

5 Tips for Navigating the Psychological, Spiritual Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic

Life is quite literally coming to a standstill. We experienced something like this on Sept. 11, 2001, when planes were grounded and fears abounded. But today's standstill is worldwide as at least 140 of the world's 195 countries have reported a confirmed case of the coronavirus. Because our economies are more intertwined, and with the media and social media reporting things in real-time, this is now a global event.

Colleges are closing; schools are sending students home; restaurants are shut down; hospitals are overburdened; and uncertainty about symptoms is leading to panic, distress, suffering and turmoil for many, even though only a few have been infected.

As a Christian psychiatrist, I have been asked by family, friends, coworkers and ministry colleagues for help in navigating this unprecedented, worldwide predicament. Here are five powerful yet practical tips I teach others—and use myself—to navigate uncertain times and adversity such as what we find ourselves in today.

1. Uncomfortable feelings like anxiety, uncertainty, fear, sadness, anger or frustration are normal. These uncomfortable—notice I didn't use the word negative—emotions are the warning system God designed to let us know something important, dangerous or wrong has happened, or to alert us we aren't looking at the facts accurately. When the smoke detector starts screeching or a red light on the car dashboard comes on, we are stressed but thankful for the warning because it has

saved us from a bigger catastrophe. Emotions are good in this sense. Emotions get us in trouble, however, when we let them become more than our warning system, allowing them to become our decision-making system. We've all made lousy decisions when we were emotional. Don't ignore your warning system. But don't let it paralyze you, either!

2. We need a godly perspective of the circumstances and situation. Perspective is key in navigating this pandemic storm and making healthy decisions, not just physically with regard to the virus, but spiritually and psychologically as well. Our emotions can be a major distorter of perspective; you've heard the expressions "green with envy," "seeing red with anger" or "love is blind." We all have seen people make horrible decisions in the name of love. Here are three truths to help you develop and maintain a godly perspective:

—God hears and answers prayer. Pray during these uncertain times.

—God can use this pandemic to help people realize an eternal Savior, who defeated death and the grave, can provide lasting and eternal help from the sin, danger and evil. Be a lighthouse built on a rock-solid foundation, shining God's glory and love, and providing guidance and safety for those feeling endangered in this storm.

—Possibility doesn't equate to probability. Every day we drive our cars knowing a possibility exists we could die in a car accident. Yet we still drive with minimal anxiety or concern because the probability is low. Unfortunately, anxiety and fear often make a possibility seem like a high probability. Between 60,000 and 100,000 people die from influenza each year. As I write this, we have fewer than 100 deaths in the U.S. due to coronavirus. With the significant precautions being implemented, it's doubtful the death toll in the U.S.

will rise to a fraction of the flu.

How to pray during the COVID-19 pandemic:

–Pray for others’ wisdom, courage, humility, compassion and energy, especially for our leaders and decision-makers. Pray for our president, Congress, financial systems, state and local government officials, business leaders and owners, ministry leaders and parents.

–Pray for those with symptoms: for peace, joy, God’s presence, love and grace in their life, and for their healing.

–Pray for yourself and for wisdom, humility, empathy, compassion, thankfulness and a grateful heart. Ask God to show you people to serve, and that His power, grace, love, joy and peace are extra clear and meaningful through this challenging time.

3. Remember, the isolation recommendation is physical, not emotional or relational. You can and should still connect with God, others and self. The biggest change being imposed is social-distancing or isolation. We need to be careful not to allow the mindset of isolation to spill over into all aspects of our life.

–God: Pray more frequently. Have conversations with Him through the day. Add some Bible reading in. Listen for His voice.

–Others: Invest in more connection with those in your household. Plan activities like playing games, watching a movie, learning a new activity, gardening, taking walks outside, cooking, spring cleaning and so on. Make plans to connect or reconnect with people outside your immediate area on FaceTime. Encourage one other.

–Self: Journaling is a great way to slow your mind down, dig a little deeper inside and learn about what is going on. It’s

also an excellent opportunity to vent some of the fears, anxieties and anger you are feeling below the surface. Start by writing what's on your mind and see where God leads you.

4. Be careful to not impose a premature finish line on a situation. Often, when people are in adverse situations, they assume this is the finish line, the game is over and they've lost. In reality, you're only in the first quarter of the game, or the second act of a five-act play. As we read through the Bible we see irrefutable evidence that God is the author of great comebacks, no matter how bleak the circumstances get. Maintain a godly perspective and a long-game approach instead of imposing a premature finish line.
5. If you are really struggling psychologically, don't be afraid to seek professional help. All too often, Christians who struggle psychologically are averse to seeking professional help from a psychiatrist or therapist. Jesus is the Wonderful Counselor and Great Physician. Jesus' psychospiritual healing is available to all, and psychiatry and psychology are tools He can use to help us better steward our minds for His glory. If you are struggling, find a Christian therapist or psychiatrist to help you.

I pray these tips, though different than the usual tip lists you'll see, will be beneficial, practical and impactful for you.

In closing, I want to share my life verse with you. This truth sustains me during any storm, no matter the size. Isaiah 26:3 states, "You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You." Let me explain: When I was a kid, we had these rides on the playground we called "roundabouts." They were circular platforms about 20 feet in diameter, about 1 foot off the ground, with rails on them. The younger kids would get on the platform holding onto an inner

rail while the older kids held an outer rail, running alongside to get it spinning really fast. At top speed, they'd jump on and ride with the rest. The thing spun so fast that when people jumped off they'd be dizzy, stumble and stagger, unable to walk a straight line. Their world was spinning! At some point on the playground ride, you learn that if you keep your gaze fixed on a stationary, immovable object, like a tree, pavilion or water fountain, you don't get dizzy!

Life, and this verse, work the same way. God is immovable. The same yesterday, today and tomorrow. If you find yourself dizzy, disoriented, confused, overwhelmed or feel like you're psychologically or spiritually stumbling about, your gaze is probably not fixed on God. Recalibrate. Tune in to God! {eoa}

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