Coping with moral struggles arising from coronavirus stress: Spiritual self-care for chaplains and religious leaders

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The acute stress of the coronavirus stress is overwhelming abilities to cope. Many are anxious about how to protect life. As communities and nations, we are facing dire limits for protecting lives entrusted to us in families, communities, healthcare, hospice, and prison systems. Many lament that human rights like access to healthcare and paid sick leave are not universally shared. Many feel betrayed by untrustworthy leaders.

Chaplains and religious leaders have spiritual care vocations committed to protecting life within healthcare, military, correctional, educational, and hospice organizations. Many are providing disaster care as the tsunami of the coronavirus swamps capacities to protect life, especially for those most at risk because of intensifying economic inequalities that are worsening the spread of coronavirus among those on economic margins (Fisher & Bubola, 2020).

Acute stress becomes moral stress when core values are compromised (Doehring, 2019; Graham, 2017). Our vocations of spiritual care make "Do no harm" a cornerstone value. How do we care for others in our professional roles while protecting the lives of those most vulnerable? How do we offer spiritual care in preparing healthcare teams for making ethical decisions when there is absolute scarcity of medical resources? How do those on the frontlines of coronavirus spiritual care protect the lives of those most vulnerable in their own families? At an economic level, social distancing necessary for protecting life is imperiling financial survival for many. How do we care for those out of work who cannot afford food or rent? These moral stresses are magnified exponentially for many people whose work brings them into close interactions with those whose lives are in jeopardy.

Moral stress also impacts religious leaders, chaplains, and chaplain educators suddenly thrust into urgent professional demands of offering online spiritual care and chaplain education at a distance. They face moral stress of doing the best job they can in new modalities of care and education. Many are learning how to teach, lead communities of faith, and provide spiritual care online while juggling intense family demands of caring for children and elderly family member.

What helps?

What helps each of us experience a sense of calm when stress physiological and emotionally overwhelms us? What has been your spiritual 'oxygen mask' in past crises? What has helped you take into your body the 'oxygen' of calmness so that you can care for self while you caring for others? Disaster care begins with protecting life literally through physical means (water, food, safe shelter, sleep). Once these basic physical needs are addressed, spiritual caregivers can

reflect metaphorically on where they find spiritual safe shelter, and what helps them take into their bodies a felt sense of calm, goodness, and hope.

Many breath-centered spiritual practices begin with a deep breath, held for a few second then slowly released. Taking deep, relaxing breathes every time we experience stress overload attunes us to the particular ways we experience stress in our bodies, what sets off stress, and the intense emotions that go with stress. Our stress response is like a fingerprint with unique patterns shaped by our life experiences, especially of trauma, and our vulnerabilities, such as health and mental health vulnerabilities. Formative experiences may make us vulnerable to anxiety, panic, worry, ruminations, depression, despair, and cravings to cope using addictive substances. Using breath-centered practices helps us slow down our body's stress response so that we can compassionately understand our particular emotional and psychological responses to stress and become less emotionally reactive.

Calming practices are vital in our lives and homes right now, when stress so easily makes us emotionally reactive to each other. Relational tensions in intimate, family, and work relationships are likely to worsen. Just as acute stress is exacerbated by psychological and spiritual vulnerabilities (tendencies to worry, ruminate, and experience religious and spiritual doubts), so, too, acute stress is likely to intensify habitual relational conflicts. Internalizing such stress increases physiological stress, and makes people ruminate in isolation. Externalizing stress makes people blame others and more likely to act out in harmful ways. Unfortunately, the 'bad' relational moments when we lose it have a much greater impact than the 'good' moments when we are able to remain calm and compassionate with each other (Baumeister & Tierney, 2019). At its worst, relational stress can jeopardize physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being for those who internalize stress, and trigger neglect and even abuse for those who externalize stress. Calming practices can save lives.

It's hard to do spiritual self-care and reflection by ourselves. It helps to find trusted others with whom to explore the particular ways we each experience stress. Seek out people who will respect your value and beliefs, and the spiritual practices that are uniquely meaningful to you. Test whether sharing your stress overwhelms others, making anxieties, fears, worries, and anger contagious. As much as possible, seek out spiritual care and offer care to each other that does no harm (Doehring, 2019). Exclusivist beliefs are insidious across faith traditions and communities. We are all tempted to become fundamentalists in urging upon others the spiritual practices, values, and beliefs that have 'worked' for us. Find trusted others who resist the temptation to save you through their testimonials of what is saving them spiritually when stress overwhelms them. Be wary of inclusive beliefs—that there is 'one God' or a common belief about suffering and hope at the heart of all religious traditions (Prothero, 2010). Insidious inclusivism, of which we all fall prey, must be set aside because it erodes trust that our unique spiritual orientations to suffering and hope will not be respected.

Find trusted others with whom to share your spiritual, moral, and religious struggles. Religion becomes toxic when it condemns; for example, when people feel that suffering caused by sickness is punishment from a judging God. Childhood experiences may make people susceptible to feeling judged when they experience acute stress, in ways that intensify shame, guilt, fear, self-blame and self-disgust, making it more likely that such divine or religious

struggles will be kept private. Spiritual struggles arise when practices that used to connect people with beauty lose their spiritual power. Moral struggles involve compromised values and beliefs. Research on religious and spiritual struggles demonstrate their frequency for people of many major religious orientations, and negative health outcomes for people experiencing chronic struggles (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Krause, & Ironson, 2015; Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Weissberger, & Exline, 2016; Abu-Raiya, Exline, Pargament, & Agbaria, 2015; Bradley, Uzdavines, Pargament, & Exline, 2016). Using spiritual practices that foster self-compassion may help you understand how your emotional response to stress gives rise to religious, spiritual and moral struggles. Trusted others can help you explore such struggles and find intentional lifegiving beliefs and values in the face of suffering.

Once you have practices that re-center you every time you experience acute stress, you may be able to create family and workplace accountability for using calming practices and exploring shared values. Remember that values are part of each person's sacred ground and that differences in values are often experienced politically (Haidt, 2012). If you can identify shared values, strategize on how to practice those today while using calming practices. Find moments to check in with each other, so that circles of compassionate spiritual accountability can keep us afloat.

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