

CRASH COURSES *in* YOUTH MINISTRY SELF-CARE & SABBATH

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UMCyoungpeople.org



DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES
The United Methodist Church

A crash course (in training or education) condenses lots of practical material so that you can read and understand it quickly. A crash course is not where we strap you behind the wheel of a youth ministry bus, point you downhill towards a target and say, *“Hope you don’t crash!”* as you hit every bump possible on the road ahead.

Each of these crash courses in youth ministry are loaded with practical tips and basic wisdom that you can read today and put in to practice tomorrow. If you are a part-time or no-time (amazing volunteer!) youth worker, these crash courses are especially for you. (They’re also great for anyone leading a youth ministry. Just saying.)

Additional crash courses are available at:

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Further training for a variety of leadership roles in ministry is available in the e-learning section of Discipleship Ministries’ store at:

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INTRODUCTION

MY OWN “DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL” WAS ABSOLUTELY TRIGGERED BY BURNOUT.

I was in my late twenties, working as a full-time youth minister in a thriving congregation. At least five evenings a week were set aside for church activities, and while my job description distinctly said, “forty hours per week,” I would realistically spend between fifty and sixty hours per week between planning and presence in ministry. I began to feel stretched thin, sensing less of God’s presence and movement as time went on; and the things that used to energize me (like great Bible studies, small groups, or service opportunities) just weren’t doing it anymore.

During my own busyness, I observed that our church had an associate pastor on staff who was incredible with her boundaries. She kept track of her ministry hours and actually scheduled self-care and sabbath time as a part of her job. She was (nearly) always the most well-rested, cheerful, and effective member of our church staff. Honestly, during that time, it ticked me off just a little bit. It would take me years to understand that her approach to ministry was healthier in the long run than my own. Also, any anger or jealousy that I felt about how she approached ministry came from



projecting my own anger, shame, and disappointment in myself regarding her approach to self-care as a vital part of her ministry. I was failing at one of the Ten Commandments by not honoring the Sabbath, which as a Christian, is a big deal. Now, I've come to be very thankful for the example that she set early during my ministry life.

We know we should practice self-care and keep the Sabbath, so why don't we? There are plenty of excuses of course, often involving too much to do and too few hours to accomplish the list you've created for yourself. Yet...you've found enough time to pick up this resource, so you may indeed have a sliver of time to get intentional about self-care and sabbath. This resource will provide suggestions to help you make the most of the time that you find to set aside and be with God and to care for yourself. While self-care and sabbath are two different things, they are related. Both require us to disconnect and practice being truly present. Sometimes the things we do for self-care, depending on our intention, can also be a part of our sabbath. Today, we'll explore understandings and approaches to each.

01 SLAYING THE EXCUSES

BEFORE WE DIVE INTO “HOW,” LET’S ADDRESS OUR EXCUSES AND FIND REMINDERS TO SPEAK AGAINST THEM.

This step is crucial. If we don’t first consider what prevents us from setting this time aside, we won’t be able to find consistent ways to keep the time. Psalm 46:10 appears in a ton of devotions and semi-cheesy, mass-produced home decor catalogues. To “...be still and know that I am God” sounds simple enough, so why do we fail or forget to do it? Firstly, that Psalm was written during a time of conflict for ancient Israel, and its message is for both the people of Israel and their perceived enemies. The command to “be still” is translated into English from the Hebrew verb *rapha*, which can also mean to “let go,” “release,” or even “surrender.” In other words, part of self-care and sabbath involves laying down weapons and armor, putting a stop to a struggle or conflict to recognize and reconnect with God.

Make a list of the struggles (time, energy, commitments, etc.) and conflicts that prevent you from surrendering time in your schedule to self-care and Sabbath. Allow yourself to sit with your list. Can you take it one step further? Is there something at the core of these struggles



and conflicts? Can you name it? After finishing the list and taking this time to reflect, go back and consider each item. What can you do when these things start/continue to prevent you from caring for yourself and/or participating in Sabbath? Write a self-reminder next to each item. This practice will raise your awareness of when you are making excuses and provide you with reminders to not fall into those traps. Invite a trusted mentor to be a part of this process if you cannot come up with reminders for some of the items on your list.

02 SIMPLE PRACTICES

WE SAY “SIMPLE” BECAUSE WE UNDERSTAND. IF THIS CONCEPT WERE SO “SIMPLE,” THIS EBOOK WOULDN’T BE NEEDED.

As each person’s situation is different, some suggestions listed below will be harder for you to tackle than others on the list. Don’t get discouraged. This is a process, and taking steps, however small they may feel, is the key.

Know What Your Church Allows & Expects

Talk with your pastor and SPR/PPR (supervisory committee) about church policies that are in place for self-care and sabbath. Consider the possibility of making them part of your job description. It may be helpful to discuss things like: “What is the policy for taking time after a mission experience or big event?” “What is the desired balance between being in the office and in the community?” If you see a disconnect between expectations and what you need, find ways to share your schedule with your pastor and SPR/PPR to provide clarity. For example, share the school extracurricular calendar and explain why you are attending events and the benefits you have seen from this commitment.



Plan in Advance; Then Actually Do It

It is incredibly easy to accidentally schedule something on all your Saturdays for a month or to make evening commitments for most nights of a week. Sit down with a calendar and fill in what you know. Pay attention to home commitments as well as church ministry schedules. Then, schedule your time for self-care and sabbath. This way, you don't have to "carve out time"; it's already there. Include the significant people in your life as part of your planning, so you can ensure you are getting quality time with these important people. Self-care and sabbath can be done alone or with those you love. Once you've planned, stick to it. If you get approached with opportunities that would conflict with time you've already scheduled, you are absolutely allowed to say, "I am afraid I cannot do that, I already have set this time aside for _____." You may feel uncomfortable saying this at first, but it is a great example to set! If saying "no" is truly not an option, circle back to our first point and find a polite way to explain that saying "yes" means you'll need to find time elsewhere.

Communicate Your Schedule in Advance

This helps prevent the question of "Where is he/she?" and allows your church staff to support you by answering informatively. Knowing someone can share why you are not at your desk will allow you to better disconnect. Remind church staff, your volunteers, and—of course—youth and their parents about your

plans to take time away. This applies to multiple days away, or even regular reminders about the schedule that you build for yourself and times that you will not be available. Remind them that part of self-care and sabbath may involve putting down your own phone and dropping out of communication for a set period of time.

Embrace Turning Off & Shutting Down

Part of this process is planning and working ahead so that you can put down sources of interruption that distract you. This will allow you to be more present during a self-care activity and to better keep your focus on God during your times of sabbath. Figure out ways to get away from notifications. Turn off email or social media alerts if these prevent you from disconnecting. If it's difficult for you to turn off while you're on an extended vacation, ask a staff person or volunteer to be a point person while you're gone and direct your students to contact them while you're out.

Discover Ways to Tell Yourself, "Good Job"

Take inventory of your week and find ways to remind yourself that you have done well. Save the nice email from a student's parent/caregiver. Go ahead and print, then hang up that picture from an impactful experience you helped create. Reflecting on these things will give you additional ways to be kind to yourself.

Find & Maintain Safe Relationships

We all need trusted mentors. We all need friends who require no walls. Find people who are worthy of your trust and then maintain those relationships by investing your time and attention. As we talked about earlier, you need to include the significant people in your life when you make plans. In ministry, our schedules can be so incredibly different from the schedules of our loved ones. If you aren't intentional, you could easily miss out on spending quality time with your significant people, for days or even weeks at a time.

Acknowledge & (Maybe) Break Down Walls

If you don't have a person(s) in your life who matches the description of a safe and trusted mentor or friend as outlined in the previous point, continue to pursue these relationships. Recognize that boundaries are healthy and helpful in ministry, but that sometimes boundaries can develop into barriers to real connection and growth. Discovering and addressing these barriers can take time and effort; a guide or spiritual director may be helpful on this front. If you are unsure of how to begin being vulnerable and open for self-care, consider taking this step: *Ask a friend for what you need and give that person an opportunity to come alongside you.* Odds are that the friend will feel honored that you trust him/her and be more than happy to support you as you recognize the places you need care.

Find & Maintain Safe and Sacred Spaces

These could be in your home, office, or at locations far from where you normally do ministry. This should be a space where you are able to let your guard down and quiet your “to-do” list. You’ll find that your special times with God are amplified when you have a special space (in addition to special time) set aside for the purpose of sabbath. Self-care is amplified when your setting allows you to simply be yourself.

Stop Counting Things That Don’t Count

You may have an incredible experience on a retreat with your students. That’s wonderful! At the same time, please remember that a youth retreat or a mission experience is not self-care. You still need time for you. You may read an incredible devotional as you are preparing a lesson for your students. It is wonderful that we can be moved by the things we read as we prepare. However, this is not practicing the Sabbath. Let your time with God be about just that—not about writing a lesson. Sabbath has been called “a holy waste of time.” Devotional time lets us focus on our relationship with God, and the worth of that time comes from the investment in that relationship, as opposed to anything that we produce because of that relationship.

Prioritize Mental Health & Recognize the Value of Therapy

In recent years, leaders have come to recognize the value of therapy and the importance of mental health for young people. We're people too and having regular time with a therapist can be a source of reflection and fuel for better self-care and sabbath.

List the Ways that You Decompress

Then, consider how healthy those are. Find ways to decompress that you enjoy and contribute to your overall health. No judgment on "retail therapy," but would you consider that a healthy way to decompress?

Do Things Intentionally

If you decompress by taking your dog for a walk, be intentional about it. Don't quickly answer a work-related text while you're at a stop sign. Don't listen to a podcast that's related to work. Enjoy your walk. Be present.

Try Something New

A quick search on the internet will give you a number of self-care activities, many of which are incredibly simple. Try some out. Shaking up your "routine" or your "normal" can help you pause and be present in new ways.

How did you do? Did you read one of those suggestions and think “Yeah sure, but I can’t do that.” Did an excuse creep up and get in the way? We invite you to challenge that thought!

03 SELF-CARE & SABBATH IN THE MIDST OF BUSY

LISTEN, WE KNOW THAT THERE ARE SIMPLY SOME SEASONS OF MINISTRY THAT REQUIRE ALL YOU CAN GIVE. BUILDING SELF-CARE INTO YOUR NORMAL SCHEDULE WILL HELP YOU NAVIGATE THESE EXTRAORDINARILY BUSY TIMES.

This is a concept that scripture repeatedly demonstrates in the life of Jesus. So often, after a time of teaching the crowds or performing miracles, Jesus seeks out time to rest and recover. Self-care is a necessary ingredient to longevity in youth ministry. Healthy churches will recognize and support you in self-care when you can communicate what you'll be doing and why it is so important for you to have that time and space.

Intentional periods of rest and reconnection with God can remind you why you do this crazy youth ministry thing in the first place. Find time at the end of busy seasons to get to your safe and sacred spaces. Trips (including short-term mission experiences), retreats, lock-ins, and other experiences require extraordinary effort on your part. So, how can you practice self-care even in the midst of busy?



Think Ahead as Much as You Can

Plan out details and minimize the amount of trouble-shooting that you will have to do during an experience.

Get Yourself Ready in Advance

Don't stay up late packing the night before an experience. Do what you can to prevent yourself from feeling rushed or tired before the experience even begins.

Share the Load

Invite and train others to be load-bearing members of the experience. Equip others to do devotions, get supplies, organize meals, and so on, so that you avoid maxing out your time and sanity.

Control What You Can

Eat healthy meals and snacks. If you will be in a place that upends your regular diet or doesn't provide enough healthy options, pack what you need so that you can be fueled properly. Create a schedule that allows for (at least the possibility) of proper sleep. Allow for opportunities to decompress.

Create Realistic Expectations

Create realistic expectations for your needs and how they can be met during busy times. Communicate your expectations and needs with other adults who are serving alongside you in busy seasons.

Find Self-Care Activities That Can Be Done in Minutes

Find self-care activities that can be done in minutes, as opposed to hours or days. When time is limited, do the self-care activities that give you the most return for the time and energy that you invest. Spoiler...these miniature self-care activities probably won't include engaging on social media. Those can certainly give you a bit of encouragement, but not the kind that provide you an ongoing, intentional recharge.

04 SELF-CARE BY ITSELF

SO FAR IN THIS EBOOK, AND IN PLENTY OF OTHER RESOURCES, SELF-CARE AND SABBATH ARE LINKED WITH EACH OTHER. WHILE THIS RELATIONSHIP IS TRUE, THAT SELF-CARE INCLUDES SABBATH TIME, IT IS ALSO IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT NOT ALL SELF-CARE IS SABBATH.

Use Your Favorite Hobbies & Pastimes As Self-Care

Setting aside the busyness of ministry responsibilities and allowing yourself to fill hours or days with things that make the time fly by and give you satisfaction and peace can be great self-care. Is there something you used to do but have given it up because of a lack of time? Is there something that brings you joy every time you pick it up? Rediscover those things and set parameters for where and when you do them.

Self-Care Includes Healthy Behaviors

You know, like the things it seems that there are not enough hours in the day to make happen. Eat healthier foods; exercise a little more; increase the amount of sleep that you get...heck, even floss your teeth every day for an entire year! It can be difficult to add a lot to a schedule, so pick one or two new things to try, and



do them until they become habits. Then you can think about adding more.

Self-Care Is Not Just About the Body

Self-care is about emotional and mental health too. Your body is the vehicle that your “self” gets to operate in. Spend time with loved ones, learn new things, embrace chances to connect with friends, explore options for therapy. Reflect on how you normally do self-care; and if you tend to focus primarily on physical, emotional, or mental care, consider trying other ways to care for yourself that may be getting ignored.

Declutter & Clear Your Path

Self-care is about doing the things you need to do to be effective in ministry. Maybe that means organizing your calendar? Maybe that means cleaning up and decluttering your workspace from busy seasons in ministry? Are you behind on chores around the house, car maintenance, or going over your household budget? I know that may not sound super fun, but self-care is not all fun. It is, however, all purposeful and getting those things done as part of self-care will free you to experience more and better things.

Do Something Where You Are Not In Charge

Often, in ministry, if you are the leader, you lead almost every time that there is an activity or spiritual experience. It can be difficult to be present in worship

if you are leading worship. Likewise, a Bible study may not be self-care if you are the one preparing the lesson and constantly trying to move the discussion forward. Find opportunities to do the things that got you involved in ministry...but as a participant and not as a leader. One of the most formative experiences I've had in ministry was going on a mission trip where I didn't plan or lead a thing; I was simply a member of the team.

05 SABBATH BY ITSELF

PERHAPS IN ITS SIMPLEST FORM, SABBATH IS A DAY SET ASIDE FOR REST AND WORSHIP.

The rest we talk about with sabbath is a step further than what we discuss with self-care. We are talking about the rest that comes when we are intentionally present with God. It is when we strive to rest our souls, as opposed to our body, heart, and mind in self-care.

Before we talk about some possibilities for sabbath time, take two to three minutes with each of these questions, figuring out a few answers for each:

- Are there acts of worship that positively affect your relationship with God?
- What are some effective ways that you already spend time with God?
- What are some ways that you are neglecting God or your relationship with God?

One approach to discovering effective ways to observe Sabbath uses the works of piety and the works of mercy, reviewed thoroughly in *Everyday Disciples: Covenant Discipleship with Youth*. In a nutshell, we live our best Christian lives when we intentionally set time aside to



demonstrate our love for God (by doing the works of piety) and demonstrate our love for neighbor (by doing the acts of mercy).

You can experiment with the various works of piety on your own or in groups and discover which help you focus on God in new and meaningful ways. Reading, meditating on, and studying scripture can be done on your own (using helpful resources like devotions and other biblical guides). Traditional practices like *lectio divina* fall in this category; [The Upper Room has some excellent resources to consider](#). You can also pray, fast, and live healthfully on your own during sabbath time. Find ways to pray and resources that help you pray in meaningful ways. Determine what kind of fasting may help you focus on God. Consider ways to keep your mind, heart, and spirit healthy by adding healthy activities or foods to your sabbath time.

Some of the works of piety are social in nature and deserve a place in your sabbath time as long as they help you remain focused on God. Fully participating in worship, sharing the Lord's Table, hearing sermons, and spending time with other Christians can provide opportunities for connection with God that are different and equally valuable as those that you take on your own.

06 PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

THE OLD SAYING GOES, “PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT,” BUT PERHAPS MORE ACCURATE IN THIS CASE IS “PRACTICE MAKES PROGRESS.”

In the case of self-care and sabbath time, this is doubly true. By adding spiritual practices to your self-care and developing sabbath rituals, you can discover more of God’s perfecting love. Our final words of encouragement are to get started and to journal about the differences you experience in your relationship with God as you get more and more intentional about self-care and sabbath time. It is important to own the things that get in your way. There will always be hurdles and challenges to self-care, so name the things that interfere with your chances to connect with God and then begin to manage them. Strive to think creatively when the temptation to think, “Well, I can’t” creeps in.

Invite people to help you. Accountability is one of the great gifts of the ministry model that John Wesley created, so share your plans for self-care and sabbath with friends and partners in ministry who can help keep you on track and remind you to do what you pledge to take care of yourself and maintain your relationship with God. You can even share what you are learning through sabbath time with your pastor and the SPR/PPR



at your church. As you witness to them, they will recognize the value of helping you have that time. Sabbath and self-care, when done well, will lengthen your ability to serve and increase the depth of what you provide as a leader, modeling a healthy Christian life.

Avoid thinking about self-care and sabbath as all or nothing. If you can't set aside a day for sabbath, start with what you do have. It's easy to be discouraged from even trying if we think, "Well, I have only an hour." Change your outlook; embrace and use the hour you have. Then, challenge yourself to gradually find more time. Try to remove your expectations; self-care and sabbath are not results-driven practices. Don't look at this time as either getting what you need or not. That kind of thinking stops you from enjoying the process of discovering new things about yourself and God. This is a lifelong process that you will enjoy. In fact, as you read this paragraph, did you notice just how many negatively phrased sentences we used? Just count the "don'ts" and "aren'ts"!

Even changing how you phrase your thought patterns regarding self-care and sabbath can make a huge difference. Instead of saying "I don't have time; I have only an hour," try saying "I have forty-five minutes, so this is what I am going to try." Instead of beginning with, "I don't think this will give me what I need," try, "I'm unsure of what I need right now, but I trust God will be with me in this spiritual practice." See the difference that framing can make? Finally, getting away from an "all or nothing" attitude for self-care

and sabbath time, consider this approach: we have the opportunity to put ourselves in positions to experience and be transformed by God's grace. These opportunities present themselves every day, often in small moments. Find one or two spiritual practices and do them until they become a habit, then try more. You just may find that forty-five minutes to an hour adds up over the course of months and years to make huge differences in your relationship with God.

CONCLUSION

THE PROCESS OF INTENTIONALLY INCLUDING SELF-CARE ROUTINES AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES AS PART OF SABBATH WILL BENEFIT YOU AND THE MINISTRIES THAT YOU LEAD.

This intentionality will be beneficial for you as well as provide a witness to others of what a healthy Christian life can look like. You are in our prayers as you seek out the rhythm that works for you!



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Academy for Spiritual Formation](#)

“Jesus saved my life, but The Academy saved my ministry,” — Pastor Ruben Ortiz

The Academy for Spiritual Formation offers a sacred place for spiritually hungry clergy and lay leaders. A program ministry of The Upper Room, it is an ecumenical experience of Christian community nurturing mind, body, and spirit. The academy fosters spiritual rhythms of study and prayer, silence and liturgy, solitude and relationship, rest, and exercise.

- [*For Sabbath’s Sake: Embracing Your Need for Rest, Worship, and Community**](#)

by J. Dana Trent (Upper Room Books, 2017)

Discover a spiritual practice that helps you maintain spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental health.

**The content of this book is also featured in an [eCourse from The Upper Room](#).*



- **[From the Center](#)**

A free, monthly email from The Upper Room that provides you with resources for your soul care as a spiritual leader.

- **[Holy Listening with Breath, Body, and the Spirit](#)**
by Whitney R. Simpson (Upper Room Books, 2016)

Many of us long to hear God's voice, yet we often overlook the great wisdom God gave us in our bodies. There is a deep connection between our bodies and spirits.

- **[Plant Like Jesus: The Church Planter's Devotional](#)**
by Ben Ingbretson (Upper Room Books, 2021)

Plant Like Jesus provides spiritual nourishment for planting leaders, innovating pastors, seminary students, and anyone seeking to root their mission work in the practices of Jesus.

- **[Practicing Compassion](#)***
by Frank Rogers Jr. (Fresh Air Books, 2015)

Compassion is more than a sympathetic feeling. It's the bond of human connection. Most religions lift up compassion, yet few people actually teach how to practice compassion for others and for yourself.

*The content of this book is also featured in an [eCourse from The Upper Room](#).

- ***Soul Reset: Breakdown, Breakthrough, and the Journey to Wholeness****

by Junius B. Dotson (Upper Room Books, 2019)

As Junius Dotson recalls his own journey through grief, depression, burnout, and emotional breakdown, Dotson is passionate about calling for a soul reset for pastors, church leaders, and all disciples of Jesus Christ.

**The content of this book is also featured in an [eCourse from The Upper Room](#).*

- ***The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making*** by Elizabeth Liebert