

Resources for Churches...

Responding to the Coronavirus

When it's ok not to be ok

One of the most useful messages psychologists are saying we need to hear during this time of pandemic is 'It's ok not to be ok'. Whether we are workers on the front line, parents busy trying to cope with life's changed demands, members of families of whom one or more members have died as a result of Covid-19, or simply people whose lives have been suddenly changed and restricted in all manner of ways we would never have dreamed possible, it is ok to be feeling not ok right now.

In speaking to one another, it is so easy just to say 'I'm fine'. I hear this a lot. In many ways this can be true: we are under less restriction, we have been able to get out and resume some 'normal' activities and we have been able to meet up with some of our families and friends. But it is also good to acknowledge the ways in which we are not fine. I have many friends across the UK who say they are struggling, despite everything on the surface being somewhat easier at the moment. They are saying things like

'Everything seems like wading through treacle'

'I have no energy'

'I've found myself wanting to scream'

'It feels as if this should be over by now and it isn't'

'It's just very hard'

I wonder if you can recognise any of these?

It is the idea that it feels as if this should really be over by now which essentially hits the nail on the head. When the village we lived in was severely flooded a few years ago, many residents whose lives weren't immediately devastated got stuck in and began to organise what was needed and felt energised by that. But they also found that when the hardship dragged on month after month it was harder to keep going. We can see something similar happening in the disaster we are facing. In the first few weeks we were kept busy trying to source toilet paper and hand sanitiser, figuring out how to live without pasta and flour, and working round not being able to get supermarket delivery slots and having no post. And we got stuck into trying to help and support those around us. Feeling that we were doing something to help others kept us going and gave us purpose. Experts would identify this as our in-built survival instinct, designed to help us deal with acutely stressful situations.

The difficulty we are facing now arises from the fact that pandemics are not like other natural disasters like floods or fires or tornadoes. It is not a case of something nasty happens and then the recovery phase begins. Pandemics stretch on indefinitely. They feel as if they should be over and they aren't. The energy we find from our survival instinct kicking in runs out and we find ourselves unable to renew it as the stressful situation is ongoing. That's why we end up feeling exhausted, unable to concentrate, struggling to work, feeling emotional and anxious, and thinking we should have adjusted by now. This isn't just us, this is normal.



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Whilst our heads may tell us we should be finding things easy by now and that there is no reason for us to be feeling like wrung out rags, we are dismissing the fact that so much of life is still far from 'normal'. Work patterns have shifted out of all recognition, schooling is still massively affected, and home and family life is still restricted and non-intuitive. Whenever before have we had to leave the house asking ourselves not only do we have our keys, but also do we have our mask?! The effect of this pandemic on all of us is still enormous, ongoing and evolving. It is normal to react to any such situation of such chronic stress and uncertainty to feel emotionally up and down, physically exhausted and mentally burnt out. It is ok not to be ok.

The reason it is so important for us to get our heads around the idea that it's ok not to be ok is that it is such a short step from feeling exhausted to feeling helpless and hopeless; that we are at the end of our tether, that we cannot go on, and that like Elijah in 1 Kings 19:4, we have had enough and want to die. How many of us are not admitting to others that that is how we feel at times? And how often have we heard on our visits to homes around the church that people have mentioned struggles with mental health? All of this is not us just being weak and inadequate, it is our having a normal response to an abnormal situation. And accepting that it is ok not to be ok is the first step in our being able to help one another through the next unpredictable and uncertain months.

Steps that can help us towards being ok:

1. Accept you are in a different situation

If we can accept that life is different at the moment, it will help us stop fighting against our new reality and pretending that we can simply carry in the same ways as before. Accepting things have changed gives us the mental space to be able to think more clearly, find new ways of coping and living, and forgive ourselves for not always dealing well with it all.

2. Expect less from yourself

Sometimes we are our own harshest critics. Accepting that life is as it is also means accepting that it is not possible for us to achieve what we are used to achieving nor to function in the ways we used to function. Everything demands more thought, more effort, more constant adjustment and is therefore more draining. We need to expect things to take longer, to get less done in a day than we once did and to give ourselves extra time for our energy levels to recover. We will need to allow more time to be in bed, to pause over a coffee or a meal, for quietness after a phone call or zoom meeting. And we will need to pay more attention to what kinds of activities give us new energy – walking, painting, reading, etc., what are the things that relax us most and what rhythms of life are of benefit so we can deliberately build them in to our new weekly routines.

3. Recognize the effects of loss

Many of the emotions we are going through at this time are all aspects of grief, borne out of the multiple losses we have experienced; loss of meeting with family and friends; of the freedom to come and go as we please; of the normal weekly routine of work, school, shopping, leisure; of the rituals of life's beginning and endings and other celebrations; of our usual support systems through church, clubs, workplaces, hospitals, etc. All such losses evoke feelings of disappointment, anger, grief, sadness, exhaustion, stress, fear, anxiety and all drain our capacity to cope with life's demands. Realising the see-sawing emotions we find ourselves experiencing (such as denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance) are recognised stages of grief can also help us accept what we are feeling as a normal response to loss.

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4. Adopt a different mindset

For the coming months we will be in circumstances that do not have a solution nor an imminent recovery phase. In any situation we are powerless to change, the only thing we can do to help ourselves cope is to change the way we think about it. Part of accepting 'it is what it is' is through recognising its many contradictions – that opposing ideas can both be true e.g. 'I feel fine and I feel rubbish'; 'this situation is awful for people and this situation is bringing out the best in people'; 'I'm very organised and I'm just going with the flow'; 'I'm a hard worker and I need more rest'.

5. Keep in touch with others

The most important thing we can do to help ourselves endure times of ongoing stress is to remain connected to people. Rather than withdrawing and hiding away, reaching out to others and exercising care does us good, even when we feel as if we have nothing to give. Showing concern and kindness helps us and helps others, particularly in situations where we are all in it together, and all feeling uncertain, helpless and anxious. We have no control over this pandemic as a whole, but this is one aspect of our lives over which we can still have control and draw strength and courage from.

6. Adopt healthy habits

When life is tough, forming habits that cultivate our resilience becomes even more important. Regular practices such as exercise, sleep, nutrition, prayer, Bible reading, reflection, self-compassion, connection with others, being grateful and saying 'no' are all essential in helping us develop a pattern of life which is sustainable rather than leading us downhill. Even making small adjustments and doing a little bit every day will be beneficial.

7. Find activities that fulfil you

Since many of our go-to self-care activities have been taken away for the time being, we have to find new things to bring us joy and life. Doing such things gives us a sense of control, keeps our minds in the present moment rather than worrying about the future, and brings us meaning and fulfilment. It might be treating ourselves to a take-away, learning a new skill, having a weekly online quiz night or even something ordinary like fixing a leaky tap or sorting out old photo albums. If it makes us feel good, that's enough.

None of these seven steps will be the solution on its own. However, aiming to work at incorporating elements of them all into how we live during the challenging times ahead has the potential to help us develop the inner strength and resources to get all through times when we're not ok, and to help others do the same. This can be a time when we learn how better to care for ourselves and one another. And looking to the future, we can also be considering how God might be using this time to reshape us into people who are equipped to help those in our community who need to know it is ok not to be ok, and how this might be reflected in our new church programme when we are able to reopen our building.