

Early on in the pandemic we offered a few pieces of work aimed at helping us to look after ourselves and others in light of the inevitable associated distress. However, while the pandemic continues, the nature of the challenge we face has changed to one of a much more chronic nature.

The ability to cope fuelled solely by adrenaline and caffeine ceased long time ago. It is abundantly clear we are not going to be able to 'white-knuckle' our way through this. Any notion that we would be 'back to normal' and 'out the other side' quickly has gone. In its place is an ever-present, gnawing, low-level uncertainty – perhaps even stress or anxiety. When this kind of feeling continues to bubble away under the surface for so long there can be a number of negative effects. The following aims to highlight some of these and encourage us towards establishing sustainable rhythms of life that will enable us and our churches to not only to survive, but even thrive during this time.

Fatigue. One issue of dealing with constant emotional flux and uncertainty is sheer fatigue – whether physical, emotional, psychological, compassion, etc. What sets the current experience apart from earlier in the pandemic is that many churches have regained some of their 'busyness'. We are beginning to re-start many of our original ministries (in new and innovative ways) perhaps on top of new things we discovered earlier on in the lockdown. We do so, of course, with the added complication of ever-changing restrictions and a list of seemingly endless decisions to be made. We must recognise how fatiguing this is in ourselves and others. Allow for the fact that it may take far less than usual to tire us out. We may need to adopt different rhythms of life and ministry that are more sustainable and resilient in light of this. Take a break and rest without feeling guilty about it. Also encourage others in your team and congregation to do the same.

Isolation. Many people living on their own are already dreading a very lonely winter and Christmas. Young families struggling to cope with the burdens of childcare are worried how they will keep going for another 6 months without help from others. Grandparents are missing grandchildren. Friends are missing socialising. The list goes on. We must be honest about the reality of this enforced isolation. As a church family we can and must provide support and community for one another as we plan for and maintain new ways to connect with and support one another.

Stress. When we carry around low-level feelings of unease and confusion it can be easy for things to 'build up'. Small things quickly add up to become very big things sometimes leading to surprisingly dramatic or volatile responses. Add to this the fact that much of our present ministry carries a greater sense of risk as we find ourselves exempt from some of the restrictions governing other areas of life. This brings a great sense of responsibility which can be a challenging burden to bear. We can sometimes help ourselves by limiting the amount and sources of information we consume regarding Covid. In addition, this is a good opportunity to recognise our creaturely dependence upon God. We can only deal with and control so much. Try not to pre-empt or anticipate potential issues too far down the line – sufficient for the day is the trouble thereof.

Selfishness. When faced with the current circumstances, we can tend to become rather introspective and curved in on ourselves. When we are so acutely aware of the difficulties in

our own lives, it can become difficult to notice, or even think to look for, the needs of others. This may be the needs of our church family or wider community. As those called to imitate the love of Christ we must be especially on the defence against such tendencies. As we bring our own needs to Christ and experience his abundant provision and satisfaction, let us learn once again the “freedom of self-forgetfulness” as we seek to love others.

Conflict. As more and more of our church activities need to be considered in new ways, this is of course an immense joy, but also a challenge as imperfect (and stressed out) people can easily rub one another up the wrong way. When experiencing difficulties ourselves, it can be easy to fail to see other people’s perspective or we can impute uncharitable motives or assumptions to the actions of others. We must be careful to think the best of one another and seek to be ministers of reconciliation and peace in our communities. This will mean creating an environment of honesty and forgiveness, where accounts are kept short and grace and understanding abounds.

Despondency. There hasn’t been much good news recently. In addition, as we journey on together through these current trials, we will no doubt become acutely aware of the weaknesses, imperfections, and limitations in ourselves, others and our community. This is often an uncomfortable, painful and messy experience. However, this is also frequently the place where God’s grace is most wonderfully at work. It was in and through the darkest moment of human history that our salvation was won. Therefore, in these current dark times there is ample hope that God is at work building his kingdom and transforming us into the likeness of his Son. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor 12:9)