

Reflections and survival tips in the current situation

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We're now a couple of weeks into this new way of being and ministering. Drawing on the conversations I've had, both individually and in group Zoom rooms, here are some reflections and survival tips.

Adapting: the early days

- We are all creatures of habit and we mostly prefer life to be predictable and normal, but the current situation is a disruption to our normal way of life. When we move into an unusual environment it takes time to adjust to it, but eventually we will. Don't worry if it still feels odd and strange: as time passes you will naturally adapt to the temporary 'new normal'.
- Establishing a routine will help you adapt. A routine gives a sense of control and helps reduce uncertainty by building a pattern into the day or week.
- You may need to revise your routine again as the situation evolves.

Ministry and worship

- A wise nun once said to me, "if today is a day I don't believe in (or feel close to) God, the Sister next to me is probably doing ok and her belief will carry me through". This is also true in our congregations and churches: our times of doubt and uncertainty can be helped by being with, and ministering to, other believers. If we're used to being uplifted and fed by collective worship, we may sometimes struggle on our own. Find other ways of being fed; for example, join in with a streamed service which you haven't prepared, or sing hymns / worship songs, or spend time with nature.
- It is natural to be competitive, to compare ourselves with others, and sometimes to feel inferior as a result. As most church services happen at similar times, and few were previously streamed or broadcast, clergy had limited opportunities to see others. For the first time there is the opportunity to view what others are doing in their online services, both within the Diocese and across the globe. This can be a blessing and lead to new insights into ways of leading worship but can also leave clergy feeling their own online offering is inadequate. Try to play to your strengths and do what you do best, and not compare yourself with others in this way.

Anxiety and low mood

- It's ok to not be ok. At times your emotions may be all over the place.
- It is normal to be feeling stressed in the current situation. Stress and the feelings associated with it are by no means a reflection that you cannot do your job, or that you or your faith are weak.
- It is normal to feel vulnerable and overwhelmed by what's going on. This is especially true if you've previously experienced trauma or have a mental health problem, or a medical condition which makes you more at risk of complications from coronavirus.
- It is normal to alternate between almost forgetting what's going on, and feeling it is awful.

Self-care

- Pay attention to your own needs and feelings, especially when you're feeling stressed.
- Prioritise healthy activities which you enjoy and find relaxing.
- Try to have your daily outdoor exercise, keep regular sleep routines and eat healthy food.
- Limit your exposure to the news. A near-constant stream of news reports can cause anyone to feel anxious or distressed. Access the news at specific times during the day from reputable websites or broadcasters and avoid listening to or following rumours. It is good to remain informed and educated but aim to do so in a controlled way.
- Use social media wisely. Seek out those you want to follow; and try to avoid mindless scrolling through updates as this can cause low mood. Active use of social media, rather than passive, can help: see [here](#) for ideas.
- Take breaks from your work and be aware your normal working pattern may need to change. Managing the current situation and the pace of change is intense and tiring, so be sure to take regular breaks during the working day. You may find it difficult to get an uninterrupted day off, especially if you are in a leadership role or are involved in a community response to vulnerable people in your area, so it is important to take chunks of time throughout the week instead.
- Holidays will be different. Most licensed clergy go away from home for a holiday, as it can be difficult to fully unwind when living on the job. The current situation makes travel impossible, and there may be the additional need to stay partly connected (as stated above). Ask yourself which aspects of holidays you value most, and try to replicate these at home: e.g. if you need a lie-in or a leisurely start to the day make sure you get these and tell all who may contact you that you won't respond until the afternoon; or if you value hours with your family or a good book then put boundaries round any work you may need to do.
- Know what feeds you, and spend time doing it. Time spent in nature, or with family, or in online socialising, or with books, films, or music can all feed us and give us a much-needed breathing space from the current situation. Spend time in a comfort place within your home: have an early night or re-read your favourite book or watch your favourite film.
- Avoid overuse of alcohol or food, which are common comfort strategies.

So near and yet so far away.....

- If you live with others, create some ground rules of how to survive lockdown. How will you structure the days, and what behaviour isn't acceptable (e.g. does everyone need to take part in keeping the house tidy)? Even young children can be involved in this discussion.
- Everyone needs space of their own sometimes. Many children will have their own bedroom to hide away in, but most couples will need to talk about where each will find their own space.
- Don't sweat the small stuff: back away from potential arguments sooner than you normally would, and bite back the sharp response. Remember everyone may be struggling with being at home all the time, and tensions can easily rise.
- We're with our household all the time but can feel miles away from everyone else. Keep connected with others by phone or video call or social media: this is especially important if you live alone.

Children

- It is good to talk to children in an age-appropriate way about what is happening. Trying to hide too much can be counterproductive, as their unspoken fears and imaginings may be worse than the reality. Every child has their own way of expressing emotions: sometimes engaging in a creative activity, such as playing or drawing can facilitate this process. Children feel relieved if they can express and communicate their feelings in a safe and supportive environment.
- Children feel safe with routines. Maintain familiar family routines, or if this isn't possible create new ones.
- The British Psychological Society has advice sheets on helping children at this time, which can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

Blessings in the darkness

- In the middle of such disruption to our normal lives we may find blessings and unexpected pleasures. There may be more time with our children or for family meals, more space for reading or gardening, and more incentive to spend time talking with distant family and friends. Make the most of these and enjoy them.
- Be kind to yourself if it doesn't seem like this: sometimes the darkness is just dark.
- Seize moments of space when you can: e.g. 20 seconds of handwashing can also be spent singing or praying or simply being aware of your surroundings, a brief (and at the moment very frequent) pause in the day.

Suggested resources

- The Church of England [Guidance on mental health and wellbeing and Coronavirus](#).
- The NHS have advice on [looking after your mental health](#).
- The Royal College of GPs [recommend these resources](#) which contain general advice in addition to mental health tips.