

On not being that guy

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I had an appointment to meet a colleague for lunch at noon, but we had to move it up to 11:00 a.m. He was on the verge of retirement and I was just starting out, so he asked to meet so he could give me a bit of advice. We slid into our seats, the waitress came around, and the pastor ordered a scotch. I burst out laughing, because I thought he was joking. Presbyterians often banter about scotch, so I thought this was part of that ongoing joke. Then I looked up at the waitress, who was dutifully writing down his order. It wasn't a joke. In fact, I could tell he had done this before. She had done this before. This was a regular thing.

He sighed, winked, and mumbled, "Hair of the dog."

I hummed, nodded my head, and looked down at my menu so I wouldn't have to make eye contact with him.

Pastors struggle with alcoholism. It's not big news to those of us in the profession. Graham Greene's whiskey priest is a very believable literary figure in *The Power and the Glory*.

It makes sense. We take on things. Even though Protestants abolished the confession booths, even though it doesn't fit in with our theological constructs, people still come to us. They often need a flesh and blood recipient to hear their sins and offer them grace. But it's painful to hear.

People put us in places where we have no control. We find out that a wife is being emotionally abused. She tells us, but there is nothing we can do to make her leave. It's painful to see.

We love a family deeply, and then a child dies. As we preach over a tiny casket, the church looks to us for answers we could never give. It's painful to stand there.

We bear the brunt of a great deal of criticism. Depending on how much time we have served in the congregation, or the culture of the church, we might have very

little actual power, but we still get the criticism. And speaking of power, being a pastor is just an odd authority position. I have watched as pastors are called to churches to become the captain of a sinking ship. Then when she steps on board, no one wants to take orders. Or even suggestions. But there is mutiny as the ship goes down. And it's very painful.

Being a pastor also means that there are very few outlets for constructive anger or pain. We are often told to be a “non-anxious presence,” but we know that the anxiety attacks are increasing. Rapid breathing. Erratic heart beats. Sweaty hands.

Anyways, it is a position that can drive one to drink. To take the edge off. To numb some of the unbearable pain. To drown our doubts. To give us a nightlight as we trip through the dark night of our soul.

The pastor gave me an hour of advice, but I didn't pay much attention to any of it. However, lunch wasn't a complete waste of time. As I gathered my stuff, and the pastor remained to order his second tumbler of scotch, I left with my own advice seared into my brain: DON'T BE THAT GUY.

I remembered that lunch, when I read [this article](#). The author, Hilary Jacobs Hendel, talks about two types of emotions.

- Core emotions—like anger, joy, and sadness. When we experience these emotions deeply, it leads to relief and clarity.

- Inhibitory emotions—like shame, guilt, and anxiety. They are not always bad, but they can keep us from experiencing our core emotions.

I'm no therapist, but I do wonder if pastors use alcohol because we don't always have the space to express those core emotions in healthy ways. I wonder if we feel like we have to bear everyone else's burdens, so we don't have room for our own. Or when we talk to other pastor friends about our frustrations, they come back at us with well-meaning, awkward platitudes, which quietly indicate that we're not really allowed to have those sorts of feelings.

Whatever it is, we have some soul-searching to do. Can we figure this out? Because THAT GUY is really unhealthy.