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**Dealing with Anxiety during the Covid-19 Pandemic – some suggestions from Anglican Pastoral Care leaders.**

The current situation can fuel anxiety in a range of ways including concerns about health- our own and others, isolation, job security, difficult ethical decisions for some, overwork for some, lack of work for others, family issues and loss of routine to name a few. Linked to this we can have a sense of frustration with being stuck in the situation we are in.

Anxiety can manifest itself in an acute way in feeling overwhelmed and panic attacks and in more chronic ways, rumination (when thoughts go round and round in your head),tension, irritability, poor sleep.

The following suggestions are not magic solutions, but they may be of help to yourselves and those you minister to and with. They come from a range of sources including the Christian spiritual tradition.

**Background anxiety**:

***From the Christian tradition:***

*Use a prayer phrase.* Select a prayer phrase, maybe *My God and my all* (St Francis) or the Orthodox Church’s Jesus Prayer *Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner* (can be shortened to *Jesus mercy),* or *Maranatha* (Come Lord Jesus) or *Come Holy Spirit*. Sit comfortably but upright and close your eyes. Breathe deeply and centre yourself. Slowly say the phrase over a breath for example Jesus (as you inhale) mercy (as you exhale) and continue in this way for 5 to 20 minutes. If you get distracted into thoughts just note that and return to the prayer phrase.

Still yourself and be aware of your breathing then say out loud Be still and know that I am God…….Be still and know….. Be still…….. Be…….. between each phrase just stay with the awareness of your breath.

Some kind of regular contemplative practice can help open us more to God’s grace, still us and reduce anxiety. Christian contemplation/meditation has many parallels to mindfulness meditation. For more information see <https://contemplativeoutreachuk.com/> <https://www.johnmain.org/> <https://www.christianmeditation.org.uk/>

*Gratitude* This is very much part of the Christian tradition - “count your blessings”. Mindfulness books suggest keeping a gratitude diary. This is not a Monty Python like “Look on the bright side”! It is living with paradox: yes there is a whole pile of grim stuff around, but alongside that things to give thanks for and opportunities. Linked to this is the question: what is the gift of this time?

*Connecting with others in worship, study or prayer*

***More general ideas***

Keeping connected with family and friends. There are creative ideas for this in the anxiety workbook listed below.

Establish a rhythm/pattern in the day, and have a sense of what gives point and purpose. Maybe there are projects you can undertake.

*Get out!* Within Government social distancing guidelines get out for walks. Exercise and fresh air help, and you are allowed to drive short distances to go walking. Research indicates physical exercise reduces stress, anxiety and frustration.

*Don’t beat yourself up* if there are times of despondency, lack of motivation, anxiety and frustration, irritation with others, this is a difficult time and sometimes we won’t respond in the best way.

**Higher Level Anxiety**: techniques to calm yourself (or others)

*7/11 breathing*: this can be done wherever you are to calm yourself and let go of anxiety it is unobtrusive so can be done in many situations. Close your eyes or focus on something in the middle distance, exhale to empty your lungs then breath in slowly and deeply, filling your chest and diaphragm, roughly to the count of 7 and exhale even more slowly, roughly to the count of 11(the counting is less important than a slow inhale and even slower exhale) do this a few times. Breathe in through your nose and out through pursed lips.

*Holy Spirit visualisation.* Sit or lie comfortably supported and close your eyes. Breathe deeply and centre yourself, breathe deeply and slowly through your nose into your abdomen, let go of tension, imagine breathing in the Spirit of God, feel peace and relaxation, breathe out tension and physical or emotional pain,……. imagine the energy of the Spirit flowing through your body, circulating, filling you, perhaps visualise it as a colour maybe green or lilac or white,…. Imagine the Spirit cleansing you, entering darker shadowy places, if you are aware of tension or pain in part of your body, for example your shoulders or neck, flex or wriggle and relax and let the tension go…….. Rest in this state of harmony.

We can find ourselves “ruminating” that is thoughts going round and round in our heads

*The THINK technique can help*

True? – Is this thought 100% true? If not, what are the facts, and what is opinion?

Helpful? – Is paying attention to the thought helpful to me or others?

Inspiring? – Does the thought inspire me or does it have the opposite effect?

Necessary? – Is it important for me to focus on the thought? Is it necessary to act on it?

Kind? – Is the thought kind? If not, what would be a kinder thought?

Saying the thoughts out loud and then questioning them out loud can help, or writing them down and questioning them.

*Focus on something else* can help. One technique to calm you if you are feeling very anxious is simply to walk as slowly as you can (without falling over!) across your room – take several minutes, being mindfully aware of the movement of the body, joints and muscles; there is a level of concentration and focus required for this.

Notice 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can see hear, 2 things you can smell and 1 thing you can taste. Count these down using your fingers to guide you.

Or go outside and shut your eyes and attentively notice 5 things you can hear, 5 things you can sense or feel (for example the clothes on you, the wind…) or smell, and 5 things you can see.

**Poor sleep** related to anxiety**:** There is no fool proof solution to this, but the suggestions on this link can help (also follow the insomnia link) [https://www.helpguide.org/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm#](https://www.helpguide.org/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm) in addition to those suggestions. If you can’t get to sleep or you wake up in the early hours or if you are awake for more than 45 minutes, get up and do something outside the bedroom, such as make a non caffeinated drink, read something not too demanding then go back to bed either when you start to feel drowsy or after an hour. If you have had a bad night have one or two “power naps” during the day: lie flat on the bed or floor and be aware of your breathing but get up after 15 minutes (set an alarm if necessary.)

Avoid watching late evening news bulletins which can add to anxiety. Avoid caffeine after mid afternoon.

**Panic Attacks:** on occasions these can feel quite similar to a heart attack- hyperventilation, tightness or chest pain, feeling hot. So if you are in doubt – for yourself or someone else experiencing these symptoms dial 999, paramedics can check it out. If you know it is a panic attack, move somewhere quiet and try:

*Square breathing* Looking at a picture frame, tracing its edges, breathe in to the count of 3, hold to the count of 3, breath out to the count of 3, hold to the count of 3, breath in to the count of 4, hold to the count of 4, breathe out to the count of 4, hold to the count of 4… continue to the count of 5 and 6 and extending the interval to as far as is comfortable. This slows and deepens breathing and requires concentration which takes your mind off the panic

Or count backwards from 100 in threes, or spell your name and the names of family /friends backwards.

**Other more detailed sources of help for anxiety are:**

There are a range of Apps see the NHS web site <https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health/>

The Mind web site has useful information <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/>

The Corona Virus Anxiety Workbook This comes from a secular CBT and mindfulness perspective, it has some useful suggestions in it <https://thewellnesssociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Coronavirus-Anxiety-Workbook.pdf>

Feel free to get in touch for confidential support or counselling. counsellingandwellbeing@newcastle.anglican.org