

Psyche Soul - 7

COPING WITH STRESS AND ANXIETY DURING COVID – Physical, mental and Spiritual strategies

Jose Parappully, PhD

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See also: <http://pojose.blogspot.com/>

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

Last weekend we focused on self-care during Covid 19. This weekend we shall focus specifically on the stress and anxiety related to Covid, and the physical, mental and spiritual strategies that can help us cope with them.

With the growing data emerging on the lasting physical, mental and emotional consequences of Covid, it is likely that our stress and anxiety levels would be rising higher and higher. The prolonged exposure to stress arising from the crisis is likely to have insidious long-term health effects including increased risk of physical (e.g., respiratory, cardio-vascular, neurological, reproductive) and mental (e.g., depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress, impaired cognitive function) disorders. These effects are likely to remain long after the pandemic ends and the lockdown measures lifted.

At the core of all these conditions lies elements of one of the most basic and primal human emotions--fear. In the case of the COVID pandemic, this fear is inextricably tied to feelings of helplessness and the loss of a fundamental sense of safety, security, financial stability, and the ability to envision a brighter future. Fear of infection in the presence of others, of contact with contaminated surfaces, and of passing too close to another human being evokes an increasingly familiar mistrust of others, avoidance, and withdrawal from everyday activities, thereby shrinking and constraining opportunities for essential human contact and social support, vitally necessary for adaptive functioning. All this leads to increasing levels of stress and anxiety.

There are specific physical, mental and spiritual strategies we can use to cope with this rising stress and anxiety.

Physical Approach

Healing Through Breath

From ancient times breath has been used as a powerful tool for calming oneself. Doing some mindful (slow, focused) breathing affects our parasympathetic nervous system and calms us down and makes us feel more in control.

Abdominal, deep breathing is especially helpful. We take in the breath through our nostrils, hold it for a few seconds, and breathe out through our mouth. Make the exhale, that is, out-breath much longer

than the inhale, the in-breath. Pay attention to the pause between the exhale and the inhale. Try to empty out the breath completely in the exhalation before inhaling again. Rounding our lips to create very small opening through which to exhale makes the exercise even more beneficial. After a while notice how the breathing is affecting our body and mind. Stay for a while with whatever we are experiencing.

This form of breathing can be done often particular when we are feeling overwhelmed.

Mental Approach

Cognitive Reframing

Our beliefs about Covid and its effects play an important role on our capacity to cope effectively with stress and mitigate its maladaptive outcomes. Many models of stress suggest that stress appraisals and mindsets are central to determining whether our responses to stressors are adaptive or maladaptive. When we appraise the stress situation as challenging, that is, offering opportunities for growth, as opposed to threatening, we are able to cope more effectively. This approach is particularly effective in contexts where the source of stress cannot be avoided, as in the case of Covid. So, reframing our beliefs and attitudes, seeing opportunities in the Covid pandemic rather than dangers, will reduce our stress levels and help us cope better.

Are you experiencing the Covid situation as threatening or challenging? What opportunities can you find in the Covid lockdown?

Spiritual Approaches

Healing Through Meditation and Prayer

Meditation and contemplative prayer have a calming effect on us and can heal us. The simplest and easiest, and yet a very effective form of meditation, is to simply sit quietly and focus on our breath. We don't need to do any kind of deep or slow breathing. Simply be aware of our breath and the breath will do what it needs to do. When our mind wanders away from the focus on breath we gently return to it and keep returning. This will calm us down, relax and refresh us. Doing it even for short spells during the day, will reduce our anxieties and depressive feelings.

We can also turn this simple meditation into a prayer. Instead of focusing on our breath, we focus on the Divine (whichever way we understand it) dwelling within us. We simply sit in the loving awareness of this Divine presence within us. When our mind wanders away, we gently return to the loving awareness of the Divine within us, and keep doing this over and over again as distractions are inevitable. Thinking of a simple monosyllabic word that has for us some association to the Divine (like the name we give it, or words like love, joy, peace etc.) can serve as a vehicle that takes us back into the loving awareness of the Divine. The deep relaxation this attention creates combined with the experience of the unconditionally loving divine presence, can activate healing mechanisms within us.

Loving Kindness Meditation

Loving Kindness Meditation is a technique used to increase feelings of warmth and caring for self and others. It consists of turning positive emotions (e.g., love, warmth, compassion) towards oneself, loved ones, other humans, and ultimately to all living beings. During Loving Kindness Meditation, we sit quietly with eyes closed, focus on our heart, think about a person who loves us very much being near us and

experience that person's love filling our heart with warmth. We now think of more and more such loving people around us sending us love and warmth. We feel our heart filling and overflowing with this love. We now send this love to people whom we know and love, and gradually to people all over the world and then to all living creatures in the universe, wishing them health, happiness and wellbeing. We remain in this experience of receiving and giving love for a while, and take a few slow breaths before we open our eyes.

Doing the Loving Kindness Meditation, even for short periods, is a useful tool during the COVID pandemic and other stressful times because of its many psychological and spiritual benefits. It relieves self-pity, soothes fear and anxiety, reduces depression, dissolves anger, and negates feelings of isolation and aloneness in coping with adversity. It enhances positive emotions such as love, warmth, empathy, joy, gratitude, hope and positive feelings toward others. Loving Kindness Meditation enables us to remain calm and peaceful not only when we engage in it, but throughout the day. The overall effect is increase in our emotional wellbeing and overall life satisfaction.

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Being with Jesus: Loved and Loving

These physical, mental and spiritual strategies have been practised by Jesus of Nazareth in his healing ministry. He reached out and touched people, he breathed on them wishing them peace. He invited people to reframe their beliefs and attitudes. He loved people and invited them to abide in his love as he abides in his Father's love. He exhorted them to reach out in love to others just as he reached out to them in love....

Whether we practise the healing tools presented in this podcast or not, we can focus on the presence of this loving and compassionate Jesus with us, reaching out to us in love, embracing us warmly and filling our heart with love and compassion. We can then visualize ourselves reaching out to others with love and compassion, thus filling the universe with healing energies, which can also positively affect those infected by Covid and bring them healing and peace.....

Have a pleasant and love-filled weekend. Bye for now.