

Resources for Churches...

Responding to the Coronavirus

Why are we feeling this way?

Last week I asked our church members to sum up in three words how they are feeling in this strange, new coronavirus dominated world. It was a way of helping you begin to find words to express something of the turmoil of emotions you are experiencing just now. The prayer written using them expressed a range of feelings – bewilderment, confusion, annoyance, anxiety, fear, to name but a few. Everyone's response was different and hardly any words were duplicated, although some were fairly similar. If we are to stay healthy in mind as well as in body over the next few months, it is important that we have a measure of understanding of why we are reacting in the way we are and what we can do to make sure that we are not taken over by prolonged feelings of anxiety or distress.

One of the words I put in myself that you didn't suggest, was the word grief (the prayer was 'come to be with us in our grief for the normality we have lost'). Although you may not have thought of it in this way, many of the feelings you described are those which arise from grieving. Grief is our natural response to loss of any kind, real or anticipated. The discomfort and disorientation we are feeling is the result of having suddenly lost so much of what we have taken for granted in our lives – we have lost a sense of what is normal; the freedom to do as we please; the ability to be with, touch and hold our loved ones, family and friends; the sense that we live in an essentially safe part of the world; the ability to travel, to go to work, to have a steady income, to be able to pay our bills and to buy toilet rolls when we need them (!) to name but a few things. And we have lost that sense that we can control our lives.

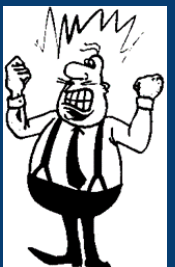
I expect most of us have experienced the death of loved ones at some stage during our lives. If we think about how we felt at that time perhaps we can see similarities with what we are feeling right now. And just as we all react in our own way when we are bereaved, so now we are all responding differently and feeling different things. We may have cried or felt angry or fearful or we may still be feeling numb and lost and confused; we may be feeling disturbed and unsettled or we may have a sense of calm and peace. And we may find ourselves lurching from one to the other – whatever way grief affects us it is never neat or according to a standard, logical order or pattern.

However, although we all experience grief in our own unique way, our varied reactions can be seen to fit a number of groups of emotions, sometimes referred to as 'stages of grief' which are common to many of us. If you read the following brief descriptions of what these are, it might help you understand a little more about the mixture of emotions you have, which are so difficult to put into words. These groupings are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.



Denial – in any form of loss – death, divorce, job loss, terminal diagnosis – there can often be a period of pretending it is not happening. This is our mind's way of buying time in order to process the news and numbing us to the severity of the situation – a coping mechanism. So we may feel all of a blur, or be saying to ourselves this virus won't affect us, we'll be ok (as we saw some world leaders doing for a while) or perhaps that it's all a fuss about nothing.

Anger – when our emotions do rise to the surface many of us may find ourselves feeling angry, bitter or resentful. When bereaved, we might feel angry at the person who has died and left us in a mess, or at the hospital for not being able to save their lives, or at other members of our family for the way they have responded. Our anger is not usually rational – finding someone or something else to blame is our way of masking the pain we are not yet ready to face. At the moment we may be feeling angry with the government for taking away our freedom, cross with our family for not being there for us, annoyed with the general public for panic buying, or angry at people who refuse to socially distance themselves.



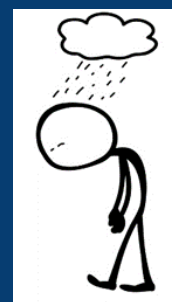
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Bargaining – as some of us expressed in our three words, we may be feeling helpless and vulnerable. This causes us subconsciously to look for ways to regain the control we have lost or to influence the outcome in some way. It is where all those ‘if only’s’ come from – if only I had called round that night they wouldn’t have died, if only I hadn’t spent so much time at work he wouldn’t have left me, etc. We can end up feeling guilty about losses which are not our fault. It is often easier to blame ourselves rather than someone else. Placing ourselves back in the past and trying to find a way to avoid our loss is our means of putting off our hurt and sorrow for another day. Today, we may find ourselves thinking things like: if only lockdown had happened sooner the virus wouldn’t have spread so quickly, or if I wash my letter box thirty times a day I will stay safe, won’t I?

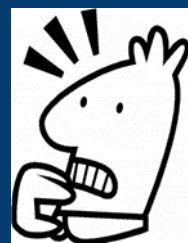
Depression – this is the stage where we stop trying to ‘do something’. We begin to face up to our loss and feelings of sadness more. This is when some people withdraw themselves from others in order to more fully cope, and when others feel in a fog or totally confused. It is when we feel we are nothing without the person we have lost, or when we question the point of going on, etc. We may feel completely overwhelmed. These are normal, appropriate feelings which only become concerning if we find ourselves stuck in these feelings and unable to move on. In today’s situation, we may be feeling ‘I don’t know when it will all end’ or ‘I don’t think we will ever be the same again’.



Acceptance – this doesn’t mean you are happy or that you have moved on, rather that you have faced up to how things are and understand what it means in your life at this time. We may be thinking very differently about life because of what has happened. When we are bereaved it is the stage at which we are able to say we have been fortunate to have had that person in our lives and treasure our memories of them; that although we know there will be bad days, there will also be good ones. In terms of adjusting to our coronavirus afflicted world, it is where we are able to say: this is happening, I can deal with each day as it comes, there are things I can control - wash my hands, be socially isolated and communicate remotely; I can support my friends, start a new knitting project, etc.

When we recognise what is behind some of the feelings we are experiencing, that can help us realise when we are avoiding the pain and begin to face up to its reality. This in turn can help us to begin to work out how to accept the things we can’t change and what things we can do that are in our control.

However, there is an extra layer of grief we are feeling today which is different to that when we experience a loss, which is also going on for us today. It’s the sort of grief we can experience before the loss happens – an **anticipatory** sort of grief – such as the fear of losing a partner, parent or a job. We imagine that the bad thing will happen and what it will mean. We get pictures in our mind of future events and find ourselves thinking about the worst-case scenarios. This is why at the moment we find ourselves worrying about who will die, what will happen to our job, whether we will be able to make ends meet. Our grief is to do with the loss of a sense of being safe. If we leave this unchecked, we can begin to develop an unhealthy state of constant anxiety. But there are things we can do to help this, all designed to draw our mind back from the future into the present.



In my second letter I spoke about when we find ourselves in a negative thought trail, we can draw ourselves back to the present moment and focus our attention onto other things, things that we can control. There is a useful mnemonic that can help us with this: **APPLE** –

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Acknowledge – notice the negative thought or thoughts

Pause – stop and breathe instead of reacting with panic or worry

Pull back – remind yourself this is your anxious brain talking – that this thought or feeling is only a thought or feeling and not a statement of fact

Let go – tell yourself these thoughts or feelings will pass – you don't have to respond to them; you could imagine letting them go like a balloon which you watch floating away

Explore – think about the present moment in which all is well. Look around your room at what you can see; listen for the sounds around you, what you can touch and smell; notice the sound of your breathing and how it feels. Then go and do something that will take up your full attention.

There are also prayer exercises we can use.

Breathing prayer

Sit comfortably in a quiet place with your eyes closed. Breathe in through your nose for four seconds, noticing your chest expanding as you breathe in. Hold your breath for two seconds. Breathe out through your mouth for six seconds, noticing your body softening and relaxing as the breath leaves your body. Repeat this a few more times. Now add some words. Short phrases work best, such as:

Breathing in: Come Holy Spirit and Breathing out: Fill my heart.

or Breathing in: Lord Jesus Christ and Breathing out: Give me your peace

As you breathe in, imagine God's Spirit blowing into your soul like a wind; invite him to clear out all thoughts that don't reflect the truth and bring fresh inspiration to your mind. Imagine God pouring out his peace into the air for you to breathe into your soul and absorb. As you breathe out, imagine all that's unhealthy blowing out of your soul; imagine the stress you feel disappearing as God's Spirit works within you to transform you; imagine fear loosening its grip on you as you mentally turn away from it and toward God, who gives you true peace. Feel the relief of letting go of your worries, knowing that you can trust God to help with each of them. Rest assured that God hears your prayer and will answer it.

The Jesus Prayer

The Jesus Prayer is an ancient Christian contemplative prayer used in a variety of Christian denominations. It can help us focus our attention on God and become aware of his presence. It consists of a simple sentence:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.

Again, it can be used in conjunction with our breathing – pray 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God' slowly as you inhale, and 'have mercy on me, a sinner' slowly as you exhale.

The Ananias prayer of self-compassion

Pray the prayer that is based on the prayer of blessing that Ananias prays for Paul in Acts 9 and what Paul later said about this experience in his letters.

May the love of Christ take hold of me

May the light of Christ shine in my heart

May the love of Christ flow through me like a river

You can place your hand on your heart to pray this for yourself. You can also pray it for your family and friends, for strangers, for those in distress, for carers of the ill and anxious, and all the NHS and care professionals who are working so hard to bring healing and renew wellbeing at this time.

It may be that there will be harder times ahead before things get better, as the virus spreads even further. Acknowledging our fears and having things to help us move from worry into the present moment, onto good things (Phil 4:8) and into finding God's presence, will all help us face each day with hope and trust. As Paul writes in 1 Thess 4:18: 'Therefore encourage one another with these words'.