

Managing your mental health during COVID-19

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Fear is a part of everyday life on some level. Fear can actually be good for us. God gave us fear as a warning system that helps us stay safe. Think of it as an alarm system on a house. When there is an intrusion, the alarm goes off to protect you. There is a true story of a woman whose part of the brain (the amygdala) that works to alert the body of danger was completely shut off. She found herself in dangerous situations on a regular basis because her brain's warning system did not operate correctly. In the midst of the global pandemic, many people find themselves with heightened levels of fear and anxiety.

It can be challenging to know how to react when our body's alarm system won't shut off, but there are things that we have control over that can help to calm the body and mind. So, here are some simple, yet powerful, steps to help calm the body and mind.

1. **Accept the negative emotions you are experiencing.** It is common to avoid unwanted negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, anger, frustration, and uncertainty. But the reality is, the more we try to avoid these negative emotions, the more we intensify them. It sounds counter-intuitive but allow those emotions to be there. Notice them. Get curious about your experience with them. One quick, helpful tool is a technique called, "Notice and Name." Just by noticing the emotion you are experiencing and naming it out loud, it helps to calm the body down.
2. **Remember not all negative emotions and stress are bad.** Negative emotions and stress can have a positive impact. If handled well (not perfectly), God can use negative emotions and experiences to grow our character. As we cope in healthy ways with anxiety and negative emotions, it strengthens our resilience. It also has the potential to deepen our relationships with others and with God. Additionally, we have the potential to appreciate our blessings in new ways.
3. **Anxiety carries, so limit your coronavirus consumption.** Have you ever seen a movie or tv program that shows a herd of animals calmly grazing only to be attacked by a predator that forces the entire herd to flee? This is an example of anxiety traveling. Just like it travels through the animal kingdom, anxiety also travels through humans. So, limit the amount of time you and your family spend listening to the news or reading social media. You may even need to limit your time talking with others about the situation. Stay informed, but don't marinate in the negativity. Instead, look for ways to take in the good that surrounds you. Increase meaningful, joyful activities, listen to

music, dance in the living room, play games with the family. All of these activities create a social connection that helps to calm our anxious nervous system.

4. **Create new routines during this unpredictable season.** One reason people are so anxious is the loss of what feels predictable. Creating a flexible but consistent routine helps to create a sense of stability which brings a sense of calm. Wake up at your normal time, eat well, exercise, and get a good night's sleep. All of these activities increase positive endorphins while decreasing negative hormones that contribute to anxiety.
5. **Take control of your thought life.** Victor Frankel was an Australian neurologist and psychiatrist, as well as a Holocaust survivor. In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankel responds to his horrific circumstances, "The one thing you can't take away from me is the way I choose to respond to what you do to me. The last of one's freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given circumstance." While we have little control over COVID-19 and its impact, we do have control over what we choose to do with our time and with our mind. Take time out of your day to write down your blessings, create a gratitude jar with your family, and look for the beauty in your relationships.