

The following document was developed by the Brotherhood of St Laurence chaplains as part of their wellbeing resources for staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their contribution is gratefully acknowledged.

Calmness

Key Points: - Our brains direct our behaviour through the flight, fight, freeze response - Calmness requires direct sensing in the body and concrete small actions.

When humans perceive a threat or a danger, our brains respond with its own built in emergency response unit, which is often described as the 'fight, flight or freeze' response. Most of us would have heard of this. The brain moves us into efficient action for our survival, bypassing the usual logic centre of the brain where we do our ordinary thinking and planning.

Public Health professionals know that in this pandemic, the danger of the Coronavirus is very difficult for our brains to process – we can't see it, we believe it's coming but we don't know when, etc. And this kind of danger is hard to make a specific quick response to, which freaks us out even more. And before we know it, our brains have escalated the situation in our minds – just in case!

This is what is underlying the panic we have been seeing and it makes it difficult to follow the basic instructions for keeping everyone safe, because we're in do-or-die survival mode.

Stress – the opposite of staying calm – is also something which brain-scientists know is bad for our immune system, and can actually decrease our physical resilience at this time, so that's another reason why it is really important to prioritise calmness as a health and wellbeing strategy during the COVID-19 context.

Calm inducing wellbeing practices focus on:

1. Primary sensing: What can you see, hear, touch, taste, smell and feel on your skin?
2. Concrete actions: One small, simple action at a time. We've become used to talking about this as mindfulness. In this context, mindfulness has 3 steps:
 - Awareness - let yourself feel the individual senses - label what you observe with a word if you can
 - Acceptance – practice letting whatever is present in your body be there without any response. Create a little 'breathing space' between what your body senses before it moves into a response
 - Choice – once you feel yourself calm, and your ability to think reasonably is activated, make a small choice about the best course of next action in response to your situation.
3. Get practical – talking endlessly about the crazy state of the world is counterproductive to staying calm. Instead, we need to get practical with small and concrete actions.
 - Have a clear health and wellbeing plan and follow it!
 - Manage information consumption: Unplug and be in the moment

- Prioritise the basics – sleep, eating well, exercise
- Perform small acts of kindness for others
- Perform body-based spiritual practices which ‘plug you in’ to that which inspires you and keeps you connected to your own body.

PRACTISE: Ask yourself what keeps you calm? What is one thing you can focus on to stay calm during this time?

PRACTISE: Take four deep breaths, each one breathing in and out of a different part of our body.

- The first we breath in and out of our bellies, this is the moving centre of our bodies and the place of intuition.
- Next, we breath in and out of our chest, our heart space. This is the feeling centre of our bodies.
- Third we breath in and out of our head, which is of course the place of thinking.
- Finally, we breath in and out of all three at the same time.

Connectedness

Key points: *Three dimensions of connectedness incorporate social, spiritual and environment wellbeing*

- *‘Plugging in’ means connecting with fellow humans, something bigger than ourselves, and the natural world*

Staying connected whilst we don’t have the resource of physical touch, or physical proximity is difficult for creatures who live their best lives in their bodies. So we need to get creative! Because human beings are essentially communal creatures. We live in packs with fellow human beings and our newborns die without social care, even to the point that up to a third of our brain development happens once we are outside of the womb, in relationship to that which is outside of ourselves.

The communal dimension of our bodies isn’t just human though. It also includes the interaction with our environment and particularly the natural world. Too much concrete drives us crazy! We are literally dependent on trees for the clean air we breathe which keeps us alive. And also, something which western cultures have struggled with lately, human beings have a need to connect to something beyond ourselves – the first nations of Australia call it the Dreaming, cosmologists call it Stardust, religious faith calls it God, whatever it is, for some reason having a big picture story about our place in the overall scheme of things keeps our minds and actions in perspective.

So, what can you do to nurture social connection whilst practicing social distancing?

Our Mindset is critical:

1. We’re all in this together – social distancing is not just for me. In the Christian tradition of Father Tucker, he would have described this as ‘we Love our neighbours AS we love ourselves’
2. Small actions are important – making our mindset concrete and practice helps us to believe it! A phone call, a food parcel, a note, let’s join the Kindness Pandemic

3. Connect to something bigger – what stories about life are meaning for you? What spiritual practices ground you? EXERCISE: What keeps you connected? What ways can you stay connected with people whilst maintaining social distancing or social isolation? How can you plug in to that which inspires you and stay grounded?