

CARING FOR FRONTLINERS



Dear Leaders,

Many of our brothers and sisters in church are currently working on the frontline of the battle against COVID19, often in challenging conditions, exposing themselves to the risk of infection on a daily basis. The goal of the following resource is to help us pastorally accompany our frontliners through this valley of danger, stress and anxiety, as a part of wider discipleship.

‘And the very last thing we need right now, is a mindset of mutual distancing. We actually need to be thinking in the exact opposite way: Every hand that we don’t shake must become a phone call that we place. Every embrace that we avoid must become a verbal expression of warmth and concern. Every inch and every foot that we physically place between ourselves and another, must become a thought as to how we might be of help to that other, should the need arise.’

(Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky)

Stress, Fear and Panic

Fear is a normal response to real and potential threats. It's okay to be afraid. However, fear is designed to be a brief emotional state.

Persistent fear and panic are detrimental to our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. We can acknowledge the normality of being afraid without giving in to living in fear.

Pastoral Response

- Listen in love with patience, compassion and a genuine desire to understand their unique, real life experience and how it makes them feel.
- Allow for anxiety and do not dismiss their fears. One of the worst forms of anxiety is being scared about being scared.

Encourage them to listen to themselves:

- If physically tense, they can get up to do something active, like going for a walk.
- If emotionally spent, they can rest, relax, or start important spiritual practices such as prayer, meditating on Scripture, listening to music that reminds us of who God is. This will help them be assured that the Lord accompanies them through difficulty.
- If running into a mental wall, they can take a step back, turn off the things that are stimulating the stress and reach out to others.

Suggest they become selective in accessing information (only reliable news) and limit their exposure to commentary on the pandemic.

During pre-social media era, people listened the news presented on TV once a day.

Mental Well-Being

It is too easy for our thoughts to cascade into catastrophe. Though this crisis has brought about changes, not everything will remain permanent, pervasive, or personal.

Pastoral Response

- Help people adapt a long-term view and promote hopeful thinking by using Scripture.
- Pray (with and for the person) to help become conscious of God's presence and to renew a sense of purpose, while acknowledging the seriousness of the crisis.
- Balancing reality of the situation with gratitude.
- Keep values alive by calling people to remain faithful to their Christian convictions and their best sense of how to be in the world.

- Encourage development of routine that acknowledges the new normal: bathing, eating, devotion, working, relating, exercise, social interaction, sleeping.
- Encourage focus on what one can control. Serenity prayer: 'God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference' (R Niebuhr).
- Promote relating and reaching out to friends, family, and members of the church. Physical distancing does not have to equate to social isolation. We remain a community.
- Encourage a change of physical surroundings. Physical spaces can become associated with emotional states. It may even help to rearrange your bedroom.
- If needed, encourage the person to seek professional help. Break down the stigma of seeking counselling and coaching.

Spiritual Well-Being

The present pandemic is not just a physical and mental crisis, but for many people it is also a spiritual crisis. As church leaders we want to offer a distinct biblical perspective and interpretation. Let's continue to spend time in community thinking, reflecting, and learning about how we theologically understand what is happening.

Pastoral Response

Encourage sound biblical interpretation of the present crisis and an understanding of our place in God's story: e.g. suffering is not part of God's original creation; God is sovereign and uses our present crisis for good; our God is strong enough, good enough and loving enough to help us.

- Encourage enriching virtual activities such as Sunday worship services, online Bible studies, daily devotions and prayer for continuing fellowship with God and other believers, e.g. through sharing service links.
- Let them know that they are valued and appreciated, and that their sacrificial work is very close to the heart of God.
- Agree on a schedule of regular check-ins and follow-ups that fits with their work rota and days they're off work.

As this pandemic unfolds and we continue to care for our frontliners, let's be conscious of our own limitation. May this be a time when we serve together, supporting each other and sharing the load when giving care. Let us also not neglect self-care, rest and renewing of our own strength in the Lord.

To start a meaningful conversation

This is the perfect time to be intentional in reaching out to those around us, making every effort to ensure that no one feels alone. This means often making the first step in communication and checking in. Here are some thoughtful questions you can ask to start meaningful conversations:

- What's the one thing that's made a difference to your day?
- Have you been able to take time for yourself, in any way?
- What promises of God are you holding on to right now?
- What are you looking forward to most in your daily routine?

- What fears do you feel may be overwhelming you right now?
- What's the one thing you're looking forward to once you're physically reunited with your friends and family?
- What's one thing you've learnt about yourself during this time?
- How can I help you stay encouraged as a friend during this time?

Other helpful tips:

- Allow for silent moments and don't feel the need to rush the conversation
- Prompt but don't push; if they're not ready to discuss their inner thoughts or emotions, then kindly respect that request
- Be mindful of your own capacity and sign-post them to Pastoral staff if needed

As this pandemic unfolds and we continue to care for our frontliners, let's be conscious of our own limitations. May this be a time when we serve together, supporting each other and taking turns in giving care. Let us also not neglect self-care, rest and renewing of our own strength in the Lord.

If you have found this guide helpful and would like further support, please feel free to get in touch with us

at support@wordinternational.org.uk

Sources:
The Presbyterian Mental Health Network.
The Chaplaincy Innovation Lab.