

Do You Feel Different Now Than You Did Before COVID? It May Have A Purpose

By Cathy Wille, retired pastoral/mental health counselor

Have you been feeling tired, sad, empty and lack energy more than usual? Are you feeling some disorientation and are unable to focus? Are you feeling abandoned? At the end of the day, do you feel overwhelmed or like you have not accomplished anything? This note is written to let you know that you are not alone.

Psychologists know that being connected with one another is part of our DNA. Community, collaboration, and networking are all ways we connect with one another, and at their very core give us greater feelings of security and safety. Unfortunately, that is what COVID-19 has taken away from us at many levels. Our physical safety is challenged with the possibility of illness. Many of us are challenged financially. And, of course, our relationships – family, friends, colleagues, fellow worshippers – have all been limited, with some of us experiencing total isolation from our social interactions.

These changes cause us stress and trigger anxiety and depression, for some people one of these phenomena and for others both. Both of these mental conditions are often viewed with negative expectations – “pull yourself up by your boot straps” – “you obviously don’t have enough faith.” Those of us who have struggled with anxiety and depression have heard these platitudes, along with other comments which try to shame us into feeling differently. These feelings are real!

I would like to offer another perspective. God created us with anxiety and depression as mental states which insure our survival. I remember when my Dad, following his cancer prostate surgery, became depressed. I called the doctor, concerned. His doctor responded and said, “Depression helps us to slow down and manage the stressors in our life. In your Dad’s case it is appropriate for him to be depressed, because his body needs time to heal, and the depression will slow him down so that can happen.”

Our anxiety has the job of alerting us to a danger which could threaten our survival. Fortunately, we also have the thinking part of our brain that can help us mediate the anxiety. So, if we are walking through the woods and we hear a rustling in the leaves, we have the ability to recognize that we saw a squirrel several feet back and make the decision not to run away. A deer that hears the same thing immediately runs away. On the other hand, if we are sleeping, wake up startled (anxious) and smell smoke, we know we need to move and get out of the house. Fortunately, the thinking part of our brain allows us to discern whether or not we are in danger.

Both mild to moderate depression levels of anxiety can be managed. At the top of the list of interventions is self-care. Eating well, getting enough sleep, exercising, even if it means doing exercises we can do in a chair, tapping into our creativity, engaging our hobbies, perfecting a skill we haven’t had a chance to do previously, limiting watching the news, limiting social media, slowing down, spending time reading, listening to music, playing games with family,



taking walks, taking time to reflect/meditate/pray and giving ourselves time to “veg” are ways which allow our bodies to deal with the stress we are experiencing.

As people of faith we also have the comfort of the scriptures. In Isaiah 54:7-8, Isaiah shares that God said: “For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer.”

The theologian, Walter Brueggemann says:

“In its season of abandonment, Israel had not forgotten – and always remembered – that the performance or covenantal fidelity – even amid abandonment – consists in radical, restorative neighbor actions for those left behind. To the familiar triad of ‘widow, orphan, immigrant,’ the prophet adds ‘the poor.’ Action toward the left behind who are treasured by God is a primary strategy for resisting despair in abandonment.”

Brueggemann suggests that we continue to do justice and this will give us a sense of purpose and meaning which is so important in countering depression and anxiety.



All that being said, mild to moderate levels of depression and anxiety are manageable, and there are ways we can reduce the stress. But, certainly, for those in which depression and anxiety become more acute, know that there are therapists and/or doctors who can help people with talk therapy and/or medication which helps bring a person’s ability to function to a point again of managing the stress.

As we navigate the pandemic during this holiday season, know that we are not alone. All of us, at some level, have suffered some or all of the

above feelings. Know that God so loved the world that God gave us God’s only son, that who so ever believes in him will not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16) Know that Christ’s church is there and is willing to support one another as members care for one another in the midst of this struggle. Know that there are ways to manage our depression and anxiety. Know that there are professionals who are there and willing to encourage us. Know that God has compassion for God’s people and has been with us, is with us and promises to be with us as we move forward during this unprecedented time. Especially at this Advent and Christmas time, Jesus will be born in us again.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- What are some examples of negative messages you have heard or learned about depression and anxiety?
- What are some examples of how anxiety and/or depression have been helpful for you or someone else?
- In this time of pandemic, many of us have experienced some level of anxiety and/or depression. How unhelpful has this been for you? How has it been helpful?
- How have you experienced God Emmanuel (God with us) during this pandemic time?