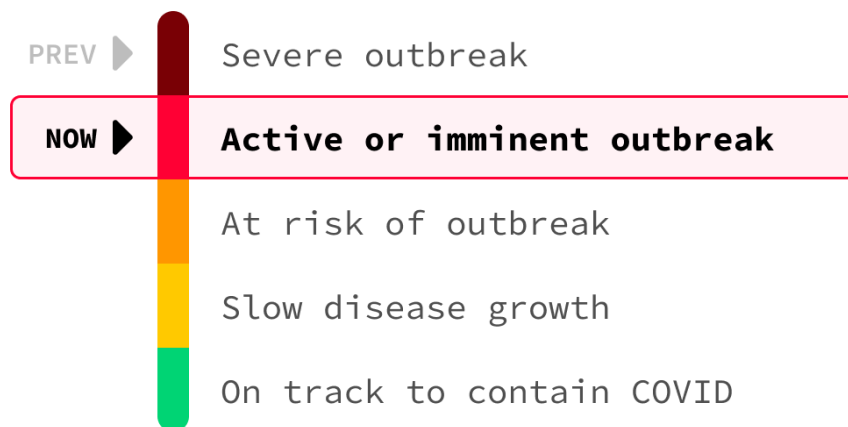


Having spiritual care conversations about moral stress

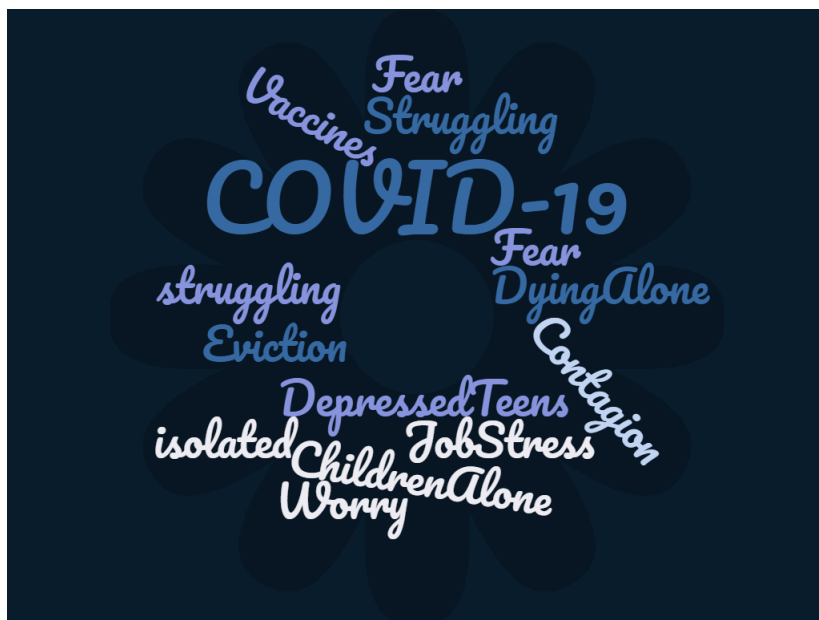
Carrie Doehring
April 7, 2021

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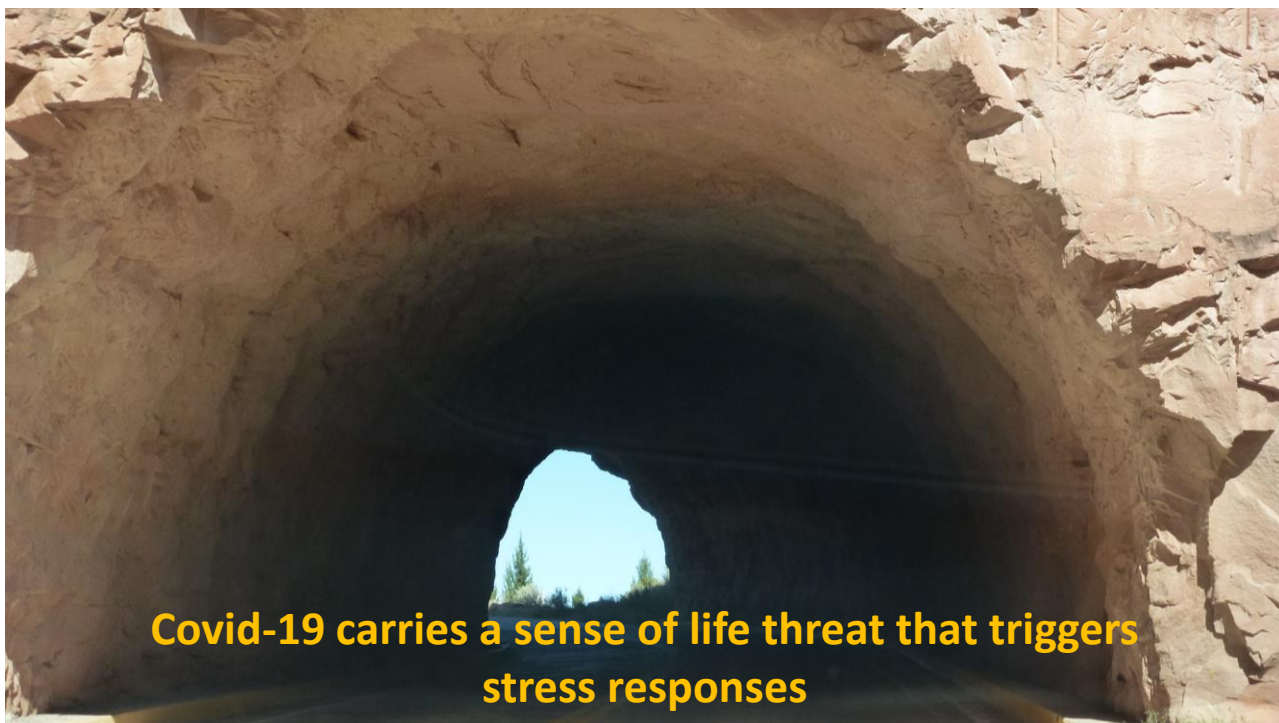
COVID-19 Stress: The ways and moments that COVID-19 stresses us out



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What helps us interrupt stress, and respond to fear with compassion?



The Body Knows – Leadership Workshop

5

5

Experiencing a Calming Practice

Deep, slow
breathing

Hands on our
hearts



Connecting to goodness through
a memory or meaningful phrase

“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want”
(Psalm 23)

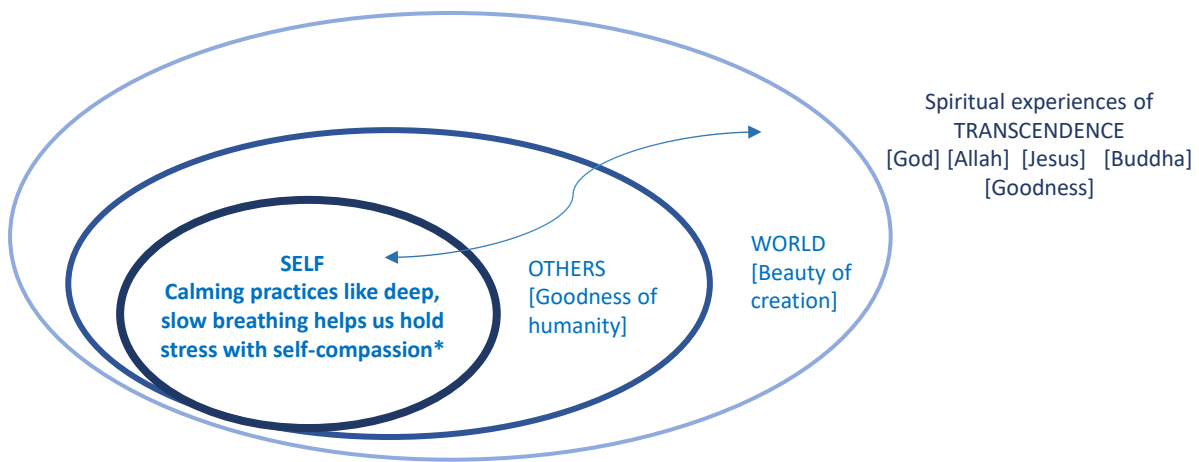
“Remember me, I will remember you”
Quran2:152

“I am a child of the universe / I have a right to be
here”

“I am safe. All beings are safe.”

6

Calming practices connect us with goodness beyond ourselves



*Trauma research has demonstrated that without taking the steps to use calming practices individuals are more likely to become increasingly stressed when thinking or speaking about struggles (van der Kolk, 2014).

Polyvagal theory: Calmness activates a body-experience of trust (life-giving relational connection to others)

7

7

The Components of Self-Compassion: Research by Kristin Neff



1. Self-kindness
2. A sense of common humanity
3. Mindfulness that help us focus on the present moment

What helps you experience self-compassion at work?

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8



9

Care of Self ⇔ Care of Others



10

Stress and our COVID-19 Fears

"Pandemics are unique in terms of causing prominent fear responses because the infection is transmitted invisibly, rapidly and with an increased risk of mortality"
(Schimmenti et al., 2020, p. 2).

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Types of fear experience	Characteristics of COVID-19 fear experience	Fear domains
Fear of the body	Sense of one's physical vulnerability due to which the body is perceived as a potential source of danger.	Bodily domain
Fear for the body	Notion that one's body needs to be protected.	
Fear of others	Threat originates from contacts with other persons, including key attachment figures, because of the possibility of being infected.	Interpersonal domain
Fear for others	Threat concerns one's contacts with other people, including the loved ones, because of the possibility of infecting them.	
Fear of knowing	Avoidance of information about the pandemic as a way of reducing the effect of the perceived threat.	Cognitive domain
Fear of not knowing	Coping with negative feelings by collecting all information about the pandemic.	
Fear of action	Indecisiveness about taking action and a sense of being paralyzed by uncertainty.	Behavioral domain
Fear of inaction	Inner pressure to take action and do anything to avoid negative feelings and thinking about the pandemic.	

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Stress in Healthcare Workers

- **Worry:** new virus without treatment protocols, risk of exposure, access to PPE, next surge, deployment to new units
- **Exhausted:** uncertainty, new phases of pandemic, poor hydration in PPE, physical and cognitive overload, longer shifts, staffing shortages, insomnia
- **Juggling:** caring for patients, teams, and families, holding everyone together, no COVID free time
- **Grief:** ill patients, high rates of death, health disparities, end of life education/decisions without families, ethical/moral distress, own loss

From American Psychological Association Town Hall March 29, 2021: Addressing Stress in America and APA's Role in This Reality

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Guided Conversations about Stress

- **create spaces for sharing struggles arising from COVID-19 stress that may be intensified by other kinds of stress related to all kinds of prejudice, like racism, sexism, and ableism**
- We are going to practice using a step-by-step guide to having a conversation about COVID-19 stress
- Those in guiding roles use steps to invite their colleague to talk about a particular experience of COVID-19 stress.
- Those in guide uses a calming practice, like slow deep breathing, so that they can fully listen, without sharing their own story, offering advice, or fixing problems.

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A guide to having conversations about stress

1. Let's begin with a moment of quiet; perhaps taking a slow, deep breath.
2. I invite you, if you wish, to share an experience of COVID stress: an everyday COVID stress or a crisis experience.
3. If it would be helpful, would you like to describe how you experience stress in your body?
4. If it would be helpful, do you want to describe any emotions that go with that experience of COVID stress?
5. Let's pause. If you wish, take a slow deep breath, and put your hand on your heart, and hold your experience of COVID stress in compassion.
6. If it seems helpful to explore moral stress, would you like to talk about conflicts in your COVID stress?
7. If it seems helpful, would you describe whether any aspect about yourself---such as your racial, gender or age identity or your hospital role was an advantage or disadvantage?
8. If this question is relevant, did you have a sense of purpose that carried you through this experience of stress?
9. Thank you for this conversation.

Adapted from Doebling, C. (In press). Religious, spiritual, and moral stress of religious leaders in pandemics: Spiritual self-care. In Z. Moon (Ed.), *Doing Theology in the Plight of Pandemics, Police Violence, and Post-Truth Politics*. Wipf & Stock.

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COVID-19 & Moral Stress

FAMILY: Being a good son or daughter, partner, parent



WORK: Doing a good job as a frontline health care provider

Moral stress

Protecting life; Doing no harm; Being true to oneself

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Moral Stress and Moral Injury

Nurses were the first profession to name and identify **moral stress/distress** as a both a personal and organizational challenge in healthcare (Cronqvist & Nyström, 2007).

Moral injury was first identified among military service members and veterans whose traumatic military experiences

- made them feel angry, guilty, disgusted, ashamed, and/or betrayed
- overwhelmed their abilities to cope and understand.

Moral stress is like moral injury in that it arises from

- feeling fear for and/or guilty about causing harm **and/or**
- feeling betrayed by those in authority who should have helped to prevent harm

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Managing Stress When Memories are Vivid



Everyone here in this workshop has made it through stressful experiences of COVID. It's as though we have rafted through turbulent waters on our COVID journeys and are now in calm waters.



Our conversations about COVID stress can vividly remind us of overwhelming moments, when it felt as though we had fallen out of the raft. Our bodies store these kind of memories as a sort of 'alarm' system. Sometimes we can re-experience these memories as if they are happening over again. This is our body's way of warning us about danger and the need to protect ourselves. It's good that our bodies have these alarm systems. When we re-experience moments of fear, it helps to use a practice like paying attention to our breathing or deep slow breathing to settle our bodies. It's as though we are entering a code to de-activate our body's alarm system.



Finding ways to manage stress when memories are vivid is like using a life vest that keeps our head above the turbulent waters of a memory. A practice like deep slow breathing reminds us that we are in calm waters now.

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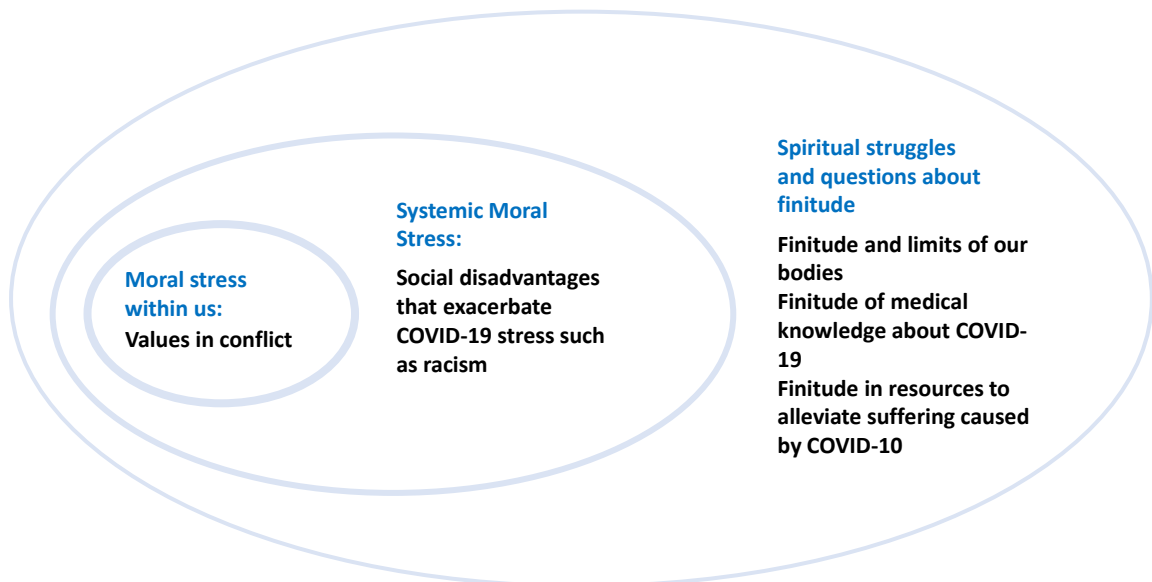
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Moral Stress → Injury

People with strong core values of
responsibility and concern for others
 will be more susceptible to moral stress.

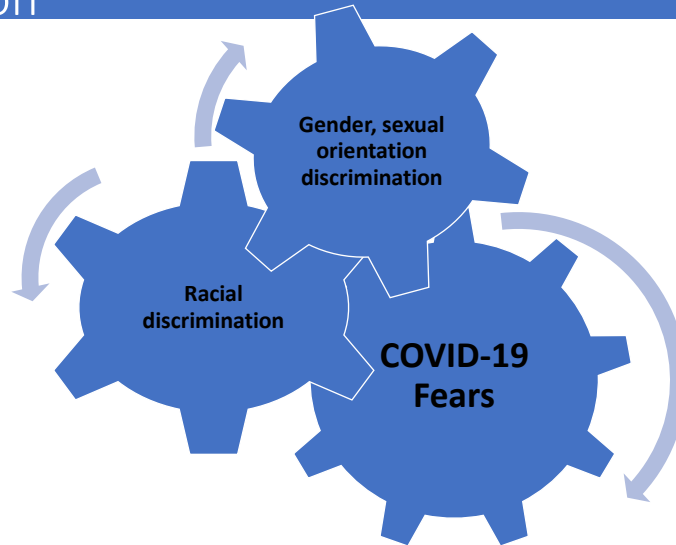
“Moral stress results from a heightened sensitivity to the possibilities of causing harm, which can be life-giving if people don’t isolate themselves but reach out to others in a process of spiritual integration in order to share responsibility for and realistically assess harm” (Doehring, 2015, p. 638).

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COVID-19 Stress gets compounded by discrimination



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Evidence-based spiritual self care

- Emerging research suggests that stressful life events are more likely to have long-lasting harmful outcomes if they elicit religious and spiritual struggles (Pomerleau et al., 2019).
- Spiritual, religious, and moral struggles may mediate relationships between stress and spiritual and psychological harm, as demonstrated by recent research (Pomerleau et al., 2019).

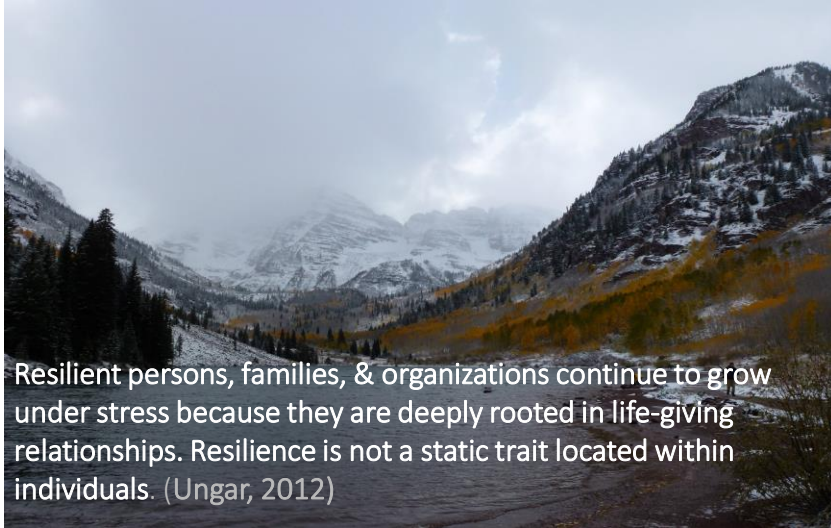
This research suggests that if we intervene and use spiritual practices and explore struggles with trusted others, then we will be able to spiritually integrate stress, instead of be broken by it.

- According to Southwick & Charney (2012), relational resilience draws on faith, religion, and spirituality, and enhances social support, meanings, and life purpose.

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Resilience: Relational & Interactional



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RESILIENCE & CONNECTIONS: Consider Aspens



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Practicing conversations about COVID-19 stress

Those guiding the conversation will

- Use the conversational steps as a guide
- Use stress-relieving practices (like slow deep breathing) so that they can listen closely without feeling like they need to fix problems, offer advice, or share their own experiences.
- As soon as your conversation are over, rejoin the plenary group

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Group Discussion

- What was it like to be guided in a conversation about your particular experience of COVID-19 stress?
- What was it like for guides to follow steps?
- What was it like for guides to try using a calming practice to listen to each response?

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