

Editorial

COVID-19 Pandemic and Spiritual Coping

Human beings have been known for surviving the world's history-natural disasters, wars, and pandemics. Yes, the world has had a tough past and humans are nowhere near the end goals of sustainable living, super-advanced technology in the medical field, and ultimate conquering of the physical world. However, the resilience and persistence of the humans that go far beyond the physical powers or the mental capabilities- his consciousness about his existence and the meaning and purpose of his life- has survived and helped them survive through history.

The world is facing a novel virus this year. Though the origins of the virus and when it started spreading are still empirically decided, there is no doubt that this will not be the last time we would hear about this. The Coronavirus disease caused by the COVID-19 virus which can cause mild to moderate respiratory illness and cause more medical problems for those with underlying medical conditions was said to be transmitted through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose of the infected person (WHO, 2020). Due to the nature of transmission of the virus among humans, the best way to prevent and slow down transmission is to be informed about the virus, washing hands with an alcohol-based rub or with water and soap, and most important of all is maintaining social distancing. Countries around the world declared lockdown and mandatory restrictions including shutting down institutions and places of work and studies, strict measures on the number of people who could gather in a public. Beyond the physical, economical, and financial trouble, there was also some unseen social, emotional, mental, and spiritual trouble that almost everyone faced during the time. The psychological and spiritual consequences of being shut inside one's

home could no longer be brushed under the carpet as everyone at some point of time during the day could see it impact their lives in some way or the other. The situation the virus caused ensured that we talk about mental health and dedicate time to finding out how one can overcome their struggle.

Sitting in our home, we were forced to sit with ourselves which included our ups and downs, our abilities and faults, and securities and insecurities, and having very limited options of distracting ourselves, we were forced to be aware of ourselves. There has been an increase in the levels of loneliness and depression especially among those who may have had a greater disruption in their social lives (Lee, Cadigan, & Rhew, 2020). During this time, there is a need to find opportunities to amplify the positive and hopeful side of things in life and find ways to take care of our mental and spiritual health.

Research has shown that religious individuals tend to use spirituality and religion to cope during times of stress (Pargament, 2001; Koenig, 2018). During COVID-19, there has been an increase in the interest in understanding religion (Pirutinsky, Cherniak, & Rosmarin, 2020). Rosmarin and Koenig (2020) reported how religion can be a powerful resource for mental health as it involves a framework of meaning-making associated with decreased psychological distress. There is also the added benefit of providing the individual with a source of attitude and cognition that can help reframe negative events into less stressful frames (Jenkins & Pargament, 1995). Hence positive religious coping can be beneficial during these stressful times.

A scientific way to approach the problem of COVID-19 would be to make sense of what we already know and begin to use this knowledge more effectively (Banfield & Kay, 2012), and even build on this knowledge to meet the needs and requirements of the hour. A lot of the Last but not the Least contents of the *Vinayasādhana Journal* over the last few years had reflected on the journeys in life and facing the challenges. Let us take a look at points from the *Journal* which has always prepared us to survive and look at ways in which we can spiritually and mentally recuperate during the pandemic.

Facing the Challenges with Jesus

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance” (James 1: 2-3)- the main thought in the edition January

2019 cannot be more fit for the situation right now. King David, during one of his desperate conditions, wrote a joyful and wise psalm from inside a cave and sung it in the presence of despairing men who were taking refuge with him (Guzik, 2020). “The Lord is near to the broken-hearted and saves the crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18).

One of the challenges that the pandemic brought in was the restrictions that were placed on gatherings and Church services which were one of the main ways in which people sought comfort and strength through fellowship with other people. “But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Corinthians 12:9). When praying we can become rescuers who offer hope in the face of desperation (Brolsma, 2019). Day (2010) lists a few things that we can do when facing life’s challenges: pray fervently, prepare ahead of time by seeking specific gifts from God, trust in God alone, stand firm in our conviction, fight discouragement with faith, run towards your goal with determination, think with godly perspectives, glorify God, and rejoice in whatever conclusion that occurs.

Character Formation

FratelliTutti, the Encyclical Letter of Pope Francis, calls for everyone inclusively to recognize a brother or a sister in everyone and for every Christian to recognize the face of Jesus in the other who suffers. “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32). Everyone can take a page out of the characteristics that were reported by Saint Paul to the Church of Colossians. There needs to be “heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience”, and continual practice of forgiveness even if anyone complains against each other (Colossians 3: 12, 13). The WHO (2020) released a report on Mental Health Consideration in which it asked the general population to be empathetic to all those who are affected, to give support, compassion, and kindness.

Since character includes our perceptions, dispositions, and intentions, and motivations (Talbert, 2004), character formation is the basis of personality development. Why it is necessary is that it entails these characteristics will be necessary not only for the progress in one’s own life but also if one needs to help those around them. “Let each of you look not only to his interests but also to the interests of

others” (Philippians 2:4). The concept of character formation must be addressed as it can significantly impact the individual and their growth in life. This calls the psychologists, formators, and the Church leaders to address the challenge of how they can model and help others learn these characteristics of character formation. Individually people can practice kindness daily, call up lonely parents or grandparents, and give food or something in kind or charity so that you can be of help to someone are just a few ways in which we can develop character. Developing a picture of patience and endurance through the lockdown will also drive us to find the best way in which we can calm ourselves down. Parents with kids can model and teach their children to engage themselves and not to settle for quick-fix solutions like TV or computer games. The difficulty lies not with having families who are less tolerant to arguments and children who are prone to believing what they see on the internet but with a generation of people who believe that changes through personal growth are not required for them to cope with the new environment. A step closer to character formation is a step in the right direction towards using the opportunity to make the world a better place for oneself and others.

Through Thrones and Thistles

On March 27, 2020, Pope Francis walked through an empty St. Peter’s Square at the Vatican where he likened the coronavirus to that of a storm that lay bare illusions that people can be self-sufficient and instead found us all fragile, disoriented, and in need of each other’s help and comfort. Jesus’s disciples also found themselves on a boat being tossed about in the waves and the wind. Jesus who calmed the wind and storms is there with us in the boat that Pope Francis referred to. Neither does this mean that we can go out without a mask, fight for an unnecessary gathering of people that can spread the virus nor does this justify the need for putting oneself in dangerous situations because we think God will take care of us. The walk of Pope Francis in the empty Square of Vatican should be a reminder that we are still fighting a physical virus, but the storms that upsets was spiritually leading us to question whether God abandoned us can be calmed with the presence of an ever-present Saviour in our lives.

January 2017 Last but not Least section titled “Through Thrones and Thistles” had reflected on the beautiful lyrics of the song “In His Time.” “Lord please show me every day, as you’re teaching me Your way, And I’ll do just what You say, in His time.” The lesson is to take one day at

a time and to ask for HIM to teach us what we need to do every day. Prayer is a profound way of connecting with God. Kay Bajwa, a real estate agent in Washington D.C., said that she would spend five times a day praying to Allah and reported that this ordeal has brought us all together and closer to her God, and spending time praying has been a time of comfort to her. All around the world people have reported how prayer has helped them feel that God is with them through the thrones and thistles in their lives.

In the journal edition titled Fearless, Free and Faithful, the Last but not Least section named “When you thought I wasn’t looking” consisted of a beautiful thought-provoking rendition of how there is an ever-present presence in our lives looking after us and taking care of us. The following verses can sum up the feelings of anxiety and fear we face and bring security and strength in its place: “Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (Genesis 28:15); and “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41:10).

Coping with the Pandemic

The WHO’s document “Mental health considerations during COVID-19 Outbreak” urges us to “be empathetic to those who got affected”, not to address people with the disease as “COVID-19 cases” or “the diseased”, and to “protect yourself and be supportive to others”. People’s ability to cope with stressful events has been and will continue to be tested by the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time when mental health is moving to the forefront of the public’s consciousness, professional counselors are in a prime position to help clients cope with uncertainty and loss, build resilience, adjust their coping strategies and self-care routines, and identify their individual and community strengths. Don’t stop your daily routines unless you have to. Self-monitor and identify specific stressors of this isolation. Eat right, sleep right, and get plenty of exercises. Counselors have the unique role of helping the community restore itself, counsel the survivors and their families, and bring the agency back to the community that may be feeling disempowered and devastated. This group of professionals is called forth to share in the responsibility of strengthening the psychological fabric of society. This is also a call for formators and mentors of formees to enlighten themselves with the nature of spiritual challenges that everyone is

facing now and to have healthy and productive discussions on how they can face the challenges and overcome the hurdles that the pandemic is bringing forth.

As a closing thought, let us turn our minds to possible positive attitudes and behaviors that we can have during the pandemic. The American Psychological Association (2020) in their article on “Faith in a Time of Crisis” had listed three ways in which we can use religion and spirituality to help cope with adversity. The first one is on how the positive religious framing can help us to transcend stressful times by enabling us to see events through a hopeful lens. Secondly, it can help foster in us a sense of connectedness as we pray, meditate, take part in religious meetings, and listen to music. Third and lastly, it will help cultivate a sense of connection through rituals like daily prayer meetings and taking part in special occasions, which may be done through virtual meetings now. Let us find reasons to be grateful and count our blessings together every day.

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