Clergy Health Initiative at Duke University, supported by a growing body of social science research. Drs. Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Sarah LeGrand, as part of the Clergy Health Initiative at Duke University, found that clergy suffer from higher rates of hypertension, obesity, depression, arthritis, and asthma than do most other Americans. Multiple studies across numerous Christian communities show clergy are frequently the first helping professionals contacted when mental health issues and familial troubles arise. It is imperative that our Church and church hierarchy grow concerned with this serious discussion intended to identify the kinds of stressors clergy and presbyters face, and continuing education and training as part of their ministry, tends to make them more vulnerable to higher levels of emotional suffering.

Priests and presbyters face increased likelihood for emotional and spiritual well-being of our Greek Orthodox clergy and their families. Pastoral ministry can be extraordinarily rewarding and fulfilling. And, while it is unlikely that all of these clergy and clergy spouses are struggling deeply with ministerial stress, with over half of participants reporting feeling overwhelmed” in the face of events or experiences in their ministry and nearly half reporting clinically relevant trauma-related and mental health symptoms. Trauma symptoms are associated with an increase in emotional suffering, ministry burnout, and difficulties in coping with everyday life.

At the same time, there are many clergy and clergy spouses who continue to grow and thrive in the midst of these considerable stresses and challenges of ministry. It is imperative that our Church and clergy families must shift toward a self-protective or defensive stance in which clergy and clergy families must shift toward a culture of resilience amongst our clergy and presbyters who are less isolated and more connected to core relationships with family, friends, peers, and spiritual elders and tend to experience the more corrosive emotional and relational effects of stress.

According to the Danielsen Institute study, the marital relationship between priest and presbytera holds a special place in providing this relational buffer and protection.

In addition, ecclesiastical structures in the form of hierarchical support, financial stability, healthy rhythms of work and rest, and continued education and training are another set of factors that help build resilience and spiritual protection from the destructive personal, spiritual, and familial consequences of trauma.

Conclusion

Priests and presbyters in Greek Orthodox tradition that teaches that God, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, has always existed, and always exists in loving, dynamic relationships to others. For this reason, clergy and presbyters are frequently the first helping professionals contacted when mental health issues and familial troubles arise. But one particularly important consequence of the kinds of stressors clergy and presbyters face, is the vast majority of our clergy and presbyters, especially their willingness to be open to and engaged with the suffering of others as part of their ministry, tends to make them more vulnerable to higher levels of emotional suffering.

Finally, the capacity for empathy and loving concern that characterizes the vast majority of our clergy and presbyters is idealized by many parishioners and are vulnerable healers. While it is unlikely that all of these clergy and clergy spouses are struggling deeply with ministerial stress, with over half of participants reporting feeling overwhelmed” in the face of events or experiences in their ministry and nearly half reporting clinically relevant trauma-related and mental health symptoms. Trauma symptoms are associated with an increase in emotional suffering, ministry burnout, and difficulties in coping with everyday life.

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GROWING FAITHFUL FAMILIES IN CHRIST

In collaboration with the Metropolises and parishes of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, the mission of the Center for Family Care is to equip families with the resources to “affirm the importance of the family as a blessed gift of God and to address the specific needs of families as they try to live in a very challenging culture and world” (Archbishop Demetrios of America).

WHAT IS FAMILY?

In the traditional sense, family is comprised of the parents and children in a household all brought together by Divine grace—the “domestic church”. Additionally, it must be understood that the Church—the Body of Christ—establishes a broader dimension of family through the very real spiritual relationship established through the baptism that unites all of its members. We are all one family in Christ!

SO THEN WHAT IS FAMILY MINISTRY?

Sound family ministry is, in reality, a systematic ethos of how a parish understands ministry. It is people-centered—not program-centered. The church community that embraces a family ministry approach:

• engages people at all ages and stages of life.
• empowers all members of the Orthodox Christian family to become active participants in the life of the Church.
• encourages families to “drive” the Church home so that their faith is lived out in day-to-day life.
• nurtures the parishioners’ relationship with Christ and one another.
• is aware of resources in the community that assist parishioners in need (mental health, elder care, social support, etc.).

Family ministry can be “messy.” Yet these inherent difficulties are acknowledged and, in a sense, embraced as opportunities for grace. It is not the goal of family ministry to create “perfect” families, but rather to promote church communities where family members can be welcomed with support, fellowship, and unconditional love—for the purpose of their salvation.

HOW TO LEARN MORE AND GET INVOLVED

• Listen to our Faith and Family podcast at www.myocn.net. Our summer parenting series includes topics on fatherhood, building independence, and preparing your child for confession.
• Watch our webinars (online workshops). Archived topics include parenting, marriage, domestic violence, and Internet safety, to name a few. In September, attend a webinar with cardiologist Trent Orfanos where he will speak about the connection between our spiritual heart and our physical heart. Invite some friends and watch together! See our website for details.
• Read our family connection newsletter on the theme of philanthropy and learn about some really awesome activities and programs you and your family can participate in to build a compassionate spirit in your home.
• Host a Family Outreach Sunday in your parish. For more information visit our website.
• Share what you are doing with your families at home to live out the Orthodox Christian faith! Share your pictures with us by mentioning us on Facebook (@centerforfamilycare), using #familyfaith, or emailing us at familycare@goarch.org.
• Sign up for our Family Link Email Ministry to keep informed of new resources coming out of our office.
• Like us on Facebook to also keep connected and share with others.
• Call us to plan a retreat, find a resource, or brainstorm for your ministry.
• Visit our website at www.family.goarch.org to learn more about the above resources as well as other articles, events, and activities for families and parishes.

PRAYER FOR OUR NEIGHBORHOOD FAMILIES

I pray to You, God, for the families of my neighborhood. Visit them. Throw their troubles out of them and bring hope. Make the daily cares that devour the heart disappear. Present solutions to life’s problems. Settle the disturbed relationships among members of different families whom I know or I don’t know. O Lord, remind the people of our area that You exist, that You are a strong and loving Protector. Keep away, Lord, anything that causes the disappearance of peace from souls, and the escape of sleep from our eyes. Stay a little while more tonight in our neighborhood. Spread peace along with the night. Let the harshness of the day and its struggles not spread over the night too, God.
—Archbishop Demetrios of America, Speaking to God, Volume II