



Centre for
**THEOLOGY +
PSYCHOLOGY**

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic

– Some insights from Theology & Psychology

The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting our world and we are all faced with serious challenges. Our team at the Centre for Theology & Psychology offers here a few guidelines that will help us to cope with this new situation and perhaps even thrive and flourish in the midst of uncertain times.

I. What is happening to us?

First, it's helpful to clarify what is currently happening. We are clearly experiencing what psychologists call a critical life-event, an event that is particularly stressful.

*“Stress refers to experiencing events that are perceived as endangering one’s physical or psychological well-being . . . The controllability, unpredictability and duration or chronicity of a situation affects how stressful it is.” (Nolen-Hoeksema, *Introduction to Psychology*, p. 474)*

There is so much that we don't know about this particular virus, and that makes us feel very stressed indeed. We have no control over it; the whole situation is quite unpredictable (as even experts tell us); and we have no idea how long this is going to take or how long we will have to practise social isolation and/or distancing.

Now, how are we supposed to deal with this situation? Some of us are by personal disposition naturally more relaxed and calm at this time whereas others feel more vulnerable and anxious. Some of us perhaps move back and forth between these two states. There are some things, though, that we can all do to cope with the present challenges.

II. What can we do about it?

There is a great deal that we can do. We might not be able to change the situation, but we are indeed able to change our attitude and focus on the things and truths that really count. By God's grace, we might in fact turn this challenge into manifold opportunities.

1. REMIND YOUR SELF: First of all, and most importantly, it's crucial that we call to mind who we are as Christians. Remind yourself on a daily basis of who you are in Christ. Christ lives in you and you are in Christ. There is no safer place to be.

Gal 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

If this is true, and since you believe God's Word, it surely is, then this is your ultimate safety. If you have God, no matter what comes, you are safe. This is how the Psalmist puts it:

Psalm 73:26 My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

2. THANKS: Second, give thanks to God every day. Spend time each day finding God's blessings in your life and thank him for this. Then use that joy to calm those around you and glorify your Father in Heaven.

Ps 107:1 Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!

Write down each day three things for which you are grateful? You'll be surprised how much reason you have to be thankful to God. Psychologists have come up with a creative idea and you might have time to put this into practice now that you have (perhaps) more time on your hands. How about you write a "gratitude letter"? (Seligman, *Flourish*, 30-33; Tierney & Baumeister, *Power of Bad*, p.203-4). You write about 300 words, expressing your gratitude to your friend, partner, anyone really for whom you are grateful, in very concrete words. This will not only lift your own spirits but also warm the heart of the recipient in these difficult times.

Here's something you could do on a regular basis: Read Psalm 46 slowly and carefully. (This is the psalm that inspired Luther to write his famous hymn, *A mighty fortress is our God*.) Reflect on times in your life when God has been that fortress to you. Give thanks. Reflect and repeat.

3. RELATE: God has made us relational social humans.

Gen 2:18 It is not good for the man to be alone.

Research shows social isolation is a strong predictor of poor mental health. Psychologist Martin Seligman writes: "Other people are the best antidote to the downs of life and the single most reliable up" (Seligman, *Flourish*, 20). Due to current social distancing and reduced in-person contact, loneliness and poor mental health are big risk factors at this time. Remind yourself that though you may feel lonely, you are never alone as you cannot be separated from Jesus. As Christians we want to be on the front-line in times of distress, caring for our community, but restrictions make it harder to care for people in the same way. We need to protect ourselves from becoming self-focused and self-preserving. How about you get creative and find new ways to connect. Most churches are now online, so keep attending and connecting, inviting others to tune in as well. Increase social connections. Isolation means we need to make a bigger effort to connect with and support family, friends and neighbours. Research shows we experience more happiness from giving than receiving (see also Acts 20:35).

1 Thess 5:11 Encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

4. PRAY: Use this time to reflect on where your treasure lies. Cast your hope on things that are unseen rather than seen. Write down your worries as they come up in the day and then set aside 10 minutes in the early evening to pray about them, give them over to God and problem-solve anything that you can change, breaking your problem into 'bite-size' pieces. If you cannot change your situation, try to change your attitude instead. Whilst you practise social distancing, also practise cognitive distancing. Focus on the 'theme' of the worry rather than the 'content'. Think about what you might say to a friend who was in a similar situation, think about how you would want to respond if you looked back at this time in one, two or five years' time and write down the pros and cons of your various options. Pray through a Psalm that you find helpful, applying it to your own situation. Many people are praying Psalm 46 or 91 in these days.

Pray for your friends, family members, for the government and for those working in the health-care professions. Perhaps you might want to think about fasting, too. God calls his church to fast in times of darkness. Think about joining with others in your community to fast and pray together for our world and our church. BUT: Make sure you check with your GP (perhaps via phone these days) whether fasting is safe for you at this time. Unfortunately, some of us are vulnerable or under certain medication that does not make fasting an option.

5. CONTEMPLATE: Our hearts and minds are shaped by the information we hear and see around us and this forms a lens through which we see the world. During this time, it is easy to become overwhelmed with anxiety and fear through hearing about rising rates of COVID-19 cases and deaths or hearing stories of people losing their jobs, etc. Looking through this lens, we can elevate our risk of harm or worse begin to wonder, ‘where is God?’. We can forget our God is sovereign and loving and says: “Do not fear, for I am with you” (Is 41:10). The media has a bias to reporting negative experiences and worst-case scenarios, so limit the amount of media you are watching to once a day and learn your information from reliable sources.

This season is an ideal opportunity to be quiet and read and reflect on God’s word. Our world has become less noisy and hectic and we find perhaps more moments of rest and contemplation.

Psalm 104:34 May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the Lord.

Keep connected with God through prayer, scripture and songs of worship. Make sure you aren’t distancing yourself from Jesus; draw near to him and let him draw near to you. Look out for what God is teaching you and how He is maturing you through this time. Focus on who God is for you in Jesus Christ. Explore the beauty of the person and work of Jesus and sit in awe and wonder. Basically: seek God’s Face.

Ps 17:15 “As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.”

You might also want to explore some more guided meditation. Katherine Thompson offers helpful guidance here: See Katherine Thompson, *Christ-Centred Mindfulness: Connected to Self and God* (2018).

6. RHYTHM Now that for some of us the daily routine is in disarray, it’s important to implement structure, rhythm and discipline. How about you create a daily routine: stick to your usual work/study hours; carry out your household tasks; and take up the gift of sabbath rest. Even if you are home alone, take your shower and get dressed. Enforce boundaries with colleagues and those in your home so you can get your work done as well as have some time alone; and respect others’ boundaries too; attend online church and Bible studies; make time for pleasurable activities and hobbies; make time to rest, etc. Be mindful of the amount of screen-time you are having and try to do activities that do not involve looking at a device, such as reading paper books, doing jigsaws, playing board-games etc.

Exodus 20:9-10 Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God.

Try to get sufficient sleep, not staying up or sleeping in too late. This will keep your sleep cycle unchanged and boost your mental and physical vitality for coping with the additional stress.

Psalm 4:8 In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.

If your mind won’t turn off, write down your worries and remember God is hard at work while you sleep and restore your body. Keep your bedroom for sleep only and do not work, study or watch news in this room, or your brain will think it’s ok to dwell on these things when you’re trying to sleep. Verbal activity causes insomnia but visual images do not. So try to think in pictures before going to bed (Nelson & Harvey, *BJCP*, 2002, 2003).

Psalm 121:4 Indeed he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

7. ACTIVE: Stay active. Your body is a temple of Christ, take care of it. Exercise and stretch regularly as you may be more sedentary or holding more stress and tension. If restrictions allow, go for a walk to connect with God’s beautiful creation. As research confirms, this reduces stress and restores the body. Feed yourself on nutritious foods, refraining from emotional or mindless eating of

non-nutritious foods such as bingeing on high calorie snacks, TV, etc. Exercise and good nutrition boost immunity and keep us physically and mentally strong. Regularly check in with yourself and others, checking that you and they are managing and noticing any signs of anxiety, low mood and stress. Perhaps this is now a good time to pick up a new hobby, learn a language you always wanted to learn – or to take an online course at MST/Eastern 😊

8. HELP: In times of hardship most people are resilient and can draw and build on natural coping strategies. Encourage each other to draw on your personal support network and coping strategies. Some people, however, may not have the coping skills or access to the same resources or may have been impacted more severely by this pandemic and so may find it harder to manage their situation. So ask yourself: Which neighbour or friend needs your help right now? With whom could you share your resources (toilet paper 😊)?

Phil 2:4 *Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but to the interests of others.*

People who are most at risk are those who:

- were struggling with mental health before the pandemic;
- are elderly, have limited social contacts, and/or live alone;
- are without, or have limited, access to internet;
- are living with household discord or domestic violence;;
- have lost employment and/or are in financial difficulty;
- have a physical illness or disability or have loved ones who are sick and are unable to visit them;
- have loved ones who have passed away, and may be unable to attend the funeral;
- are self-isolating due to suspected or confirmed COVID-19.

Gal 6:2 *Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.*

Here are some practical ideas to help you support your community.

- Check in regularly with people whom you know are at risk of poor mental health and see how they are going. Ask how you can support them. Look out for changes in their behaviour and radio silence. If they need professional help, offer to connect them with a mental health professional and continue to support them.
- Drop a flyer in letterboxes around your neighbourhood with your name and contact number and list of things with which you could help them with (e.g. picking up groceries or medicines, posting or collecting mail, giving them a call, helping with IT issues, praying for their needs...). See #viralkindness
- Establish a fund to support people around you who have lost their jobs or are struggling financially.
- Start up a prayer chain with your church community.
- Donate to a local or global charity who are supporting the poor, homeless and vulnerable at this time.
- Share non-virtual resources such as books, board games, jigsaws, etc. with people around you.
- Continue to support local businesses that have been able to stay open.
- Strengthen bonds with people in your home and neighbourhood and learn new things about them. During times of uncertainty, people are more willing to hear and receive the gospel so share with people how your faith is helping you cope.
- When out of your home, smile and say hello to people. You may be the only person with whom they connect that day or even longer.

Do not be afraid to reach out and ask for help. Confess your worries to others and to God and be open to carrying each other's burdens.

Finally, don't lose hope. Put your trust in God.

We wait in hope for the Lord;
he is our help and our shield.
In him our hearts rejoice,
for we trust in his holy name.
May your unfailing love be with us, Lord,
even as we put our hope in you.

Psalm 33:20-22

In Him,

The Team at Centre for Theology & Psychology

RESOURCES & REFERENCES

Christian Meditation Apps:

Abide Christian meditation app (paid app)	https://abide.co
Soultime Christian mediation app (some free features)	https://www.soultime.com

Christian Resource for Kids:

Compassion - Videos and activities	compassion.com.au/colin
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Secular Resources for Teenagers and Young Adults:

Headspace	https://headspace.org.au
Emergeminds - resources on how to talk to children/teenagers etc	https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/supporting-children-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/

Secular resources:

Australian Psychological Society	https://www.psychology.org.au/COVID-19-Australians
Phoenix Australia: Centre for Post-traumatic Mental Health	https://www.phoenixaustralia.org/coronavirus-covid-19/
PsychologyTools	https://www.psychologytools.com/articles/free-guide-to-living-with-worry-and-anxiety-amidst-global-uncertainty/
BeyondBlue	https://www.beyondblue.org.au
White Ribbon Australia (domestic violence)	https://www.whiteribbon.org.au
Centre for Clinical Interventions - CBT based self-help modules for coping with or how to care for someone with anxiety, depression, etc,	https://cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Overview

Free Secular Apps for coping with anxiety, stress, worry and low mood:

Smiling Mind - help with breathing and staying present-focused (thoughts emotions, etc), sleep programs	https://www.smilingmind.com.au
Mood Mission - 200+ CBT based coping strategies for anxiety and low mood	http://moodmission.com
Reach Out Worry Time - record worries and set-up worry time and problem solve.	https://au.reachout.com/tools-and-apps/reachout-worrytime
Sanvello - CBT skills for anxiety, stress and low mood and online support- normally only some free features but have made premium available to all during COVID-19	https://www.sanvello.com

References & Further Reading

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- Susan Nolen-Hoeksma et al., Atkinson & Hilgard's Introduction to Psychology, 13th ed. (Cengage, 2014), chapter 14: Stress, Health, and Coping
- Reference for evidence supporting walking in nature on reduced cortisol and improved mood: Olafsdottir, G et al (2020). Health benefits of walking in nature: A randomized controlled study under conditions of real-life stress. *Environment & Behavior*, 52(3), 248-274.
- Reference for evidence supporting poor mental health related to social isolation: Smith, K.J., & Victor, C. (2019). Typologies of loneliness, living alone and social isolation, and their associations with physical and mental health. *Ageing and Society*, 39(8), 1709-1730.
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