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## Better Service through Good Self-Care

by Steve Alexander, Ph.D.

One of the most daunting tasks facing priests and men and women religious today is finding a healthy balance between service to others and self-care.

Fewer vocations, training that traditionally has emphasized service first, and the giving nature of most Catholic clergy and religious can create a recipe for overwork and greater self-sacrifice than is healthy.

Unfortunately, good self-care is more easily conceptualized than practiced, especially for someone whose work and life mission is to serve God, the Church and others.

It often can be quite difficult for many lay people to practice good day-to-day self-care, but it can be even

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harder for Catholic clergy and religious who frequently are on-call, work long hours six to seven days a week and regularly must respond to unexpected crises.

### Cost of Poor Self-Care

The cost of not practicing good self-care is significant, as it often results in declining personal health, lowered work performance, and emotional and behavioral issues.

The vast majority of referrals to Saint Luke Institute involve, directly or indirectly, significant deficits in the self-care arena. It also is not uncommon to encounter a new client who knows that she hasn't been taking adequate care of herself, yet who also feels guilty at the thought of doing so in the future.

### What is Self-Care?

In the most basic sense, "self-care" is just what it sounds like: taking care of oneself. It does not mean being self-centered or selfish. Nor does it mean caring for oneself to the exclusion of others or to one's work duties.

What it does mean is learning how and when to say no to more and more responsibilities. It means knowing when to ask for, and truly accept, help as needed. It means striking a balance between work and leisure/social pursuits. And, it means getting proper rest, regular nutritional meals and enough physical exercise – all of which many overly conscientious clergy and religious forget to do or don't make time for.

There is a handy 12-Step-inspired acronym that serves as a reminder for monitoring whether one is getting too

### Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired.

Checking in with oneself around HALT can do wonders for improving self-care. It can help us remember not to skip a meal (especially breakfast), to discuss feelings or grievances before they become resentments, or to call a friend or take a short break from work.

### Developing Good Skills

Self-care skills involve planning, assertiveness and, perhaps most importantly, listening to and respecting your feelings as legitimate signals for action. The bottom line is that any healthy means of personal recharging that works for an individual can be considered good self-care.

Yet, even if someone clears the first hurdle of actually implementing better self-care, most organizational systems (including the Church) tend to reinforce and reward individuals who overwork and excessively sacrifice for the job. This means that there can be some hidden costs to making positive self-care changes, at least initially.

Each person must decide for himself or herself the benefits of better physical and emotional health versus the seductiveness of being rewarded for overwork. Sometimes, it isn't until a person comes to treatment at a center like Saint Luke Institute that he or she

*continued on page 3*

# Case Study Father Tom

by Marge Pakulski, M.A., LCSW-C

After rushing to pack, negotiating a conflict between the DRE and school principal, finally securing coverage for his parish, and speaking to the family of a well-loved parishioner who had recently died, Father Tom was dog tired as he boarded the plane that afternoon.

Unfortunately, this had become the usual state of his life as a pastor of a large suburban parish: many demands, not enough time and resources, and less and less time for himself. No wonder his new therapist had suggested this vacation, which not coincidentally, would be his first real break in about two years.

What had his therapist said again about self-care? Oh, yeah, she had reminded him that he would be no good to anyone else in his congregation if he couldn't even take care of himself. This

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In an emergency, you must first engage your own oxygen mask before assisting others.

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phrase flashed back to him as the flight attendants were reviewing the litany of emergency evacuation procedures.

## Make a Plan

Everybody needs a well-thought out plan, he thought to himself, and he smiled as he made the connection to his own situation when the attendant noted that in an emergency you must first engage your own oxygen mask before assisting others.

Fr. Tom began to breathe a sigh of



relief at the thought that he could actually do this. Just then, he more specifically noticed the built up tension in his body. "Relax and breathe," he reminded himself, almost a direct quote from his therapist. As he did so, he remembered her also saying, "if you focus on the present moment, the past and the future will not seem so burdensome."

Still, it was tough for Fr. Tom not to encounter his usual machine-gun, racing thoughts, even in this moment: what did I forget to pack, will the bulletin get out in time, I forgot to check that email about the deanery report. Let it go, it will have to wait. Each slow and easy breath can bring me back to the present, with peace arriving on the in-breath and toxic stress leaving on the exhale. Stop judging, accept and have some self-compassion.

In the few months that Fr. Tom had been attending therapy, he had begun to integrate and internalize more of the self-care strategies than he realized. Again, a smile creased his face.

## Mind as Healing Tool

Fr. Tom decided again to take this time to practice better self-care, including the

use of his mind as a powerful healing tool to de-escalate stress and get back to the present moment. He knew that this meant inviting God back into his life. In the months and years prior, he often had asked God for help, but was coming to realize that he had gotten away from a daily routine to truly allow God into his life.

Just the thought of doing so again helped him sink more comfortably into the airplane seat, which wasn't easy since he was stuck between two other people. He felt a little less stuck emotionally, less ruminative. His body even relaxed as he thought about the possibilities associated with better self-care and connection to God.

"Thoughts and feelings manifest in the body" and "as you think, so you feel, and as you feel ... so you act," his therapist liked to say. Sitting there, Fr. Tom found himself feeling and acting less stressed. In fact, he barely noticed that the plane had taken off.

It was amazing (and reassuring) to Fr. Tom that he could change things so quickly by focusing his thinking differ-

*continued on page 3*



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**Father Tom, *continued***

ently. As he relaxed more, he also felt more self-aware, in a positive way.

**Breathing and Eating**

He started to practice another breathing technique he and his therapist had been working on: breathe in for a count of 4, hold for 7, and breathe out for 8. This seemed to calm the agitation he was experiencing earlier in the day, which still reverberated in his body. And, he could do the technique without anyone even noticing.

The flight attendants started to come by with snacks, but Fr. Tom de-

murred. The night before, he made sure he had some food to take on the plane. This was so unlike him that he almost laughed out loud. It was, however, comforting to know that he could make changes in his life. Instead of skipping meals as he usually did, he was now going to try to “feed oneself first before feeding others,” just like the oxygen mask!

He thought again about his last therapy session as the plane began its final descent for landing, and felt buoyed by the possibilities and his progress.

Maybe he really could take better care of himself, and thereby others, by following a specific plan of self-care:

eat right and regularly, plan for enough rest, meditate and pray experiences with God close at hand, breathe, stay in the present moment and don’t forget to share – out loud – with family and friends. As the wheels of the plane touched ground, Fr. Tom told himself, “I really can do this.” His vacation had already started, and he was just arriving.

*Marge Pakulski, M.A., LCSW-C, is a therapist with Caritas Counseling Center, the outpatient program of Saint Luke Institute.*

*For confidentiality reasons, names, identifying data and other details of treatment have been altered.*

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**Self-care, *continued***  
*from page 1*

makes such a determination.

This often is done by more fully understanding the relationship between excessive self-sacrifice/self-neglect and the corresponding emotional or behavioral problem that has brought the person into treatment.

**Ask For and Accept Help**

In addition to exploring and respecting the power of one’s feelings and unmet emotional needs, clients learn not only to ask for the help they deserve, but to accept it in a vulnerable, real manner. Often, treatment progress and success is directly proportionate to the manner in which help is sought and accepted. This is self-care in the truest sense.

As anyone in a helping role can attest, being flexible enough to shift from care-giver mode into care-receiver mode can be incredibly difficult to do,

especially for individuals who have experienced poor self-care dynamics long before the entering the priesthood or religious life. It can be hard even to contemplate implementing change and engaging in self-care.

Yet, it is worth the effort. Making such a change is not just good for the individual, either. As a person gains better balance in his or her life, he or she is in turn better able to serve others.

Ironically, that was the goal in the first place.

*Steve Alexander, Ph.D., is a therapist with the Halfway House program at Saint Luke Institute.*

*Halfway House is a transitional housing program for clergy and men and women religious who have completed the residential program, but need additional time to integrate treatment gains before returning to their diocese or community. The program also can help those who have relapsed, or are transitioning out of religious life and ministry.*

**Self-care tips**

- Realize you need to take care of yourself so you can care for others
- Relax and breathe
- Invite God back into your life through meditation and prayer
- Share with others and learn to ask for help when you need it
- Rest, eat right and regularly, and exercise



## Register online for the 2014 Critical Personnel Issues conference

Registration is underway for Critical Personnel Issues (CPI), the bi-annual conference for Church leadership sponsored by Saint Luke Institute and Southdown Institute.

CPI provides leaders of religious institutes and (arch)dioceses with insights and practical strategies to lead effectively through critical mental health, placement and personnel concerns.

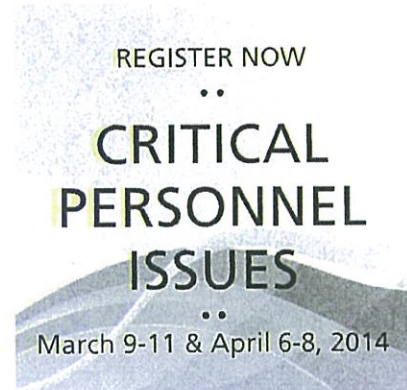
Topics include bridging intergenerational divides, supporting healthy aging, navigating complicated person-

alities, addictions, fostering resiliency and healthy sexuality.

The faculty is drawn from the professional staffs of Saint Luke and Southdown.

CPI will be offered March 9-11, 2014, in Vaughan, Ontario and April 6-8, 2014, in Greenbelt, Maryland.

The cost is \$350. Details and registration information are online at [SLIconnect.org](http://SLIconnect.org) or by contacting us at 301-422-5593 or [SLIconnect@sli.org](mailto:SLIconnect@sli.org).



### Just published

Congratulations to Monsignor Stephen J. Rossetti, Ph.D., D.Min., president of Saint Luke Institute, and Colin Rhoades, Ph.D., LCPC. Their article, "Burnout in Catholic Clergy: A Predictive Model Using Psychological and Spiritual Variables," was published in the November 2013 issue of *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, a journal of the American Psychological Association.

### Support our ministry

A contribution to Saint Luke Institute is a wonderful Advent or Christmas present. Donate online at [www.sli.org](http://www.sli.org).

For information about including Saint Luke Institute in your estate plan, please contact Rich Landfield at 301-422-5406, or [richl@sli.org](mailto:richl@sli.org).

## SLIconnect now offering group membership

SLIconnect, the education resource of Saint Luke Institute, is offering new webinars, pricing and group memberships for 2014.

New topics in the Bridge to Christ series include working with challenging personalities, dealing with dementia, mindfulness, preventing burnout, integrating spiritual and psychological wellness and more. Most webinars will cost \$25.

Group memberships, now available, provide (arch)dioceses and religious institutes an affordable and convenient way to provide their clergy, religious and lay leaders with ongoing formation. Members receive unlimited access to live and recorded webinars, e-workshops and newsletters that can be used for individual formation, support groups, deanery meetings, convocations and staff training. Visit [SLIconnect.org](http://SLIconnect.org) for details or contact Beth Davis, 502-414-1754 or [SLIconnect@sli.org](mailto:SLIconnect@sli.org).



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