



Returning to “Normal”

Managing Post-Pandemic Stress and Anxiety, and Grief with Students

As the world attempts to return to a pre-COVID-19 pandemic “normal” it is paramount to note that collectivity we have all experienced several traumatic events over the last year. Though these traumatic events are collectively experienced, the impact they have had on individuals is unique and specific to each person and family. This calls for extra care by care providers in addressing the needs of individuals as well as being aware of the overlapping natures of these collective traumas. For this Quick Sheet, the COVID-19 pandemic will be the primary traumatic event addressed.

As campuses, offices, and public spaces begin to open back up and restrictions ease the experiences and emotions students are feeling will vary. Some will be elated and hopeful for life to return to “normal,” and be able to do the typical college life activities. Others may be experiencing anxiety and stress as they attempt to go back to pre-pandemic life routines. Some students will also be looking to make up for lost time and dive headlong into activities or behaviors they were unable to engage in or believe to mark “the typical” college experience. The fears of contracting the virus which previously motivated precautionary behaviors may linger with some student, and there may be increased stress surrounding social interactions as a result. Some students and young adults may also be experiencing varying degrees of grief over events and life milestones that were missed or adapted (i.e. graduations, prom, a “normal” freshmen year of college, etc.) due to the pandemic. For individuals who contracted the COVID-19 virus, the stress related to the unknown long-term physical health implications and ongoing health concerns may pose both unique physiological and emotional challenges. The COVID-19 variants that continue to emerge, as well as the variety of state and local responses to the continuing pandemic will also spark a variety of emotional responses, anxiety, and stress.

Being that care givers are not exempt from these feelings, it is important for them to attend to their own emotional and spiritual wellbeing by acknowledging where they are with the pandemic and life returning to “normal,” setting firm boundaries in response to where they are and using the spiritual and emotional practices that have sustained them through the past year, while also staying open to new possibilities.

Practical Aids and Strategies

Having several practical aids and strategies helps provide a sense of empowerment, a lifeline to reach for, and/or daily practices that help both our students and us work through what we are experiencing as we return to “normal”. Not all of these will “fit” for each person, yet there are some that we should all consider prioritizing. These practical aids and strategies are divided into four categories: *Physical Well-Being*, *Individual Reflective Practices*, *Connecting with Others*, *Attentiveness and Creativity*.

Physical Well-Being

- *Attend To What And How You Are Eating And Drinking.* Eating a well-rounded diet with whole foods, a lot of vegetables and fruits, as well as whole grains, is good for a healthy body and mind. Avoid or limit *junk food* consumption. Also, limit alcohol and excessive caffeine intake. Caffeine tends to exacerbate anxiety, and alcohol masks or suppresses important feelings and affective responses.

- *For community events where meals are served, consider having a variety of fruits and vegetables on the menu.*
- **Get Enough Sleep.** Our bodies need rest to recharge and reset. Generally, enough sleep is considered to be between 7 and 9 hours. Not getting enough sleep may negatively affect our mental and emotional functioning. (See [“Sleep and Mental Health”](#))
- **Exercise.** Physical exercise is one way to release emotional energy related to grief as well as a major stress reducer. Accompanying regular exercise (45-60 minutes of anaerobic activity 3 or more times a week) is your body releasing stress-reducing hormones and increases overall physical health.
- **Spend Time In Nature.** A walk out in nature not only provides a time of physical activity and enjoyment of God’s creation, but it has also been shown to lower stress, decrease blood pressure, improve heart health, and lowering cortisol levels (a natural-occurring steroid in the body that impacts the body’s stress responses). A walk in a forest is not possible, tending a garden or house plants, or walking through an urban park also can help us find a sense of calm. (see [“Take a Walk in the Woods: Doctor’s Orders”](#) for more info).
 - *A group hike in a local state park or greenspace on a weekend is a way to both get outside and exercise as well as engage as a community.*

Individual Reflective Practices

- **Practice Mindfulness.** In a highly stressful situation or when your anxiety feels high the idea of meditating seems impossible. Yet engaging in a practice of mindfulness meditation may help your body manage these situations through focused deep breathing and centering practices. Research has shown those who engage in regular mindfulness practices report decreases in anxiety, and depression, and lower physical pain scores. Apps such as [Calm](#), [HeadSpace](#), [Insight Timer](#), or [UCLA Mindful](#) are accessible and offer a good entry point to beginners and experienced mediators. (see [“The benefits of meditation and mindfulness practices during times of crisis such as COVID-19”](#)).
 - *Christian practices of Lectio Divina and the Daily Office offer a spiritual/faith practice with similar benefits to mindfulness meditation.*
- **Journal.** Writing out what you are feeling, thinking and your prayers is a means to both process what you are feeling and to record the progress in grieving or managing your stress and anxiety. Journaling is also a wonderful way to get your thought out of your head, slow down, and subsequently reflect on your thoughts and feelings. (see [“Mental Health Benefits of Journaling”](#))
- **Practice Spiritual Disciplines.** Daily prayer, devotional time, and listening to religious music nurture our spiritual lives, and in times of high stress and grief help to ground these experiences within our faith. (see [“Grieving and Complaining in Prayers Can Help Prevent Spiritual Stagnation”](#))
- **Spending Time with Pets.** Not only does caring for another living being help maintain a connection to something outside of ourselves, but a pet offering unconditional love and comforting presence helps us cope with grief. If you do not have a pet or access to a friend who has, you can volunteer to walk dogs or help socialize kittens at an animal shelter.
- **Do Things You Enjoy Doing.** Making sure you are setting aside time for activities you enjoy doing. Activities such as reading, watching a tv show or movie, listening to music, or having a dance party can help you to feel rested and happy. This is another form of Sabbath-keeping.
 - *Game nights, movie nights, going to sporting events (as you are able and is considered safe), or simply having a relaxing time with a group of students allows for unstructured times of fun and laughter with significant mental health benefits.*

Connecting with Others

- **Set and Maintain Reasonable Boundaries.** Being honest about how you are feeling and the limits of what you can do and what you feel comfortable with are important for navigating life outside of one’s COVID-Safe bubble. Being able to return to normal at your pace and name when and where you don’t feel comfortable returning to in-person gatherings. With grieving, being able to name for yourself and others when you don’t have the emotional energy for gatherings with others. Helping students set and maintain reasonable boundaries can go a long way in easing stress. (See [“6 Steps to Setting Boundaries in Relationships”](#))

- *Remain or Re-engage In Relationships With Friends.* Human beings are by nature relational beings. This is modeled for us in the doctrine of the Trinity, in which God is understood as existing in and through a relationship with each divine person. Maintaining connections with friends and peers helps us to remain connected and engaged, as well as provide space to share our feelings, be cared for as well care for others.
- *Join A Support Group Or Social Group.* Getting involved with a group helps to expand your social circle and doing things that break up your normal routines. In the case of grief support groups, being around others who are grieving and can share in your experience can be healing.
 - *During weekly gatherings as a community, time can be given where individuals can share about what they are experiencing or feeling to further connect with each other and provide a safe space to talk. Do limit the duration of this and attend to when a student needs to be referred to a professional.*

Attentiveness and Creativity

- *Pay Attention To The Sources And Amount of Media You Are Taking In.* Having endless access to information at all times has the potential to inform as well as to overwhelm with information, variety of views, and options. Limiting our media intake and engaging with reputable sources will allow for a sense of remaining connected with what is occurring, but not feeling inundated with the vastness of material and information covering the various pandemics and issues in our current cultural landscape. (see “[Associations Between Media Exposure and Mental Distress Among U.S. Adults at the Beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)”)
- *Do Something Creative.* Marking art, crafting, coding, playing music, drawing or doodling, coloring, or anything that you understand as a creative expression can contribute positively to our mental health. Not only does creative expression provide us with an opportunity to express intense emotions, but it also encourages our brains to enter into a time of concentration and focus. This allows our brains to slow down, thoughts are better able to coalesce without judgment, and large quantities of pleasure and satisfaction neurochemicals are released into our systems. The benefits of engaging in creative expression are similar to mindfulness practices. (see “[Flow States and Creativity](#)”)
 - *Having coloring sheets, blank paper, colored pencils, markers, or other mediums of expression available to students during gatherings or around your ministry space encourages and allows for creativity to find expression.*

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