

Psyche & Soul 6

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING DURING COVID-19

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<https://anchor.fm/boscom/episodes/2-6-Psyche--Soul--We-need-to-reduce-stress-and-anxiety-19-ehqc7k>

Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha centre, Jeolikote, with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

This week end we shall focus on some protective measures against stress and anxiety during these Covid times.

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Ravi is a top level professional, admired not only for his innovative ideas but also for his genial personality and collegial style who has been forced by Covid -19 to work from home.

Few days ago Ravi emailed a close friend. "I am not the person I was. I don't know what is happening to me," he wrote. "I find myself getting irritated quite unnecessarily. I find fault with my wife and criticise her, which I had consciously avoided in the past. I even blame her family. Two days ago I shouted at my two children for silly things which made them cry. I am feeling ashamed of myself."

Covid -19 pandemic can be a stressful time for many. Ravi would not be alone in what he is experiencing. Uncertain times normally lead to stress and even to feeling overwhelmed. Loss of routine and structures that sustain daily rhythm, inability to connect with people, not being able to go out, having to work from home isolated from colleagues, loss of a sense of safety, worry about contacting the infection, or lack of access to hospital care for other illnesses, and need to be alert and cautious, and especially uncertainty and unpredictability about the future lead to high levels of anxiety.

During times such as this we can be overwhelmed not only by worry but also by other emotions such as fear, anger, hopelessness, sadness and grief. There can also be feelings of discouragement and being out of control. It is easy for the stressed-out mind to conjure up worst-case scenarios.

Relationship Strain

When we are deprived of social interaction with those other than we live with, there is increased potential for relational friction with those who are close by. When we do not have much to keep ourselves busy and occupied (or, preoccupied) as when deprived of the daily hassles of travel and work, we have ample time to notice negative features in those we live with which we may not have earlier. When this happens, our mind tends to go back over memory lane and pull up

more and more unpleasant situations and incidents involving the other. This can lead to bickering and recrimination that strain the relationship, leading to further emotional alienation.

Fear of Stigma

In case we had tested positive, there can be fear of social stigma. We fear that those who know of our condition are going to avoid us.

Increased Stress Levels

All this can lead to increased stress which in turn impairs our physical and emotional wellbeing.

The psychological effects have been already mentioned. Physical responses may include headache, stomach-upsets, muscle tension, fatigue and sleeplessness. It can also lead to poor cardiovascular function, and higher levels of blood pressure. It can aggravate existing ailments.

Stress increases the activity of genes involved in causing inflammation and decreases that of genes involved in antiviral responses, which is especially relevant in this time of Covid-19.

HELPFUL STRATEGIES

There are number of things we can do to stay healthy and happy during the pandemic.

Stay Positive: Fight Negativity

We need to make a special effort to weed out negativity and focus on the positive. Because persons can be high-strung during isolation, fault finding is easy. We need to consciously choose to focus on the positive, and look for opportunities to express appreciation. Blaming, accusations, fault-finding are especially hazardous during confinement.

Too much watching, reading or listening to news about COVID-19 can cause us to feel anxious or distressed. Seek information updates at specific times during the day-- once or twice would be enough.

In terms of fighting negativity it is helpful to look for reasons to be grateful. We cannot be grateful and negative at the same time. Gratitude has also many health benefits. The positivity that gratefulness creates boosts the immune system with resultant health benefits. Even during these difficult times there is so many things for which we can be thankful.

Writing a gratitude journal (listing the gifts and blessings) at the end of the day is a helpful exercise. We may even begin to see blessings in the pandemic itself, seeing opportunities where we were earlier only seeing obstacles.

1. Connect with Friends and Colleagues

Studies have shown that in times of social isolation, more than connection with our family members, what helps ward off loneliness is connection with our friends and colleagues. Hence keeping in contact with our friends and acquaintances outside immediate family is important. This can be done easily today through the means of communication available to us. An easy

topic for conversation with friends and colleagues is discussion on how we and others are facing this imposed isolation and how our lives and our work are affected by it.

2. Reach out to Help

Reaching out to help those in distress has personal benefits. There are so many ways we can do this. Helping others creates positive feelings in us and boosts our immune system, decreasing our vulnerability to illness. It is nature's way of rewarding our generosity.

3. Create a Pleasant Environment

Creating a pleasant environment in the space to which we are confined is especially important. We can do this first of all by avoiding negative and critical conversations. Planning and executing common activities (a celebratory event is especially helpful) brings joy and togetherness.

Busy parents who otherwise have not had enough time to spend with children are given a golden opportunity. Play with them, do fun things with them. Read stories to the very small children.

While doing things together is important, it is also helpful, even necessary, to create some personal space where we can be by ourselves do things undisturbed by others. The solitude that such personal spaces provide can also help us devote time and energy to projects we are interested in, but could not find time earlier.

A quiet space is especially important for us to engage in meditation, which is very helpful to reduce stress and anxiety and create positivity.

A clean environment matters. Studies have found that when we are surrounded by clutter, the visual chaos affects our brain. It gets in the way of our ability to process information. Research has also shown a cluttered home environment increases the levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

The way we dress also has an impact on our feeling of wellbeing. Since we do not need to go outside or work in an office, we might tend to be too casual or even shabby in our dress. Dressing up, as though we were going to office or visiting friends, will put us in better frame of mind and energize us.

4. Fight Boredom

Reduced activity caused by absence from our place of work and the hassles of travel leaves time on our hands. Not knowing how to utilize it can lead to boredom and irritation.

Having a structure helps. Create a schedule for various activities and stick to it. Go to sleep and get up (even if we choose to sleep longer) at the same time every day.

5. Exercise and Relaxation

Physical activity improves overall health, reduces risk of diseases, and can make us feel better and function better.

Exercise energizes mind and body, reduces anxiety and increases feelings of wellbeing. Even short spells of physical activity are beneficial.

Even though outdoors are the best for exercise, it can also be done with great benefit within the narrow space to which we might be confined during the lockdown. Yoga, qigong, tai-chi, and simple aerobics, besides beating boredom, help stimulate and strengthen the immune system. Acupressure - rubbing or tapping some specific pressure points in the body helps release tension, lessen anxiety and improve blood flow.

Dancing is another way to exercise. It relaxes body and mind and creates a good mood.

Listening to music has a calming effect on the nerves. So, pull out our favourite music CDs, plug in the head-phones (not to disturb others around) and let the music flow.

Tending to plants is another stress reliever. Some of us may have potted plants inside the room. Some may be even more fortunate and have a garden to tend.

Settling comfortably with a favourite book can be both exciting and relaxing. It can also promote mental wellbeing. Studies have linked reading to improvements in depression symptoms, as well as mental flexibility and brain function.

6. Surrender

There are many things over which we have no control. We do not know how things are going to be. Worrying about things over which we have no control is a futile and useless activity, which only increases our stress levels.

In this context surrendering in faith to a God who loves and cares for us can relieve stress and anxiety. The Prophet Isaiah reminds us of God's protective presence during difficult times. He says:

Fear not...

When you pass through the waters I will be with you;

And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

When you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

And the flames shall not consume you....

Because you are precious in my eyes, ... and I love you.

Fear not I am with you." (43, 3-5)

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What do these words of Isaiah evoke in us as we struggle with our anxieties and fears? How do they move us? What are the feelings rising to surface as we stay with these words and images?.....

As we conclude, we could imagine God being with us, and place ourselves in the caring and protective arms of God and enjoy for a while the security and comfort this provides.

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Have a pleasant weekend, feeling safe and secure in the arms of God. Stay Safe. Stay Blessed.
Bye for now.