

Four mental health profiles identified for clergy before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing new strategies for intervention.



WHAT WE STUDIED

Drawing on survey data from over 1,200 North Carolina United Methodist clergy, we identified four profiles of positive and negative mental health symptoms and determined how those profiles changed during a period of extraordinary stress (COVID 19, from 2019-2021) in clergy life.



THE FOUR PROFILES OF MENTAL HEALTH between 2019-2021

FLOURISHING (44% -> 36%)

LOW depressive & anxiety symptoms
LOW emotional exhaustion
HIGH personal accomplishment
HIGH positive mental health

BURDENED BUT FULFILLED (18% -> 18%)

MODERATE depressive & anxiety symptoms
MODERATE emotional exhaustion
HIGH personal accomplishment
HIGH positive mental health

LANGUISHING (24% -> 24%)

MODERATE depressive & anxiety symptoms
MODERATE emotional exhaustion
MODERATE personal accomplishment
MODERATE positive mental health

DISTRESSED (14% -> 22%)

HIGH depressive & anxiety symptoms
HIGH emotional exhaustion
LOW personal accomplishment
LOW positive mental health



WHAT WE FOUND

Clergy who were “flourishing” pre-pandemic were most likely to remain in the “flourishing” group after the onset of COVID-19, with the majority of these clergy (76%) continuing to display high levels of good psychological health, minimal depressive and anxiety symptoms, and low levels of burnout in 2021.

Clergy in the “burdened but fulfilled” and “languishing” groups before COVID-19 showed the most significant worsening of psychological well-being after the pandemic. These clergy members were most at risk of moving into the “distressed” group in 2021 (24% from each subgroup).

Members with a pre-pandemic status of “distressed” had the highest probability of staying in that same subgroup after the onset of COVID-19, with 80% continuing to report substantial levels of anxiety and burnout and the absence of positive mental health.



WHY IT MATTERS

In good news, “flourishing” mental health was protective of future mental health, even in the face of extraordinary stressors like the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings also help us identify which clergy may benefit the most from support. Resourcing clergy who are “burdened but fulfilled” and “languishing” before they become “distressed” could be an important and attainable goal for those who care about their well-being, as it might help them move into the protective “flourishing” group before the next catastrophe.