

COVID-19: Emotional Health and Wellbeing

Lesslie Newbigin was a missionary from the UK who spent 40 years in India during the 20th Century. Upon his return to England in 1974, he experienced a surprise greater than anything he had seen in India. The Churches in the UK had succumbed to a false story about the world and no one seemed to notice. As a cross cultural missionary returning to his homeland he was shocked. **Everything was the same - and yet everything was different.**

In some ways, the experience of Newbigin is a little bit like what we have experienced in the past fortnight in our world.¹ A few weeks ago we had our relate weekend. We took 45 young people and 11 leaders away on a residential trip, stayed in dorms, crammed into rooms together and if truth be told there wasn't too much thought given to soap and hand washing (among the boys at least!)

Fast forward three weeks and going on such a weekend seems completely unimaginable. **Everything is the same - and yet everything is different.**

That experience of massive upheaval and change in such a short space of time can leave us feeling a huge range of things - anger, fear, anxiety, worry, disappointment and confusion. Perhaps the biggest feeling for many of us is just one of complete disorientation. *How did things change so much, so soon? Why is this all happening? When will it all end? How bad is it really going to get?*

Those are huge questions - and we have to admit we simply don't know the answers to them. And yet this is our new reality - none of us like it - but we have to learn how to cope with it. That includes being able to cope emotionally and mentally with some of the seismic changes that we are now experiencing on a day to day basis.

I have put together some thoughts that might be of some use for us in thinking through how we can respond to COVID-19 in a way that takes into account our emotional health and wellbeing:

1. Recognise you will have range of emotions

Some of these will be good, some of them won't be. It is worth taking some time to ask yourself and reflect in your own heart about how you actually are feeling about all of this. In some ways, we can find ourselves feeling a sense of excitement at what is happening. Part of being human means that we find things like change, drama, chaos somewhat exciting. That feeling might soon wear off - but it is important to acknowledge it as a natural response, even in a time of crisis.

Many of us will feel anxious about what is happening - particularly about how this is all going to play out over the coming weeks and months. We might well feel afraid, disappointed and confused. Part of dealing with this situation will mean recognising that we are probably feeling some or all of these things at the same time - and that is part of what it is to be a human being. Take time to pause, reflect and ask the question: *How am I feeling about what is happening?*

2. Talk to God about how we feel

Recognising that we will have a range of emotions is one thing, figuring out what to do with those emotions is another thing altogether. The Bible is refreshingly realistic for us in that regard - it encourages us to be honest with God about how we are feeling and gives us examples of how to do that. The Psalms, for example, are full of lament. They invite us to bluntly tell God our questions, fears and frustrations. They also invite us to ask for help - in the confidence that God can actually *do* something about the situation we are facing. But the Psalms of Lament always encourage us to trust more fully and deeply in God. One writer said '*Laments are not cul-de-sacs*

¹ This comparison between our experience of COVID-19 and that of returning cross cultural missionaries was pointed out to me in this video by Paul Grimmond from Moore Theological College, Australia. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k1SUP-GwDrY>

*of sorrow but conduits for renewed faith.*² Biblical lament, then, is an honest cry to a God who is powerful, good, and just. It is a cry that expects an answer from God, and therefore results in hope, trust, and joy rather than despair.

So don't *just* ask 'how am I feeling about what is happening?' Talk to God about it. It may well be that this crisis presents us with a unique opportunity to cultivate a much deeper and richer prayer life than we would have had otherwise.

3. Habits can help

For many of us our old routine has completely gone out the window and we are facing the prospect of an altogether different way of living. We are creatures of habit and forming healthy, *new* habits will be part and parcel of how we navigate the days ahead. If you are at home from school, university or work then you should think about your weekly routine. Don't just lie in til noon, lounge around binging on Netflix, scrolling endlessly on social media and rediscover your love for some old Xbox games!

Try and get up at the time you would normally get up at, eat a good breakfast as normal and as much as possible work to the same routine that you would have been timetabled to if you had been at school, university or work. Linda and I are trying to figure out what routine looks like with Toby in the middle of it all - it's been a fairly chaotic adjustment but we are getting there. Simple things have helped. The most important thing has been having a designated workspace (the spare room for us) so that we can enjoy our time downstairs in the living room as a family. As much as possible, we try not to have work sprawled out all over the house. Sometimes this just isn't possible - but we are doing our best to maintain a good routine. (I hope to post a video soon with some more thoughts on some habits that we can develop that might help us with some of our spiritual disciplines in these days.)

4. Remember the Gospel - Preach it to YOURSELF!

The way you experience preaching in the days to come is going to be very different. If you think it comes across as awkward - then rest assured it is 10 times more awkward for us delivering it! Preaching to a camera is excruciating and yet we hope that over the coming months we will be able to teach you the Bible as best we can. However, this is an important time for you guys to be preaching to *yourselves*. By that I mean we need to remind ourselves daily - oftentimes several times throughout each day - that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ really does change things.

This pandemic might be messing up our lives somewhat and we will inevitably feel disorientated on a daily basis. But there are some solid things that we can and must hold onto in these days. God really is, as the Shorter Catechism tells us, most holy, wise and powerful. He really is preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions. He really did send Jesus to the cross to pay for your sins and mine. And He really did raise Jesus from the dead in victory over sin, hell, death and the devil. And Jesus really is seated at the right hand of God ruling and reigning over all peoples and all circumstances. So take a deep breath. Remind yourself of the gospel and do it often. That might be the single most helpful habit you develop over the coming months and you might well find that it calms you down, keeps you sane and refreshes your soul.

² See this excellent article for a fuller treatment of the Psalms of Lament <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/strong-churches-lanuage-lament/>