

Finding joy and peace in a challenging Advent season

This is Part 8 in an ongoing series of managing stress and anxiety during difficult times.

By Rev. Thomas E. Konopka, LCSW

We are approaching one of the happiest and cheerful times of the year. Usually, the stores are getting overcrowded, and people are strategizing Black Friday and practicing self-defense skills so they don't get hurt in the mad dash to the stores; traffic gets a little crazy so we all have the opportunity to refresh our defensive driving skills; credit card companies are giving thanks because of the rise of income; the lilt of Christmas carols wafts in the air, and by December 24, we have had it and listen to hard rock to unclench our teeth.....oh wait, it is the feast of the birth of Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

I don't want to minimize the worries and concerns about COVID and the uptick in cases or the unrest in the country right now, but one way to cope with all this is not to lose a sense of perspective and a sense of humor.

Research has shown for many years that the holiday season is one of the most stressful times of the year. I purposefully used the word "holiday" because of the secularization of the season. Many people who have no faith in Jesus or have left the practice of formal religion have redefined the season. Have you ever seen the irony that the time of Advent and the Feast of Christmas is ours as Christians and, yet, it has become something devoid of the reason that we have Christmas? I believe that this maybe the year for us as Catholic Christians to lead the way in reclaiming the true meaning of this season and show others that we do not need to buy into the secular message. We can be witnesses to others that stress will not be the overarching feelings of the season, but joy.

It is known what stress can do to the human body. Without getting into all the dynamics of the flight, fight or freeze response, high levels of stress affect cardiac issues, create or exacerbate gastrointestinal issues, open the door or worsen symptoms of depression and anxiety or increase addictive behaviors, and the list goes on. So, how can we to cope better?

First, slow down! There is no rule that we need to run around hectic this time of year. That notion resides in the messages in our heads that we learned as children or adopted from our American culture. This part of our stress we can control. You may ask: What do I do if I slow down? What will people think if I do not put the tree up right after Thanksgiving? What if I don't get the perfect gift for my children or relatives? What will people think if I don't have my plastic smile on when I am feeling sad, angry, "not into it"? Here is the phrase to learn: Who cares! Other people probably do not ever notice, or they are caught up in the same negative thinking.

Second, spend that extra time in prayer. Learn how to do deep breathing (remember this from earlier articles) and center your breathing on the presence of the Lord. Then, take out the story of the Nativity and imagine you are at the manger and in the scene. What do you feel? What do you see? What are Mary and Joseph saying to you? You can spend the entire season of Advent in the scene and see what every person in the story has to say to you about how to live your life as a Christian. One other book of Scripture to use during Advent is the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. We read a good portion of Isaiah in the daily Lectionary and in the Sunday Lectionary. We are all looking for hope right now; the ancient words of the prophet are there waiting.

Third, go for a walk at night and look at the winter sky. Feel the cold on your face. Smell the smells of the night air. Hear the quiet of the dark and the crunch snow (if there is any). See the stars of the night sky. Think of the words of the chant: "Creator of the Star of the Night."

Finally, ask for the gift of perspective. Not being able to have the large feast and gatherings of Christmas is sad; but it is not the end of the world. After all, the One whose birth we celebrate was born in a smelly, dark cave. Perhaps we will not be able to spend the amount of money we think we are supposed to spend; but, the Jesus we celebrate told us that the poor are blessed. There is no law that we need to listen to Christmas music right after Thanksgiving; start a new trend and find some good Advent hymns.

You may all wonder what this has to do with coping with stress. Breathing is a sure way to reduce anxiety and stress levels and bring them to a normal range. Becoming aware of thinking patterns and the ability to see that they are not healthy will decrease our feelings of depression and sadness. Also, this will help someone become aware of triggers for addictive behaviors, anger, and other issues. To adopt a mindful approach enables a person to not worry about the future (anxiety) or get trapped into regrets about the past (depression). To strive to live in the present moment and process what happens in our lives in the present moment is a goal to strive for good mental health. Living an active spiritual life not only brings us closer to the Lord, but it also opens the door for healthier coping skills and better approaches to experience life no matter what happens.

So, we cannot control the fact that we will have to have COVID with us this Advent and Christmas. However, we do not need to allow it to be the unwelcome guest in our heads, thinking it will destroy Christmas. It may actually give us a gift: to strip away all that is not essential to the celebration of the Lord's birth and see Christmas for what it has always been — God's Love incarnate coming to set us free.

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