Blog
Spirituality

Staff of Mount Sinai Queens in the Astoria neighborhood wait in line to be tested before returning to work during the COVID-19 outbreak in New York City. (U.N. photo / Evan Schneider)

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How is the coronavirus affecting your community? Submit an example we may use in future coverage.

Feeling stressed and anxious? Me, too.

I live in the New York City borough of Queens, and two neighborhoods over from mine is "the epicenter of the epicenter," with a disproportionate number of COVID-19 deaths given population density, particularly in immigrant communities.

As The New York Times reported last week, "[As] the death toll has mounted, the contagion has exposed the city's stubborn inequities, tearing through working-class immigrant neighborhoods far more quickly than others."

Not to overdramatize it, but this is a moment of real tension and anxiety for everyone in Queens. I live about five blocks from one of the borough's major hospitals, and we're hearing a lot more sirens, which can be particularly haunting at night.

So it came as a balm to hear Australian Sister of Mercy Maryanne Loughry's recent advice about how to deal with such anxiety. Loughry is a trained psychologist who has led numerous psychosocial and well-being trainings as part of research and ministry in many parts of the world, particularly among refugee communities. Loughry has worked with Jesuit Refugee Service and is a part-time faculty member of the Boston College School of Social Work and a research associate at the University of Oxford's Refugee Studies Centre. She holds a doctorate in psychology from Flinders University of South Australia.

On April 1, Loughry led a webinar by the International Union of Superiors General on ways to deal with anxiety and stress that drew nearly 200 viewers: individual sisters, but also sister communities watching as a group. (You can watch the webinar on YouTube. On April 21, Loughry plans to host another webinar on ways to face social and personal grief.)

The insights Loughry offered included sister-specific advice about what congregations and communities can expect in the coming weeks and months. Noting that the "pandemic is still rolling out," she said economically poor countries with fragile health care infrastructures are going to face real challenges.

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"Very little resource will be brought to these countries," she said. "Where are we as religious in this?"

She also noted that community life "isn't always easy," but it is "extraordinarily challenging at the moment," with frictions and tensions rising to the surface.

"There will be times we'll be sorry about what we said," Loughry said.

Though this is the time for sisters to be compassionate with one another, she said, "it might be the time we need to have that tough talk with a sister about her behavior."

Beyond the specifics of sisters' community life, Loughry provided sage advice about how all of us, not just sisters, can deal with anxiety and stress at this unprecedented moment.

Here are some of the takeaways that stood out for me from Loughry's helpful webinar.

These really are difficult times.

A colleague told Loughry that the virus affects people "fundamentally" because the physical distancing required has stopped the normal interactions of hugging and shaking hands.

"It interferes with us," Loughry said, and "we grieve those losses." We grieve at "not being able to do what is fundamental to us."

It's all right to feel anxiety and stress given the pandemic's "threatening and unpredictable" nature.

"It's a perfect recipe for stress," she said, so it's normal "to be sad, stressed, confused and scared. I'd be worried if people weren't anxious or scared or stressed at this time."

The challenge is how to manage such stress and anxiety so they are not causing physical ailments, such as headaches, stomachaches and poor sleep.

Loughry noted that the terms "stress" and "anxiety" are often used interchangeably, but they're not the same thing. Stress is a reaction to an external trigger, like bad news. Anxiety, frequently caused by stress, is a deeper, often longer-lasting mental health condition.

Embrace "circuit-breakers" that can help stop or at least minimize anxiety.

These include talking to friends and family, listening to music, reading fiction, even gardening. Other ways: meditation, cooking and embroidery. Having "circuit-breakers," she said, can stop the constant loop and "reruns" of worries, such as, "What if we can't get to the bank?" or "What if we run out of toilet paper?"

Don't be a news junkie.

One way to reduce your worrying is by not being obsessive about the news. Don't constantly read, watch or listen to reports about the pandemic. Loughry tries to limit her news consumption to three times day: morning, afternoon and evening. People need to keep up with the news, certainly, "but not every hour," she said.

She advised keeping a balance between "what you can manage" in terms of bad news and staying responsibly informed. In other words, limit exposure to bad news "without ignoring the bad news."

Affirm the current trends of physical distancing.

However, also affirm social interaction in new ways, such as online interactions. It's important to keep connections with people, even if they are, for the moment, not done in person.

"People need that social component," she said.

A man walks outside a pharmacy in the Astoria neighborhood of Queens during the COVID-19 outbreak in New York City. (U.N. photo / Evan Schneider)

Keep an eye out for those you know.

Vulnerabilities can emerge at a time like this, so watch out if people you know suddenly start smoking or drinking or engaging in other risky behaviors. Help people find resources if they need professional help.

Affirm spirituality.

Secular resources focused on anxiety and stress are valuable but often neglect the role spirituality and religious faith have for many people.

"A lot of people around the world rely on religious faith," Loughry said.

Such faith has deep historical roots. In the Christian tradition, "the people of God have faced plagues and pandemics before. You just have to look at our psalms. Our psalms are laments."

As such, they deal with life experience like "what we are experiencing now," she said. "We bring our lens and faith to this pandemic."

Be compassionate and forgiving.

That may seem obvious, but Loughry noted that in times like this, anxiety and stress can lead to barriers going up. Avoid them. Don't shame people who are infectious with the virus. Affirm the mental health needs of the elderly, including older sisters who may be dealing with high levels of worry.

Be kind to yourself.

To be available for others, be easy on yourself. This may not be the ideal time "to go on a diet," "to clean out the files" or "read the original Aquinas." To offer comfort to others, perhaps this is the time to take comfort in the books, food and routines we enjoy. But at the same time, be open to new perspectives. Older people may have much to learn from younger people at this moment. And keep in touch, however you can, with family and friends.

Keep things in perspective.

Loughry concluded her remarks by not minimizing what is ahead, reminding her fellow sisters that now is the time to put into place strategies "to ride out what is happening at the moment."

But, she said, "this time will pass." It's going to get more difficult in many countries, she said, "but it will pass."

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