

Getting our arms around the trauma of COVID 19 in terms of churches coming back together in faith and life: *Mindfulness*

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Crisis=Circumstances; that is, a crisis is a circumstance to which a person needs to respond and in which he or she believes the response may have life-shaking consequences. Notice that there are **three** elements pastors and church leaders must consider in the COVID 19 crisis:

- The crisis situation (real or imagined).
- The individual in crisis; and
- The response he or she makes to the crisis.

Wisdom rests in the heart of a man of understanding, but it makes itself known even in the midst of fools. Proverbs 14:33 (ESV)

This series of articles is offered to provide pastors and church leaders insights to bring God’s wisdom into the ongoing task of renewing unity in the church through this current crisis—and those we know are yet to come.

All three require careful consideration in relationship to the obligations to and the promise of God. Pastoral “First Aid” on the spot must focus first to stabilize the individual to buy time to get them more aid. The qualitative damage or deforming due to the experience will vary across the constructs of trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy.

The crisis situation (real or imagined)

Trauma destroys the social systems of care, protection, and meaning that support human faith and life. The healing process requires the reconstruction of these systems. The core experiences of disempowerment and disconnection from others are likely the universals across all segments of the pastors, church workers, church leaders and households of America. Yet. The qualitative damage or deforming due to the experience will vary across the constructs of trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy. Just as these constructs were initially formed—they must be re-formed in relationship with other people.

Trauma is a thief which “robs, steals and destroys” (John 10:10) one of their sense of power and control over their own life. For the American Church seeking to re-form care, protection, and meaning—each individual must find their place as author and arbiter of their healing journey. As with Job, others default to offering advice, support, assistance, affection, and care—but not healing.

As we begin, let us think of trauma as: the response to any event that shatters our safe world so that it is no longer a place of refuge. Trauma is the aftermath of a state of crisis. What we once saw as a safe world is no longer safe. What we once saw as predictable is now unpredictable. Live in a state of crisis

for any extended time and you will feel helpless. You experience this, to some degree in a crisis and still bounce back, but in a trauma, you may experience far more difficulty bouncing back.

What separates the experience of crisis from trauma? Put simply, the degree of overload of emotions.

As you read through the following list of responses to COVID 19, which of the following statements best describes your perception of being impacted today, by the pandemic?

1. “Nothing happened...”
2. “Something happened, but ...”
3. “Something happened, and I’m angry about it!”
4. “Something happened, and it cost me a lot.”
5. “Something happened, and I have overcome (healed from) it”.

Self-awareness is a vital component in sorting out where we momentarily find ourselves on the crisis-trauma continuum. It is important to note that your selection is indeed accurate—for you based on how well the social systems of care, protection, and meaning existed for you as this drama unfolded around you. For many, you may even have thought of points along the way where one response applies, but then, no longer does now. Crisis tends to be a state (temporary helpless) while trauma tends to develop into a trait (long standing part of one’s personhood). That is from what we experience, to who we are.

Let us zoom in a bit closer to what each statement infers in terms of self-awareness to the first half of 2020:

1. “Nothing happened...” the COVID 19 experience (to date) has not been identical as a nation, as a state, as a region, as a county, city, town, or township. Those impacted first are already far down the road of destruction of their systems of care, protection and meaning at their intersections of Faith & Life. But, for those in areas not yet impacted by large numbers of known cases and deaths... what has happened in terms of collateral consequences of 15, then 30 Days to Stop the Spread... has meant little disruption of their systems of care, protection, and meaning. For the pre-symptomatic and asymptomatic—the desire is to keep the actual threat of contracting the disease out of their minds. All emotion tends to be a package deal—disconnection from negative interpretations usually means few positive ones either.
2. “Something happened, but ...” here, the individual acknowledges that something has happened (at home, work, school, or church), but actively attempts to convince himself or herself (and others) that the experience is not harmful and has not caused them any problems—even though it has. In developing the *HomeLifeProfile*, the intent was to clearly convey the 14 distinct segments within church life and their potentially unique intersections of Faith & Life. Mixed feelings tend to be expressed in “yes, but” thoughts and statements. The ability to doubt the reality of what has happened, or its effects on their current (and future) life, can be strong in this experience. Some statements during this COVID 19 developing story:
 - “It didn’t happen enough for it to really matter.”
 - “I know things were going too well—this is just a correction.”
 - “I can’t deny all this has happened—but it’s not my fault that it happened.”
 - “Everything happens for a reason.”
 - “I can’t do anything about it now. There’s no sense of me even talking about it.”

In this experience many people find that a constant argument or civil war goes on in their heads: “This is really happening!” quickly followed by “No it is not!” and later, “Yes, it is!”

3. “Something happened, and I’m angry about it!” This is the “ah-ha” moment where one recognizes not only that something happened, but that it really is doing harm to himself, herself, or to those they love. The dynamic here is the beginning to believing that the loss of care, protection and meaning matters because they matter. Up to this point in the COVID 19 adventure this individual has squelched their anger or been unable to feel it—so this may be their first recognition that experiencing and expressing anger can be helpful and healthy. For Christ followers, it is this protesting with God that begins a closer conversation with God. Yet, for many, this “opening to anger” brings fear that they will lose control and hurt other people or themselves. This fear can be valid and healthy awareness of anger’s destructive potential tends to protect people from acting out thoughts and impulses that can be triggered very quickly. A key while engaging individuals holding this experience is knowing that it is almost impossible to be simultaneously angry about something happening to you and blame yourself for it. Expressing anger can bring relief from self-blaming thoughts. COVID 19 trauma will include much self-blame as the complexity of the trauma come into light. Of concern is that anger becomes the central player in one’s life—and faith.
4. “Something happened, and it cost me a lot.” At this point enters sadness [def. comes when a man or woman realizes that they were wronged and that he or she has lost something that can never be retrieved]. Grieving kicks in as the experience reaches this point on the trail of trauma. But this is a “new grieving” because the facing and reflecting on multiple losses can bring a great swell of sadness. Sadness is legitimate and justified as a response to such losses—and coming to know this sadness can bring a great strength and deep appreciating of suffering that are a part of being a Christ follower, and eventually extending our courage to others.

This experience is accompanied by becoming OVERLY sensitive. Not only for their own pain and suffering, but that of other people, and pets or other animals. They may cry easily and often. Their tears will change (and so those coming alongside them must have opportunities to see this as this happens). Tears begin to increase healing and strength. This shift to other awareness further floods the emotions toward captive of the trauma.

5. “Something happened, and I have overcome (healed from) it”. A phrase heard repeatedly representing this experience in the Combat Trauma efforts was, “I now have a scar—no longer an open wound.” When this was expressed there was less seeing oneself as helpless, hopeless, and defective. The scar is there—the past happened, but there is a peace that is developing.

If you were to be honest, it is safe to imagine days where you personally have bounced across the entire continuum—more than once! And if asked at any one of those shifts in your experienced you responded differently—you would be truthful!

Being Mindful is the “if I can only do one thing” tool for strengthening **acknowledgement**. Mindfulness is the increasingly lost art of being fully present in the moment with all your attention focused in one direction or on one person. As a pastor or church leader who is married (or in a relationship with

marriage as a possibility) the COVID 19 experience is NOT just about you! Yes, we can focus our attention **both** in one direction **and** on one person in normal times—but what about in a pandemic?

The best predictor of our struggle with mindfulness of other people's experience is how we did with acknowledgement at home, during these past months. Our ability to acknowledge our spouse's perspective—that is, their experience, best measures mindfulness. If my wife is expressing her experience and I am looking over her shoulder at the breaking news updates on the tv screen or checking my phone for texts from church or just being aware of what is going on around me—but not here, I've blown it!

While complete mindfulness is impossible (parents of toddlers, can I hear an Amen), it is useful to repeat out loud, "clear the cache". With our spouse, we have to clear the "cache" of the stuff of church—which kept many of us up at night as we stressed our on-line services, zoom small groups, and uplifting our staffs as safe and predictable left the building.

Mindfulness takes on a form of **other awareness** acknowledging the feelings or perspectives of another person by letting that person do three particularly important things:

- Let that person know that what you invited or what they have shared with you of their experience has made an impression on you. Any reaction is better than *no* reaction. The opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference. Valuing our spouse's expression of their experience, before attempting to share ours is high level mindfulness.
- Acknowledging the feelings of another person means letting that person know that her or his feelings matter to you. The top mistake with our spouse is to say to our spouse that she or he should not feel that way. I learned early in marriage (lots of trial and error) is that initial feelings are not necessarily right or wrong—**they just are**. When someone is upset—it is irrelevant to step in and determine if another person *should be* upset. At the first expression of disappointment, it is wise to simply acknowledge her or his hurt and emotion.
- Express that you are working to understand what she or he is saying: an indication you are struggling to understand the emotion content of what your spouse has taken the risk (or expressed in the moment) is saying. Why? This takes the pressure off you to find the perfect response—when you do not yet know all that is being experienced. When your spouse has finished sharing their feelings, the appropriate way to acknowledge those feelings may include:
 - Say nothing and simply nod in agreement
 - Put back into your own words what you heard your spouse say
 - Ask a clarifying question, "when you said _____, what did you mean?"
 - Ask if there is anything else, they would like to add
 - Ask your spouse what she or he needs from you right now
 - Offer to pray for your spouse

You are working to acknowledge and attend to the perspective of your spouse will strengthen the climate and bond of your marriage. The same principles apply to everyone who shared your household through the COVID 19 experience.

Lapses in mindfulness fuel disunity. Let me repeat, mindfulness is the art of being fully present in the moment with all your attention focused in one direction or on one person. The human cognitive capacity to simultaneously interweave variables (people, places, or things) at one time is 7 ± 2 . So that means, on a good day (non-crisis/trauma) people can handle somewhere between 5 and 9 moving parts in their balance of faith and life. What I have learned over the past 40+ years of crisis counseling is that being in the state of crisis cuts whatever the individual's former capacity was in half! A high functioning person's capacity is reduced to 4, maybe 5. A low functioning person's capacity is reduced to 3 or 4. When the trauma tends to develop into a trait (long standing part of one's personhood) reduce that capacity by half, again.

Know well the condition of your flocks,

and give attention to your herds,

for riches do not last forever;

and does a crown endure to all generations? Proverbs 27:23-24 (ESV)

Want to quickly lose all your relational equity that you worked so hard to gain before the COVID 19 intrusion? **Fail to guard your heart** against lapses in mindfulness as you regather the flock.

One of my fondest memories as a child was my dad's adventurous uncle taking me out on the Idaho high prairie to meet his shepherd friend. We drove a faint dirt trail in my uncle's 1951 Ford to his friend's mule driven wagon—and his flock of sheep. We could see a storm forming on the horizon and he and his dog gathered the sheep along an outcropping of rock just as the thunder cracked and the rain poured. As we huddled under a tarp soaking wet, I asked the shepherd "did the sheep appreciate all he did to keep them safe?" I still remember the look on his face some 60 years later! He stroked his sheep dog's head and said, "son, you've got a lot to learn about sheep."

As we seek to regather, we must come to grips with our thunder and rain—and that of our households, first. Why? Because as we return, people **will not want to hear of our experience**—only know that you desire to ask about, listen too, acknowledge their experience and be mindful of them in their struggles.

IF we do mindfulness at home well, and **IF** we then do mindfulness at church well, **THEN** we can build from the relational equity our ministries can bring into the future, from our past efforts. Everything helps and hope bring into our healing, that of our spouses and families, can do the same in the homes of our church.

IF we do not—THEN expect disunity.