

Weatherproofing for the Pandemic Storm

So much about the COVID-19 pandemic remains unknown. Will the country ever have enough critical tests to swiftly identify and safely quarantine infected individuals? Rapid testing, after all, is an essential first step to safely re-open the country according to scientists. And, should an individual test positive, will we ever have a system in place that enables health authorities to efficiently track down all the people who have had close contact with infected individuals, so they don't continue to unknowingly spread the disease to healthy individuals (so-called contact tracing)?

Heaven forbid, what if you become infected? How long will it take before scientists develop effective treatments for COVID-19? Twelve months, 14, 18, etc.? Ventilators, dialysis, among other life-saving medical devices manage COVID-19 symptoms, but have no appreciable impact on the course of the disease as it wreaks havoc on the body.

How about a vaccine – like flu vaccine – to prevent infection in the first place? Will there be one developed anytime soon, so people – especially elders – might for once feel safe leaving their homes?

All pandemics, fortunately, recede like the tide. However, what about its aftermath? How bad is the economy going to get? Are we on the verge of a recession like after the housing market collapsed about a decade ago or is it expected to get much worse, like the Great Depression in the 1930s?

On a more personal level, when will we be able to sit down and eat a meal in our favorite restaurants with friends? When will we be able to attend live sporting events again? The Seahawks, after all, aren't THE Seahawks without their 12th man! When will we have to stop rationing toilet paper? In short, what will life look like on the other side of this pandemic? Nobody knows.

To be clear, this has not been a staycation, despite how many cutesy videos celebs post on social media – dancing around in their pajamas, showcasing their shaggy dos and scraggly beards. During staycations, the world remains open for business and a person can come and go as they please. Moreover, during staycations, you only wear a mask if your staycation happens to fall on Halloween or you happen to live in New Orleans during Mardi Gras. You don't wear a mask during a staycation to prevent you or those around you from becoming infected by a nasty, possibly deadly virus like coronavirus.

The coronavirus and COVID-19 – the disease caused by the virus – is scary. It makes no noise, like one of those creeping ghosts that turn up in horror movies when you least expect it (cue the disarming happy music, moments before the climax!). It floats around in the air on tiny droplets. Some scientists suggest it can remain airborne for quite a while, if the “dose” is sufficiently high and you are in tight quarters like stairwells and elevators with poor air circulation. It “lives” on doorknobs, cell phones, even cardboard; in fact, it “lives” on all kinds of surfaces. It's almost invisible – so small you can't make out its tiny “royal” features (it's called CORONAVirus because, under a very powerful microscope, the protein ring resembles a “crown”). It's tasteless.

It's odorless, like carbon monoxide or a radiation leak (at least with those, we have inexpensive detectors that are widely available; there are no coronavirus detectors!). It's a germaphobe's worst nightmare.

We are truly living in frightening and uncertain times. So what should we do for our spiritual and mental health while weathering this storm? Because we will surely weather it. Pinky promise. People are resilient. Our ancestors endured plagues, world wars, famine, tsunamis, tornados, earthquakes, among other calamities too numerous to mention. They endured. And so shall we. Here are a few recommendations that might help you get through the pandemic.

Turn Off the Media Tap

Try to limit your news consumption to, perhaps, one hour per day. You might also consider limiting social media to once daily, too, as most posts likely concern the pandemic. People's fear, anxiety, outrage, among other powerful negative emotions can be contagious too!



Take Care of the Basics

We are first and foremost biological beings. Listen to your body. Take care of yourself. Don't forget to *eat healthy, well-balanced meals*. Avoid binging on junk food and refined sugar. Try cutting back on caffeine, which can heighten stress and anxiety.

Stick to *daily routines*. We are, after all, creatures of habit. Keeping busy can distract you from the cycle of negative thoughts.

Remember to *maintain a regular sleep-wake schedule*. One military officer aptly described the importance of sleep as follows: "Depriving your brain of sleep is like showing up to a battle without bullets." In other words, adequate sleep helps us think. Sleep also helps stabilize moods. Think about how cranky you get after a lousy night's sleep.

Practice sleep hygiene, like making the sleep environment pleasant (e.g., keep the bedroom cool and dark); Limiting daytime naps to 30 minutes (and don't nap too close to bedtime); Avoiding caffeine and nicotine close to bedtime; and avoiding alcohol before bed (alcohol helps you fall asleep though actually disrupts sleep cycles, so your sleep is more shallow), etc.

If medically cleared, try to *get some regular exercise*. I won't bore you with the details about how exercise is great for the mind, body, and spirit, as most of you have heard that message a million times over. It is important to note, however, that exercise (aerobic exercise, particularly) is one of the best things for keeping your brain young and healthy.

Cultivate calm. Meditation, mindfulness, relaxation, and prayer can help lift your spirits. The website <http://www.sharingmindfulness.com/audio/> provides a couple dozen free downloads of meditation exercises. Breathe2Relax is an excellent app developed by the VA. It, too, is free. There are countless other examples if you simply Google these terms or search YouTube.

Explore your creative side. Write about how the pandemic is affecting you. Write a poem. Write a pandemic song. If you have a knack for drawing or painting, pick up a pencil or paintbrush. Nobel laureate, Toni Morrison – author of such literary classics as *Beloved*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Sula* – has an amazing inspirational quote: “This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal.”



Get Back to Nature

Research shows that spending more time in nature can help reduce stress, anxiety, and depression. Scientists have been exploring the “secret ingredients” as to why being in nature is so helpful. Calming nature sounds, for example, have been associated with lowered blood pressure and reduced stress hormones detected in the blood. Stress hormones are related to “fight or flight” (that panicky feeling when you feel threatened).

Try to get back to nature daily. It doesn't matter where you go, a park or a local trail. Get out on or in the water. Just find a place that's soothing. You'll know, when you feel it. If you can't make it outside, take a moment to watch nature outside your window. Even just listening to recordings of nature and seeing pictures of nature can have a positive impact on health. Below, is a picture I took of my kids while hiking in the Canadian Rockies last summer. Looking at it lifts my spirits, as if I could actually feel the sun and mountain air on my cheeks.



Helping Others

When you are feeling helpless, empower yourself by helping others. Countless people across the nation are sewing masks for healthcare providers and for members of the community. If you have a friend in need, offer your help. People cut off from others are likely feeling lonely. Perhaps, you might try to reach out to them (e.g., call, FaceTime, or Skype them). This is especially impactful if a friend or family need to self-quarantine. Think of ways you might keep in contact safely. A supportive text telling them that you are thinking about them can go a long way!



Daily Gratitude

Start a gratitude journal. Try the following daily exercise. (1) Jot down three things you are thankful for. (2) Write about a positive event that occurred over the past 24 hours. Perhaps, a friend called out of the blue or someone dropped off extra rolls of toilet paper. Maybe, your cat made you laugh chasing her tail. (3) Write about how you made another person's day a little brighter over the past 24 hours. Perhaps, you called an elder to check in on him or her or dropped off groceries.

Most of all, remind yourself: THIS TOO SHALL PASS. Humans are incredible at solving problems. Soon enough, scientists will develop a vaccine and effective treatment. The best minds on the planet are tirelessly working on these. Remember: Over 10,000 people died in this country from typhoid fever back in the 20th Century. A vaccine and antibiotics eradicated typhoid fever. Problem solved. Diphtheria and Polio have been eradicated from the US too. Problems solved. We will get through this and be better people once this is over. Pinky promise!