

Charting a New Course:
Mapping our way toward less stress and a new “normal”

By Rev. Thomas E. Konopka, LCSW

Worry and anxiety, in my opinion, are the main feelings that we are all experiencing. As I mentioned in Part One, we do not have the map to deal with this current situation, so most of us are defaulting back to our original learning of how we handle this. We all learned how to deal with worry and anxiety growing up in our family systems. These patterns may have been helpful at that time; but the reality is that many of those coping skills do not quite fit in this current situation. To be clear, I do not have a Freudian perspective that our parents are to blame for our neurosis. My approach is to look at how a person learned to approach a situation on a behavioral and cognitive level. It is possible that some of this is unconscious, but that is a discussion for another time. The beauty of my approach is that it means we can always change how we adapt and how we live.

So, my first question is this: How did you learn to handle worry, chaos, anxiety, etc. in your family system? What is helpful today? What is not helpful?

Helpful: (Some examples)	Un-helpful (Some examples)
Prayer Talking about the experience Feeling connected to others A good self-image Resiliency	Isolation (my issues or family issues) are not spoken out to anyone Either “stuffing” feelings or emoting all over the place no matter who is around (especially anger) Addictive behaviors: alcohol, drugs, behavioral addictions

Once we can identify our own coping behaviors, we sift through them, choose the ones that work and put together a “map” to help us deal with the stress of today. The last great pandemic was in 1917; there are not many people left who can help us make the “map,” so we are starting from scratch. The other important reason to identify the way we are dealing with this stress is to allow us the ability to realize how it is being expressed. For example, one person may seem unfazed by what is happening, but will go home and reorganize the whole house. Another person may seem fine one moment but get “snarly” for no apparent. Some will freeze and become indecisive.

The second thing we need to realize about our current world situation is the effect it is having on our reactivity. On a normal day, our stress levels fluctuate. Some days, we are less stressed than others; other days, we are more stressed. We can always learn how to manage this variability in our stress levels. What we think about an event, how we interpret how something affects us, and our “map” of past experiences of stress all help. However, what we all need to accept is that our stress level is stuck at a 5 or 6 on a scale of 0-10. All the rest of our reactions begin there. What does this mean? The intensity of our anger will be greater and more reactive. Our sadness will be intensified. Our normal anxieties are

increased to a point where it feels unbearable. Our worry is justified, but we get obsessed with the news or the latest blog.

The third issue is that there is no idea of when this will end. We all want to get to “normal,” but no one knows when. The example that comes to mind is that we are hiking in the Adirondacks with a trail map of the Denali. The reality is that this is like looking into a bottomless pit and we are not in control of the outcome. As human beings, we all want a sense of control because then we feel safe. No one feels in control of much these days; so, how many of us really feel safe? Again, we look back to the past for the “map” to feel safe; however, the map is drawn as we speak.

So how do deal with it?

1. **Self-awareness.** It is important to take some time every day to check in with yourself and realize where your stress is and breathe. A five-minute meditation break every few hours will keep the worry and stress in check. Exercise will also work. Definitely, Laugh!
2. **Monitor your own level of reactivity.** Not everything needs to be a major crisis. Once we all accept that our stress level is so high, we can control the outcome of how we react to certain issues during the day. Keeping a good perspective on all this important.
3. **Learn these words:** “I am sorry that I overreacted.” If we can accept that we all are in this together and we are all learning this “new map,” then we will be more patient and forgiving of each other. If that is one of the lessons we take from this situation, the human race will be a lot farther ahead.
4. **Prayer,** especially the psalms of trust.

Let us be patient with each other as we make “new maps” and find our “new normal.”

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