

## Facing Fears, Changing Attitudes

Father Konopka continues his series on managing stress and anxiety as reopening begins

*This is Part 6 in an ongoing series of managing stress and anxiety during difficult times.*

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As we move into the reopening of our churches and life in general, I have been reading some interesting things. I would have thought that people would just walk out the door and jump back into life. In my mind, we would just pick up and get back to life. What I have been reading is that many people are worried as we open up and anxiety is becoming prevalent.

One possible thing that is happening is that we have been in survival mode the last two months or so. As things changed so quickly and life almost halted like a bullet train hitting a wall, our minds did what they were supposed to do. We went into crisis mode. Our focus was on how do students get taught, how do we have Mass and take care of our parishes, what does it mean to work from home, etc. Those who work in health care were faced with an even greater crisis moment: how do we treat someone with a disease we don't understand?

Now, as this wave seems to be on the downside, we are able to move from crisis mode to processing mode: what the heck just happened? This is like waking up from a nightmare we didn't plan on. In my opinion, that is where the anxiety is coming from. We have to process and engage this fear. Anxiety and fear are necessary emotions. We are hard-wired with the flight-or-fight response for our own protection. I think what has happened to us all is that the switch on our flight-or-fight system is stuck on. Now that we are loosening things up, we need to confront our fears in order to move ahead. As I wrote in the fourth part of this series, the first step is naming what I have control over and what I need to live with. Personally, I have been using the analogy of the sword of Damocles as my symbol. This ancient parable is about a king who hung a sword over his enemy's chair with a single strand of horsehair. The enemy could not help but be focused on the sword throughout the dinner. We all need to accept that the COVID-19 virus is with us to stay, but we do have the choice as to how we deal with our fear and concern.

The CDC and the medical world have given us all the tools to stay physically healthy: wear a mask, wash your hands, avoid large gatherings, etc. There is a comfort in that part of the map because if we practice all these things we have a reasonable chance of staying healthy. We need to accept this fact though: we can still get the virus but we can do what we can to avoid it.

So, what about our mental health? I go back to the first segment. I wrote about the gold standard of anxiety treatment: learning how to breathe correctly to manage the feelings of anxiety. Researchers have shown the effectiveness of mindfully living in the present moment and managing feelings in a healthy way. I noticed that when the first segment was posted on Facebook, someone objected to this. The reality is that in evidence-based practice, learning how to breathe correctly, live in a mindful way and paying attention to one's thinking is the process to deal with anxiety, normal and clinical, that is causing major discomfort. Plus, the practices are part of the Christian monastic tradition. Learning how to pray the Jesus prayer is a mindful practice. By focusing on the words, the person is centered in the living presence of God and is aware (mindful) of his Divine Presence.

So, step one as we walk out of our houses, is to remember to breathe and to practice good, deep relaxation breathing every day. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zin, who developed this approach, has some good YouTube videos to lead you through a guided meditation. There are countless apps you can buy also. As you breathe, be aware of your feelings but also your thinking. Because we have been in survival mode, most of us have not been aware of our thinking because our feelings were too “raw.” As you become aware of your thinking, ask yourself a few questions: Are you being realistic? What is the data behind your fear? Are you caught up in shoulds and oughts? One important way to deal with the anxiety is to challenge the thinking. For example, if I am afraid I will get it by riding my bike, I can do the research about how the virus is transmitted, what do I need to do if I ride on a bike path, etc. By the way, I did exactly this and now I know how to mitigate the probability that I could be exposed doing something I like to do. Will I go back to the gym? Probably not because I don’t have the comfort level I used to have. We all need to be willing to change our pre-PAUSE habits because we may not be comfortable with what we were doing

The second thing is to take it slowly. If you are not comfortable coming to church because you are over 65, are in a vulnerable population, or are just afraid, don’t come the first few weeks. In fact, that would allow your church community to work out all the kinks in the reopening plan and when you are ready, things will be moving smoothly. If your anxiety becomes more intense as we open up and you feel paralyzed by it, then it is time to call a mental health professional and your doctor about the possibility of medication. My experience is that the sooner an intervention is done, the quicker a person will return to a more normal level of anxiety. As you reintroduce things into your normal routine, it may also be the time to take stock and throw out some things you thought you had to do for the sake of your own sanity. I am hoping that our youth have learned that they do not have to have every hour of their day scheduled and that being out every night is not healthy. I am praying that families have found each other again (or for the first time) and will continue to put that ahead of multiple sports, unrealistic self-imposed work expectations and other practices. If youth and adults have recaptured the ability to use their imaginations again, then our world will be a far better place in spite of COVID. As we reopen up and move from crisis to coping, we need to ask ourselves what are the lessons I have learned and what will I do to make my life healthy, mentally and spiritually.

The final thing is to keep things in perspective. It seems that we are so divided these days, people’s reactivity is high and our country is in a space we thought we were immune from. We may not be able to control a virus, but we can control our own prejudice and racism. We can stand in solidarity with the world community, especially our African American brothers and sisters, but choose to do this in a nonviolent way. Those of us who are white need to confront our white privilege. I may not be able to change the color of my skin, but I can change how I think about others. This is the Gospel mandate. Perspective in life is very important to our mental health right now. We need to incorporate the reality of COVID into our lives, but we also need to deal with issues that are more systemic in our society. Prejudice and racism, violence and hatred, sexism and homophobia pre-existed the virus, but are even more deadly to our society and have no place in the Kingdom of God. It is entirely possible that as we grow used to the virus and pray for a cure; we can also pray for a cure to these societal ills that are not caused by something we see, but by attitudes we can change. We don’t need a vaccine for that; we need to put on Jesus and see him in every living person, no matter who they are.

I am not sure if this will be the last installment of this series. My own thought is to keep writing not about a virus, but how to deal with the deeper issues that seem to have surfaced in spite of our fears and anxieties about a virus. With the one, we have to wait and see; the other we have control over. My thought: let’s do what we can do to change our society and let the researchers deal with COVID.

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