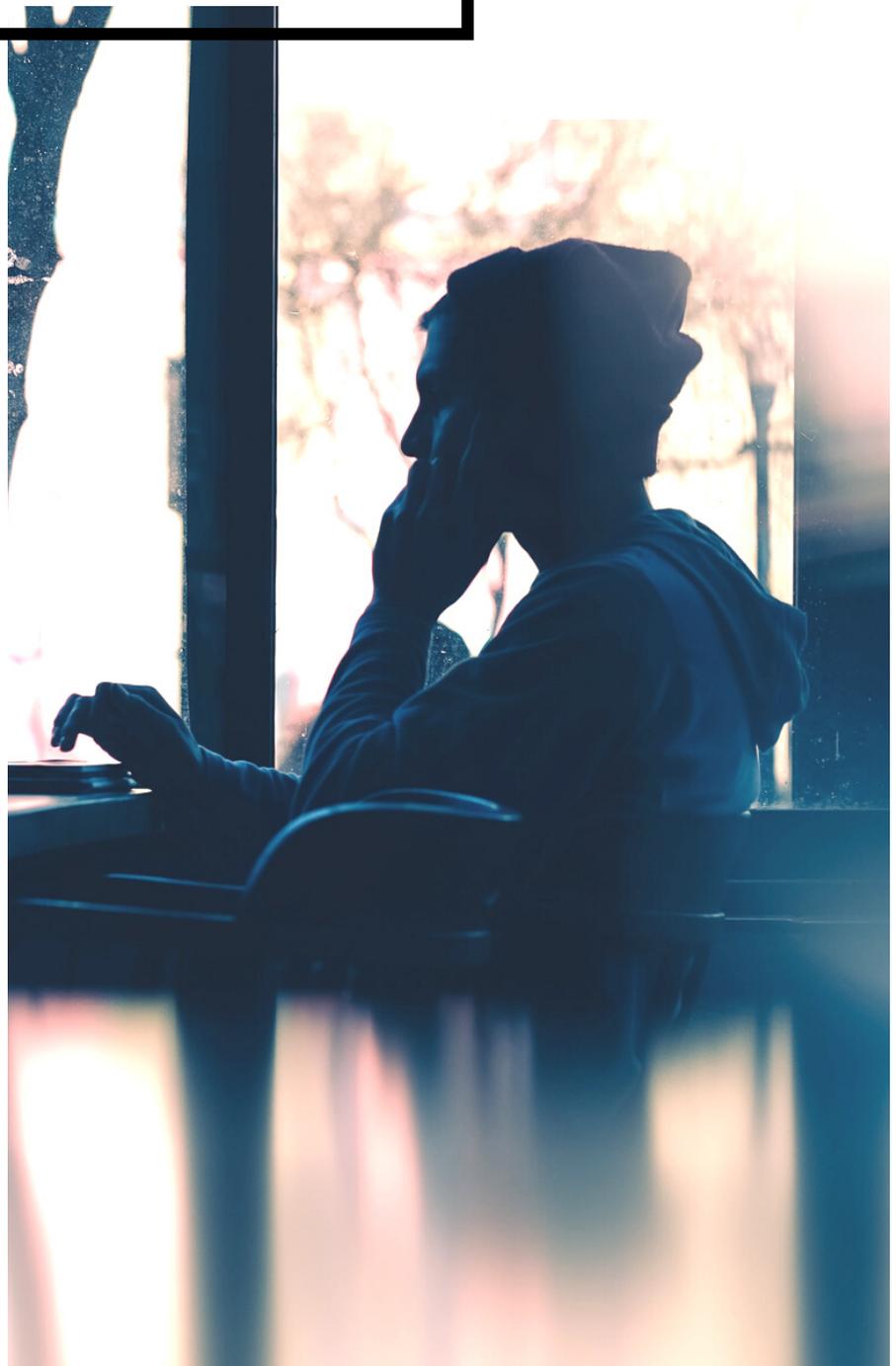


HOW TO MANAGE WHEN A SEASON OF STRETCH AND PRESSURE JUST KEEPS ON GOING

Words by Dr Kate Middleton

The challenges of pandemic life left many of us in youth work feeling pretty helpless or ineffective (at best) as we battled and navigated our way through two years of seemingly endless restrictions on our ministry. The loss of communication or connection with those we work with, the frustration of having to abandon face to face work in exchange for zoom groups or even the feeling that we were just prevented from making any real impactful difference in the lives of the young people we are called to support, left many of us experiencing higher levels of stress and frustration than we'd known before.

But in this 're-entry' season (dare we say post-pandemic season!) there are some unusual triggers which have raised people's stress levels even more - things which you might struggle to understand. And in those things, sometimes the most helpful steps you can take are about understanding just WHY you feel so under pressure, why little things feel so overwhelming and why deep down at the back of your mind you are constantly trying to ignore something telling you all you REALLY want to do is escape everything for a little while.



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So, here's a top 5 of the unexpected stressors that might be raising your tension level right now:

(1) Exhaustion

Ok, so this one is fairly obvious if you're feeling it. But a lot of us feel tired a lot of the time so why is this moment SO much worse? It's basically about maths - this season has required some people to sustain managing more for longer than any other - and it is quite normal to be experiencing the fatigue of that. And that kind of long term fatigue requires more than a quick day off, or good night's sleep - or even a holiday - to resolve (though all those things sound like a good idea). It's about gradually trying to return to a normal rhythm, building in regular rest and recuperation, letting things settle in your mind and in the wider world of all the responsibilities you hold. And of course for many people that isn't yet possible - in schools and healthcare professions in particular, but for many other people too who still feel the extra demand of the pandemic, or other pressures. So go easy on your tired mind. Try to drop your expectations of what you can or should be achieving, and build in more rest and time out than you usually would - for example limiting how much socialising you do when not working and making sure you have quiet time and rest as well. And find spaces you can unpack the pressure you feel under - that processing will help.

(2) When your foundations are shaken

So here's another unexpected thing going on in many people's minds at the moment, often just below the surface. The pandemic has challenged so many of the things which are usually foundational to our understanding of ourselves and the world. It's like a j'engageasse tower - some things about our life are less critical and can be played with a bit - and often do change in different seasons. But some things are really crucial load-bearing parts of how we build a life that feels safe and secure. Like our understanding of our own safety and health for example. Or our ability to control things and keep the people we love safe. Or things which contribute a lot to our identity like our job or roles at work. And for many people those things have been shaken - and when that happens the whole tower can start to feel a bit wobbly. This can leave us with a general sense of dis-ease or raised anxiety - and often not sure why we're feeling the way we do. Don't underestimate the power of processing - finding time and space just to chat and bounce around your thoughts about what you have been through, how it felt and what it means for the future. This might be a formal space - seeing a counsellor or therapist - but actually, for many people the informal moments with friends and family really help. So find people you feel safe with, who get you and who you can be honest with - and see where a conversation goes.



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(3) Managing difficult emotions

Sometimes when life goes crazy, our minds instinctively suppress the emotions associated with the drama so that we can get on with the practical things we need to deal with. This can feel like a disconnection - feeling numb or 'going through the motions'. The challenge is over a period like the pandemic some people are finding this wasn't just about a moment or a few days - it has been months. And over that time it can feel more and more exhausting holding down those emotions. It takes a lot of work to keep doing that, and particularly when our usual instinct might be to try to resolve the situations triggering the emotion - to make things better - when so much that is hard is about things you CANNOT change, that is increasingly difficult. For some people life right now feels like a game of emotional whack-a-mole - every time an emotion pops up the only option is to bash it down again. And all that can add to your feeling of overwhelm and demand. If that's you, try to make some space to let those emotions be expressed. Remember you don't have to solve everything - just sharing will help. Emotions always feel more powerful when they are bouncing round inside your head - sharing them releases some of that power, and helps them feel less daunting.

(4) Polarisation and conflict

So here's the final blow to people already feeling exhausted, beaten down and like it's all too much. When your mind is in that place one of the things it does to try to help you to function is simplifies the way you think and see the world. Starting to see things as though they were more black and white takes out the tricky grey areas and helps you make necessary decisions and function when your resources to problems solve and analyse may be limited or when fast actions are required. But it means that things start to feel much more binary - you've either succeeded or failed, you're either a good person or a disaster, people are either for you or against you - and when your mind feels pressurised it is more likely to go for the negative option in each case. All that means that things can feel a lot worse than they actually are - but it's very hard in the moment not to feel like that is reality. And the impact? This, combined with the fact everyone is more emotional right now means that a lot of opinions are becoming more and more polarised. So people's beliefs are extreme, they are expressed more clearly and without the usual space for discussion, and they may well be shared a lot more emotionally than usual.



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So - in the midst of a still stressful season, what can you do to help yourself and others manage it well?

Go easy on yourself, and allow yourself to be human - that means NOT perfect or a superhero version of yourself. What might that look like for you this week? Do you need to let yourself off a commitment or deadline you'd usually force yourself to make? Do you need to create space for something that is about caring for yourself? Do you need to accept 7/10 instead of pushing for perfection?

Why not take a moment right now to pause, ponder and pray as you ask yourself that question...

And let's support one another in this moment as well, allowing others to not be perfect just as we do ourselves. Can you get together with someone else to share the things you are going to do to create a bit more margin or breathing space for yourself right now? Commit to them - and check in regularly to encourage one another to stick to them - let's all follow the great advice from Hebrews 10:25 (this is the Passion Translation):

"This is not the time to pull away and neglect meeting together, as some have formed the habit of doing. In fact, we should come together even more frequently, eager to encourage and urge each other onward"

What could you do this week to cheer someone else on? Maybe you could send someone something - a thank you, an encouragement, a recognition of all the work they have put in for so long. Think about those you know who have really hit one of those top 5 stressors recently - a GP, school teacher, church leader, fellow youth worker, someone managing long term illness or higher risk from COVID, someone struggling with emotional illness or mental health problems. And make a commitment to reach out to them.

