

This is Part 4 in an ongoing series of Managing Stress and Anxiety During Difficult Times.

By Rev. Thomas E. Konopka, LCSW

*God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.*

In the first three parts of this series, I tried to focus on coping strategies and practical ways to deal with this “new normal.” An area that I think worth exploring is that of cultivating an inner disposition or approach that will last beyond the current crisis. For many of us in ministry, this has been a creative time, but, what happens when the creative ideas become more a part of how we are doing things now? I know there is usually a letdown after Holy Week and Easter, but, this year, I woke up Easter Monday morning and said to myself, “Now what?” One of the hardest tasks that we are all facing right now is that there is no end in sight, and even when things do open up again, it will be different. None of us likes change, even though it is a part of life and some would argue, a necessary part of life.

The inner disposition I am advocating is that we each adopt is the inner wisdom of the Serenity Prayer.

It is interesting that this prayer advocates we turn to God for the grace to accept that we can't change everything. From a cognitive perspective, this type of thinking will be the antidote for black and white thinking and/or a pattern of thinking “I need to control everything.” These types of distortions in our thinking lead to distress. By realizing that we cannot change the current reality, that a virus has “taken over” our world, we can then begin to ask where and when do I have the ability to change? Some of this will also be the acceptance that there are certain parts of this crisis that I cannot change but I can change my thinking or approach to it. It is my belief that the more we learn to accept the parts of this we cannot change, then the less anxious we will be, the less antsy about things getting “back to normal,” and the less frustrated with the current reality we are living in.

So, step one: What is not in my control about all this?

A virus that is acting on its own, restrictions that are being placed in our lives for the common good, and fill-in-your-own-thing that you are realizing you have no control over. I have no control over the fact we cannot have Mass together, that I cannot go

out for Mexican food with my friends, or that my work as a therapist is done mostly by phone or Zoom.

Step two: Where do I have control?

Follow all the social distancing information, learn a new way to cope with this (meditation, prayer, etc.), my thinking about how this is affecting me — these are areas that we can control. For example, from my perspective, God did not send this on the world as punishment or a test. This virus is a sign that things are always growing and changing and we, as humans, are not in control of how this world works. So, where is God? Walking right next to us; he is in every hospital room, with every medical professional and those on the front lines. God is in the middle of all this. I have control over how I let this situation affect my mood and my reactions. Feeling overwhelmed, depressed or anxious is very normal, but, the reaction to hide, “veg out,” or use some other unhealthy way to cope will not help. The paradox is to get up and do something: take a walk, garden, call a friend, etc. We cannot control our emotions, but, we can change how we express them and how they affect us and others. We all have to realize that we have more control in this situation than we realize. For all of us, wearing a mask is uncomfortable, but it is necessary right now. Our choice is what type of mask we will wear. I think it is the difference between letting life deal with us or choosing to live life on life’s terms. Maybe the illusion of having to have control is why so many people bought out all the toilet paper when this all started; just a thought.

Step three: the wisdom to know the difference

We all have an illusion of control in our lives and over our fates. It is possible that this unique time in all our lives has made that crystal clear. In and of itself, this is anxiety producing. My bias is that for someone who does not believe in God or is not a part of a spiritual tradition, the level of anxiety is augmented. It is my belief that God is walking through this time with us and that helps me cope with all the uncertainty. Faith also allows me to see that the wonder of God’s creation all around me is larger than this current crisis. It is vital that we detach ourselves from the thinking pattern that we are in control of our lives and the outcomes. Our choice rests in how we approach the things we cannot change.

It is easy to say the words of the Serenity Prayer, but, it is hard to live them. It would be fair to say that we have lost control over our lives at this current moment. To really live the words of this prayer can be the source of our peace. The reality of the new normal is that there will be things in our lives we will not have control over; but, our response to those things will make all the difference. My prayer is that this time will

help us reprioritize and to see that many of the things we have allowed to control our lives are really not as important and are the things we can let go of. We will never change the fact that God loves us so much he died for us too. This is a truth we cannot change. The wisdom we need is to accept this and begin to draw the new map for the world and ourselves from that starting point. We may not change the fact we have to change, but God will give us the wisdom to see the right path if we let Him in.