

A Therapeutic Response to the Coronavirus Crisis

“Tools for Remaining Calm but Aware”

While our nation has experienced health crises in the past, none seem to have created the levels of fear, anxiety, worry and even hysteria that the Coronavirus (Covid-19) has generated. As of the writing of this article, the stock market has experienced losses and volatility unequalled since the late 1980's, store shelves are often bare of many household items, national sports leagues have canceled their seasons, and universities, colleges and local schools have closed on-campus classes. Businesses are closing and where possible, asking employees to work from home, and travel has been drastically reduced. Many are feeling destabilized as their personal safety and financial future are threatened by either the virus itself, the social impact of the virus, or the result of public hysteria.



A careful understanding of your emotional and psychological history will serve you well in times like these.

You may find your own core psychological responses to previous stressors surfacing again during this crisis, and even growing worse. For example, if irrational fears are a common experience for you before a crisis, then in a crisis they could be much worse. If self-confidence and a healthy view of your self has been a struggle over the years, a crisis will erode confidence and create greater insecurity. Past experiences with grief and loss will surface as the crisis increases loss of control and death tolls rise.

A thoughtful plan to create self-awareness will be helpful as you navigate the days, weeks and months ahead. Through journaling or intentional contemplation stay in tune with what you are thinking, feeling and doing as it may have its origin more in past responses or public hysteria than actual relevant facts and experience.

Let me offer some helpful and very practical tools for how to remain calm but aware in this coronavirus crisis.

Avoid worst-case scenario thinking.

A common way many self-sabotage their resilience is to spin into worst-case scenario thinking. National and Local Cable News networks can exacerbate this thinking by a constant focus on the worst situations in the crisis and not balanced reporting of all the news and information available. A constant diet of emotionally charged news and information will not serve your emotional stability well. If your tendency is to spin events in your life as personal, pervasive and permanent, you will reduce your emotional resilience. While this crisis may be affecting you and your family, this crisis is not a personal attack on you, it is not everywhere in your life, and this crisis will end – it is not permanent.

Establish the reality of what you do and do not control.

Taking responsibility for something you do not control is a guaranteed case of worry and stress.

A Control Exercise - Take a sheet of paper and write “Coronavirus Crisis” at the top. Draw a line down the center and on one side list all the things you do not control about the crisis and on the other side, all the things you do control. You do not control what the virus does, who has the virus, how other people react to the public hysteria, or social and economic changes related to the crisis. But you do control your own emotional response to the

crisis, how you talk about the crisis with friends and family, how much time you devote to hearing about the crisis, and the specific decisions you make about your lifestyle in response to the crisis.

Let go of anything on your list you do not control by either handing it off to those who can control it, or by handing it off to your higher power, and focus the largest portion of your personal energy on those items you do control. This strengthens your sense of personal independence, responsibility and control.

Here are some things you do control:

- Limit your time watching cable news shows as the non-stop focus on emotionally powerful stories will increase worry, fear and anxiety. Do not leave these shows on in your home or office for hours at a time. Choose to educate yourself in small doses.
- Stay connected to friends and family who will help you sustain a healthy balanced view of current events, and not those who spin you into fear and anxiety. Avoid the inclination to isolate from all human contact. Be wise and balanced in how you stay connected using phone, texts, video calls and other safe methods to maintain significant relationships.
- Take personal precautions to be safe and healthy by washing your hands, avoiding large crowds, rescheduling travel, staying home when you are sick with symptoms, getting physical exercise, eating healthy meals, and spending time with your beloved pets and loved ones.
- Breathe deeply and intentionally, focusing on your breath flowing in and around your heart area. As you breathe a little slower than usual, focus your thoughts on images that inspire hope, laughter, joy, elements of life for which you are grateful, and in general, positive and healthy emotions. This simple exercise will regulate your autonomic nervous system and stop out of control emotions.



Move toward your faith and find calm by trusting in a power larger than you and me.

At its core spirituality is a way we attach meaning and purpose to the circumstances we experience every day. In order to do this, we look to a power greater than ourselves to help us answer difficult questions that arise in times of crisis. As a Christian, I find strength in knowing the God of the Bible is good, loves me unconditionally, and wants good things for me. I know that I am not alone, and that whatever happens to me, God will be there to go through it with me. We will all get through this together. You are not alone!

Karl Shackelford, MDiv, BCC
Counselor, Peaks & Creeks Life Development, Inc.

