

Coping with COVID-19: *Managing Stress and Anxiety*

Anxiety threatens to steal away our joy and peace by consuming our focus and kicking our imaginations into overdrive. Specifically with COVID-19, individuals are struggling with disquieting thoughts, such as worrying about infecting loved ones, dwelling on possible death, and feeling concerned for vulnerable populations.

In the New Testament, the Greek word “merimnate” appears 17 times and can convey either positive, genuine concern or more negative rumination and anxiety. In Philippians 4:6, we are told to, “be anxious for nothing,” which is really trying to convey that we should not dwell upon anxious or troubling thoughts, and it continues to say, “but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Luckily, you do not have to be alone with your “merimnate” while self-isolating or social distancing, as there are spiritually-oriented tools and resources that help you learn to process anxiety with wisdom.

If you are feeling stressed or anxious, these 5 ways of coping will help you manage your emotions.

1. Understanding Our Problems: We need awareness and insight to start making changes in our lives. 1 Peter 5:6 says, “humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s might hand, that he may lift you up in due time.” Perhaps the first step to managing our anxiety is to ask God to show us our heart, mind, and body so that we may humble ourselves. Regardless of our problems, we typically find four major elements that contribute significantly to the issue.

First, in what thoughts are we entangled?

- What memories, worries, self-criticisms, or other unhelpful narratives do we dwell on?
- What are we getting “caught up” in?
- What thoughts do we allow to hold us back, push us around, or bring us down?

Second, what feelings are we struggling against?

- What are the emotions, urges, or sensations we are experiencing?
- What emotions are we ignoring, fighting, suppressing?

Third, what life-draining actions are we doing?

- What keeps us stuck, wastes our time/money, and drains our energy?

Fourth, what challenging situations are we avoiding?

- What have you quit, put off until later, or stayed away from?

You can begin to answer these questions by 1) writing out a short summary of the problem you are facing, and 2) describing how it affects your life and what it stops you from doing or being. What problems has COVID-19 caused in your life? How do these problems keep you from being your best self?

CONTACTS & UPDATES

HDI’s website and social media accounts provide ongoing updates and resources for preparing your church for COVID-19.

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2. Grounding: Grounding is a technique of detaching from emotional pain, internal anguish, or overwhelming anxiety by anchoring yourself to the reality that is occurring in the present moment. Gaining distance between you and your negative feelings can help give perspective so that we anchor ourselves to God's truth. After 1 Peter 5:6 tells us to humble ourselves, verses 7-8 go on to give us the imperative to "cast all your anxiety on God because he cares for you," and remind us that that we should "be alert and self-disciplined" so as to not be devoured by the enemy. Grounding is one practical way we can live out this scripture, and this technique can be broken down into mental, physical, and soothing strategies.

Mental grounding could be:

- Describing your environment in detail using all five senses (e.g., walls are beige, the fan is whirring, the chair is firm).
- Playing a "categories" game (e.g., thinking of types of dogs, trying to name all 50 states, listing famous cities).
- Saying a safety statement out loud to yourself (e.g., My name is ____; I am good and loved by God. I am in the present, not the past. I am located in ____; the date is ____).

Physical grounding might entail:

- Digging your feet into the floor.
- Carrying a small object (e.g., rock, ring, cloth) to touch and describe when you feel a negative emotional response.
- Running cool or warm water over your hands.

Soothing grounding examples include:

- Picturing your favorite people or places.
- Putting up inspiring songs or scriptures in your environment to act as reminders.
- Thinking of things you are looking forward to next week.
- Saying a coping statement (e.g., I can handle this, this feeling will pass).

To get the most out of grounding strategies, it is recommended that you 1) try grounding for 20-30 minutes, 2) practice often, and 3) create your own methods of grounding.

3. Deep Breathing: Deep breathing, also called diaphragmatic breathing, is a sure-fire method of managing your body's response to anxiety and stress. Anxiety and stress attack your nervous system and send you into a "fight, flight, or freeze" response that wears down your body with a multitude of physical symptoms (e.g., shortness of breath, racing heart, trembling, dizziness, sweating).

One particular method of deep breathing utilized by NAVY SEALs is called **box breathing**. Box breathing entails inhaling slowly for four seconds, holding your lungs full of air for four seconds, exhaling for four seconds, and holding your lungs empty for four seconds. This method is simple, yet remarkably slows down or stops a stress response. It just takes practice.

4. Gratitude: If we backtrack to the very beginning of 1 Peter, starting in chapter one, we see the author give an abundance of encouragement, praise and gratitude. The author states in verse 6, "In all this [the living hope that is Jesus Christ] you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials." Being grateful helps us endure. Psychological studies have supported this idea and shown that gratitude helps shift our minds away from the negatives to see that we, in fact, do have many things to be grateful for. Try making it a bedtime habit by saying (out loud) five things you are grateful for that occurred that day.

Other methods include:

- Keeping a journal of the things you are grateful for.
- Expressing gratitude to others as frequently as possible.
- Reflecting over the small or seemingly inconsequential things in your life you appreciate.
- Looking back over the struggles you have overcome and connecting them to how they helped you grow.
- Identifying the “gratitude exemplars” in your life that you wish to imitate.

5. Meaning Making: COVID-19 has forced us to recognize that a lot is outside our control, but focusing efforts into finding meaning in suffering can help us persevere. COVID-19 is impacting us in ways that are outside our control, but we still have the ability to choose how we respond to these unprecedented times.

We start by seriously asking ourselves, “What is the meaning of *my* life? What action and conduct, daily or hourly, best follows this?” A presence of meaning in our lives or a dedication to a cause greater than ourselves helps us weather any storm. Let us remember 1 Peter 3:8, which tells us to “Sympathize with each other. Love each other as brothers and sisters. Be tenderhearted and keep a humble attitude.” What is a way you can live out God’s calling to love others during this time?

References

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