

Covid-19: The Impact of Isolation and Confinement on Religious Communities

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The Holy One has tended us from our youth, was our healer when we did not even know it, is present with us still and will not let trials and tribulations consume us. Hosea

Introduction: About Covid-19 – What we know today about this novel virus

Coping with Covid-19

Adapting to a new way of life has been difficult for each of us, with the severity of impact differing for each individual. Educating members about what to expect and affirming their experience can help them feel connected to others, not so alone, and willing to be with and share their experience.

- **Panic and fear:** frequent first reactions
- **Denial:** used to buffer the intensity of the uncertainty and fear; related to **an unrealistic optimism bias, a sense of invulnerability** and an avoidance of difficult feelings
- **Caution fatigue:** a mix of isolation, disrupted routines, stress and anxiety leave us drained and may lead to a gradual decline in safety behaviors growing lax about self-care and care of others
- **Confusion:** comes with conflicting or evolving information from different sources and/or distrust of leaders
- **Loss, Sadness and Grief:** we are coping with a number of different kinds of loss and grief (personal and communal): loss of life we knew, of structure, of a relational life, of touch and ritual and **anticipatory grief:** what the future holds is uncertain
- **Loneliness:** a subjective emotion of feeling alone, a lack of connectedness, often experienced as a feeling of anxiety and dissatisfaction with daily life; this chronic heightened stress response can negatively affect mental health and well-being – leading to depression, cognitive decline, dementia, worsening diabetes control, heart disease, negative impact on the immune system and self-neglect
This is compounded by other causes of loneliness that accompany advanced age and need to be understood and addressed: life changes, physical changes including changes to sight, hearing and stamina, and the loss of significant relationships.
- **Anxiety:** is a feeling of dread, agitation, or foreboding associated with a danger that is anticipated; it keeps you on high alert and at its core is the belief that you will not be OK and are not safe physically, emotionally or spiritually;

Some common manifestations of anxiety include: intrusive thoughts/worry, somatic symptoms/physical symptoms, nighttime anxiety and behavioral symptoms

- **Anger, irritability and frustration:** can be reactions to stress and healthy ways of coping with stress may be absent; these emotions can also be a way of avoiding challenging feelings like sadness, grief and anxiety.
- **Action:** this differs with generations and other personal experiences

For Members Recovering from Covid-19

In addition to the coping strategies just described, members recovering from C-19 may experience a lingering impact of the virus, including delirium, brain fog, short term memory issues, difficulty reading and writing as well as continued muscle pain.

A pause for reflection:

- **What was helpful for you to hear?**
- **What conversations do you want to engage in as follow-up? With whom?**
- **What are some possible next steps for you, your co-workers and your members?**

Leadership in a Time of Crisis

These are some of the particular challenges with Covid-19: keeping the community safe and informed with trustworthy information, learning how to restart daily life, dealing with economic disruptions and challenges, managing the secondary effects of social distancing and/or quarantine. Ultimately, leaders are called to the larger questions of how this is a time of change, redirection, letting go and opportunity and to rediscover purpose, both for individual members and for the community.

It is important for leaders to understand what is needed and to effectively respond in these core areas:

1. **Clear and Trustworthy Communication:** this is the most essential element in crisis leadership; communication needs to be transparent, honest and delivered empathically; this includes listening to stories, asking and understanding others' questions, delivering "bad" news if needed, being transparent (not withholding) with information, providing sufficient data, being vulnerable and humble, able to reassure by empathic communication and if appropriate engage the media
2. **Readiness and Presencing**

A leader's job is to be ready – to know yourself and to know your members and co-workers and how both to get and give solid information to them.

- Realize that it is not just up to you – learning how to be a host, not a hero – able to work collaboratively and empower ALL – both your co-workers and your members
- Be about self-care: everyday **CHOOSE to MOVE, NOURTISH,CONNECT, BE**
- Manage your internal experience first before trying to assist others; Ask yourself: what helps me to know my emotional responses? How are my emotions influencing decision making (e.g., fear and need for control; how fear limits my ability to develop creative solutions or risk); know what helps you stay grounded
- Have a learning mindset: see this crisis as an opportunity for you and co-workers and the community to grow – to see opportunity not just problems; crises push us in ways that we don't normally get pushed and can help us discover strengths and abilities undiscovered
- Be able to admit mistakes and learn from their mistakes
- Learn how to support the people you lead by being present and listening to them – to what they say and how they feel – even if unexpressed verbally
- Assist each member to create a reasonable, flexible structure to replace what is no longer (this includes you); structure helps alleviate anxiety by offering choice
- Lead with compassion not for compliance; following mitigating procedures (distancing, masks, hand washing) is critical for all involved to provide safety. The question is how best to motivate others to adapt, develop, persevere and perform what is needed to promote safety and well-being.

Leading for compliance aims at getting a person to comply to external standards – how they should behave. This often does not work in periods of distress and volatility and can lead to negative consequences: defensiveness, being closed down emotionally, cognitively and physically

Leading with compassion helps others to uncover or discover their own ideas, feelings, hopes, desires and is more supportive of their efforts to adapt and change; this requires vulnerable truth telling, suspending judgments and affirming efforts as well as genuine expressions of gratitude

Leading With Compassion*

REACH is a mnemonic which will help us remember the steps for leading with compassion:

Resonance: the goal is to create supportive, trusting positive relationships –

focusing on the other, not yourself; reach out, connect with others' thoughts, feelings and experience – don't assume you know; make room for their story

Empathy: shift from wanting to be understood to wanting to understand; put yourself in their shoes –hear what they are asking; members and co-workers have something to teach us

Perspective getting - asking/inquiring not perspective taking – imagining or thinking you know what it is like.

Awareness: self-awareness: be in touch with your mindset, your emotions and the impact on others – remembering that your feelings are contagious; know how to soothe and relax so you are able to respond and not react; lead with a calming presence

Compassion: to be compassionate is to feel with by focusing on the other, their needs and responding in meaningful ways; the emphasis here is on caring, warmth and tenderness

Hope: is reality based, envisioning a better desired future and; hope can only happen with **connection** to others (not isolation), a realization that I have **choices**, knowing how to **care for self** and reduce stress and anxiety and **relying on a benevolent, caring faithful God**.

Humor: decreases stress and increases satisfaction; it helps us to have a productive exchange and helps everyone realize that it is not the end of the world and **together** we can do this.

*Adapted in part from Oosten, Smith & Boyatzis, **Helping People Change**, Harvard Business Review Press, 2019.

Coming to Terms with a New Normal and Transformation

Crisis is often a “wake-up call, a pattern interrupt, a time of change, redirection and a call to us ALL to rise above the noise, to see the bigger picture and to find higher meaning” (Sage Robbins). A call to let go and shift the focus from what you have lost to what is new and making a commitment to move on. Here is the **opportunity** to explore what the changes mean, what matters most, what you value and what is the opportunity here for you and for the community. Times of transition open us to transformation, and invite us, challenge us, to find **purpose** and **connection** once again. We will feel less oppressed because we are doing what matters – living our values, living our charism, being concerned for self and our dear neighbor.

“There is a feeling that at our present crossroads, we might not arrive at something better, unless we become better ourselves.”

David Whyte

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For continuing the journey:

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- **What conversations do you want to engage in as follow-up? With whom?**
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