



# COPING WITH THE CHALLENGES OF COVID19 AND THE PREVENTION OF MENTAL ILL-HEALTH

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**W**e are experiencing a global pandemic of Covid19 that has affected many people across the globe. It has brought with it dramatic changes in the way we live and do things. It has become a crisis that affects us not only physically but mentally as well and has taken a heavy toll on our mental health. In most countries, it has left some people with feelings of sadness as they grieve for their losses, feelings of helplessness, stress, anxiety and depression. Some are unable to cope with their daily activities and need help.

While we are informed on what to do to protect ourselves from being infected by the coronavirus and what to do when we have contracted it, we need to also know how to cope with the negative effects of the pandemic on our mental health so as to protect ourselves from more serious mental health challenges. In this article, we will look at how to cope with the challenges of Covid19 to prevent mental ill-health.

## ***What are the psychological effects of Covid19 and the lockdown?***

The following are some of the psychological effects of Covid19 and the lockdown.

- Feelings of uncertainty about the future as we do

not know when the pandemic will end and whether we will survive it or not. We do not know what will happen to our children if we die and also do not know when the economic state that is worsening day by day will improve. Some businesses have closed down, people have lost their jobs and some have to live on a reduced income.

- Feelings of helplessness as we cannot stop the coronavirus from spreading and we do not have the vaccine as yet. We also cannot stop some of its negative effects on us such as losing our loved ones and our jobs.

- Fear and worry about our own health and the health of our loved ones.

- Boredom because of the interruption in our daily activities and the extended time spent at home with limited resources.

- Feelings of loneliness due to prolonged social isolation because of the

lockdown and social distancing, quarantine and isolation as people recover from Covid19. Those in health facilities have been missing visitors to support them for fear of spreading the virus in such facilities. Some people are forced to work from home to limit the spread of the virus and therefore miss their colleagues. We are social beings and miss face to face interaction. Some studies have shown a link between social isolation and poor mental health.

- Feelings of anger, frustration and resentment if one or one's family member was exposed to the virus because of another person's negligence.

- Feelings of sadness due to a number of losses such as job loss, loss of freedom of movement, financial losses and loss of a loved one through death.

These feelings can increase one's stress levels and may result in anxiety and depression. Pandemics have been found to increase stress levels across populations and often lead to mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. It is therefore important to know how to cope with the challenges of Covid19 to reduce our stress levels.

## ***The body's reaction to fear and stress***

When stressed, fearful or anxious, our body responds by going into a fight or flight mode. When this happens, the body gets a flush of adrenalin to help us fight or run away. Quite often during a pandemic, our stress response physiology becomes over-activated by real or imagined threats and we find ourselves stuck on the fight or flight mode which leaves us overwhelmed most of the time. Signs of anxiety may show up such as the autonomic over-activity and motor tension which may involve a dry mouth, sweating, restlessness, tension headache, chest pain and an inability to relax or sleep well.

It is therefore important to learn how to cope with the stresses that accompany Covid19 and to grieve for our losses in healthy ways to prevent mental ill-health.

## ***How to cope with stress during the pandemic and lockdown***

- Daily study of the Bible and prayer.

- Maintain social contacts with family, friends, colleagues and members of your faith by phone, email and face book among others to minimise the negative effects of social isolation.



• Maintain a healthy life style. Get enough sleep, eat well, exercise, drink adequate water and avoid using any substance as a way of coping with stress. Also avoid processed food and a white variety such as white bread, white rice and white sugar. A healthy body is better equipped to cope with stress.

• Limit worry and fear by limiting the time you spend watching or listening to media coverage that is upsetting or anxiety provoking to you. However, stay informed by watching, listening or reading news on your terms.

• Give yourself a break from the constant stream of information and balance the time you spend on information related to Covid19 and other activities that are not related to it such as reading a good book or listening to music.

• Avoid unreliable sources of information. Try to get accurate and timely information regarding Covid19 from reliable sources such as the World Health Organisation.

• Get in touch with nature inside and outside the house. If it is inside the house, get pot plants or flowers and take care of them. You will probably feel more relaxed thereafter. House plants have been found to have a calming effect and can soothe your nervous system. Gardening as an outside activity has both physical and mental health benefits. Research shows that gardening helps to reduce anxiety levels and stress.

• Get outside in nature and walk around your neighbourhood. It helps to unwind and can distract you from negative thoughts. The sunshine and fresh air will do you good

• When you feel down, talk to people you trust or those facing the same challenges as yours to get support and emotionally process what you are going through.

Create and follow a daily routine. Get out of bed normal times, same time for meals, exercise and prayer. Maintaining a daily routine can help one to have a sense of order, purpose and control which may alleviate anxiety. It can also promote a sense of normality.

• Find creative things to do to keep you busy and lift your mood up.

• Try new things like learning a new language or preparing a new dish.

• De-stress with good and relaxing music. It has a direct effect on your nervous system. Classical music can help your body to calm down. Sooth yourself with a scent such as lavender, vanilla and jasmine.

They have a relaxing effect on the nervous system.

• Focus on what you can control and spend less time on those you cannot, or questions that cannot be answered. Resilient people do that.

• Cultivate an attitude of thanks giving. Thankfulness expands our happiness. Keep a gratitude journal to remind yourself of the goodness of the Lord. Remember 1 Thessalonians 5:18 which says: "In everything give thanks for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you".

• Practice mindfulness and shift your attention from the past or the future to the present moment. Focus your attention on your breath and body and allow your body and mind to find balance again.

• Be a positive thinker and look for positives in your stressful situation. You will find them if you look hard enough. Resilient people practice optimism.

### *How to grieve for your loss*

• When you are in pain, cry out to the Lord in prayer. He has promised never to leave you alone nor forsake you. David in Psalm 69:20 did cry out to Him when he was in distress and helpless.

• Draw comfort from your faith and believe that God is able to heal your broken heart.

• Focus on positives surrounding your loss. Let thorns alone and focus on the roses.

• Share your pain with others and get support from friends and family or join a support group.

• Develop a sense of humour. Laughter is a tranquiliser with no side effects.

• Cherish hope that something good is going to happen. Hope makes the present pain more bearable. Hope in God is a powerful tool for dealing with sadness and

depression that go with loss.

• Do something good to benefit others. It promotes healing.  
Seek professional help when overwhelmed by your emotions

As we try to cope with the challenges of Covid19 and the accompanying stress, we should remember that in John 16:33, Jesus promised us peace in Him for troubled times like the one we are in. He said to his disciples:

*"These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation; but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (KJV)*

Let us therefore come closer to Him to access the promised peace and be able to cope with the crisis of the pandemic.

