

Protecting your mental health during the outbreak

catholicmessenger.net/2020/03/protecting-your-mental-health-during-the-outbreak/

Mar 26,
2020

By Chris McCormick-Pries

Pandemic. Coronavirus. Self-isolation. COVID-19. Even saying these words triggers anxiety for many of us. We are inundated with information from broadcast networks, Facebook, other social media and the few face-to-face conversations we are having with acquaintances and friends. What should we listen to? What's important to be aware of? And how do we take care of ourselves and each other during times like this?

We human beings like certainty and predictability. It is in our hard wiring to want to know what is happening, when it is happening and to notice things that feel threatening to us. It is normal to feel stressed when we don't feel safe. We all are aware of the "flight or fight" response. While this reaction is intended to protect us, it can also cause all sorts of havoc when we sense uncertainty and conflicting information all around us.

I recently read a short article titled "Protecting Your Mental Health During the Coronavirus Outbreak" by Doreen Marshall Ph.D. I appreciated her words of wisdom and would like to share some of her thoughts with you.

We know a large part of our anxiety comes from the mistaken belief that we should be able to control what happens around us. But we know we can't. It seems we are all worried about COVID19, aka "coronavirus" and what we should or could be doing to protect ourselves and our families. This uncertainty leads to feelings of helplessness and further stress. When we feel frightened about a current event it sometimes brings up fears from the past or reminds us of times when we didn't feel safe and the immediate future was uncertain.

Often, we seek time to be together in church, increase our attendance at Mass and pray. With recent developments in our diocese and throughout the country, it seems even these ways to seek comfort are unavailable to us.



McCormick-Pries

It is no wonder then that our overall mental health can suffer. Sometimes, we are not aware that this is happening. We might feel more on edge than usual, angry, helpless or sad. We may be experiencing increased feelings of frustration with others or we might want to withdraw completely, avoiding any reminders of what is currently happening. For anybody already struggling with mental wellness, there might be deeper feelings of depression or less motivation to carry out daily activities.

I believe it's important to remember we are not helpless in light of these current news events. We always choose our response to the circumstances occurring around us. If you are struggling, here are some things you can do to take care of your mental health in the face of uncertainty.

Worship and prayer are still available to us, but perhaps in a different form. Daily Masses are available through websites, including Bishop (Robert) Barron's Word on Fire website (www.wordonfire.org/daily-mass) and Relevant Radio (103.1 or 95.3 FM Davenport). Rosaries, Chaplet of Divine Mercy and other prayers can be prayed alone or with family. God is always with us, and as Cardinal Timothy Dolan reminded us this week, we are one nation under God and we will get through this trial together

Separate what is in your control from what is not. Focus on the things that you can do. Wash your hands. Remind others to wash theirs. Take your vitamins and medicines as they are prescribed. Limit your consumption of news (do you really need to know what's happening on a cruise ship you aren't on?)

Do what helps you feel a sense of safety. Obviously, this is different for everyone and it is important not to compare yourself with others around you. Social distancing is important, but it needs to be reasonable. It's okay to reach out to others over the phone or to talk to your neighbor standing in the driveway. It is important, however, to make sure that you are using social distancing based on the potential for sickness versus isolating because it's part of depression.

Get outside in nature — even if you are avoiding crowds. CDC and other experts recommend getting outside, getting our dose of vitamin D, and looking at the beauty of nature. It gives us an opportunity to get fresh air and quality time with family members. Exercise also helps our physical and mental health.

Challenge yourself to stay in the present. Perhaps your worry is becoming increasingly difficult for you to manage and it is compounding. You're thinking about what is currently happening but also projecting "what if" into the future. When you find yourself worrying about something that hasn't happened, gently bring yourself back to the present moment. Notice the sights, sounds, tastes and other sensory experiences in your immediate moment and name them. Engaging in mindfulness activities is one way to help stay grounded when things feel beyond your control.

Stay connected and reach out if you need more support. Talk to a trusted friend about what you are feeling. If you are feeling particularly anxious or you are struggling with your mental health, it's okay to reach out to mental health professionals for support. Due to the circumstances of this pandemic, mental health professionals are able to offer both videoconferencing as well as telephone visits with individuals. You do not have to be alone with your worry and it can be comforting to share what you're experiencing with those trained to help.

Finally, remember, we are all in this together and help is available. Most communities have crisis lines available. In Eastern Iowa the regional toll-free crisis line is (888) 4300375. Most mental health providers and mental health centers continue to remain open and are available to offer assistance.

This crisis will not last forever, and we do have an opportunity to stop our busy lives and schedules and really ask ourselves what is most important. In a way, this is a time to rethink how we want to spend our time.

(Chris McCormick Pries ARNP, Clinical Director, Vera French Community Mental Health Center, Davenport, and a member of St. John Vianney Parish, Bettendorf).