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Finding Calm Facing Corona

Steven C. German

News reports which are ongoing and frightening...expanding awareness of the dramatic spread of a threatening disease potentially impacting our lives, and the lives of our friends and our family...the growing anguish about the lack of clarity as to how we will respond locally and nationally to protect the health of our population...all contributors to the increased levels of stress we are experiencing since the introduction of the Coronavirus COVID -19 into our world. It is not as if the Coronavirus is a new organism for us to confront, since a tamer version of this virus is a culprit for the common cold. In addition, it's not as if this is the only time that our stress levels have been raised by the introduction of a new pathogen. I am sure we can all recall other invasive pathogens which had the potential for tragedy such as the SARS virus, the bird flu, Legionnaire's disease, the Ebola virus, and for those of us old enough to remember, the terror created by the HIV crisis.

Now confronted with the encroachment of the COVID-19 virus in our communities, we are forced to consider a range of possibilities new to us. Will we fall victim to the more serious consequences of infection or will we have minimum symptoms? Where can we go beyond our homes and still feel safe? What routines in our daily lives will we be able to maintain? How can we shop in stores for the basics needed for survival without increasing our risk of exposure? What will we do without our favorite sports teams or shows and theaters which provide the entertainment needed to take our minds off of what's going on? These are only some of the questions we are asking ourselves. And what's so frustrating about considering these and other questions is that despite all of the information being communicated to the public, we have no clear answers. We have entered a world which is filled with uncertainty and no specific path to follow as we try to maintain some normalcy in our lives. In addition, our new reality is that we can never be sure whether or not we will be exposed to and impacted by the COVID-19 virus even if we are doing everything we can to protect ourselves.

The changes thrust upon us and the corresponding lack of certainty creates in each of us a high degree of stress, not surprisingly so, since researchers have known for years that levels of stress increase as we start to feel we have less control. As we feel increasingly uncertain about the world around us, this sense of losing control becomes more pronounced. Although we are getting much critical information from digital communication and the media, the picture also being painted for

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us is that we do not know what will happen in our environment and how will we in fact be impacted personally by changes when and if they occur. To complicate this disturbing picture, researchers know that as our stress levels increase the ability of our body's immune system to fend off illness decreases, not a good thing to happen if we are exposed to the COVID-19 virus. Along with the uncomfortable feeling that comes with stress, recognizing this connection between increased stress and the reduced effectiveness of our immune system should be powerful motivation for finding ways to start to feel more in control.

Well then, what can we do to gain a sense of control? As a starter, it begins with the recognition that there are some things in our lives which we cannot control. For example, despite whatever we and public officials do to protect us, there is still no assurance that we will not contract the virus and encounter symptoms. However, what we can control is how we respond to the challenge of the viral invasion. As part of this effort, we can research all the ways available for preventing infection, implement our personal action plan for prevention, and then hold ourselves accountable to the plan. We can take walks outside, appreciating what nature offers at this time of year with the increased amount of light, the sounds of the returning birds, and the emergence of plant life. Nature has its own rhythms and these can act as a sedative during periods of stress. Stopping even briefly to focus our attention on a tree, plant, or a passing cloud, etc., is an element of mindfulness practice which has been shown to reduce stress levels.

Evaluating what we are thinking can be a valuable activity as well, since often how we think about things determines how we feel. The American humorist Will Rogers once said, "Worrying is like paying on a debt that may never come due." True, there is a lot to worry about during this period, and we can continue to think about all of the things which might go wrong in our community and in our lives and home. However, instead of worrying we can choose to focus our thinking on all of the steps we are taking to keep ourselves and our homes safe, and acknowledge that we are doing the best we can to avoid illness. In addition, we can concentrate on those elements of our life which give us joy or satisfaction, be it the positive relationships we have established, the projects we can engage in, the new recipes we would like to experiment with, the books we would like to read, etc. Taking a series of deep breathes, especially ones that make use of our diaphragm muscle, can help us to refocus our thinking in a more positive direction, as well as helping us to relax. While all of these are actions we can take individually, it is important not to forget that we are part of a community and that others are equally stressed by what is happening. Talking about our concerns with others, and hearing their concerns, can go a long way to reducing our own stress.

As we all struggle to get through this challenging period, there are some things we can take away from the impact of the COVID-19 virus. For sure, its introduction in our country is a clear and frightening reminder that life has a lot of risks. Not since the aftermath of 9-11 have we all been

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so attuned to the possibility of harm in our communities and personal lives. As the threat evolves, hopefully each of us is beginning to see the importance of working together as a community while getting through a crisis. We are all made better to the degree we can work together. Finally, it is important to recognize those areas in our life in which we do have control, and those in which we have no control, and to apportion our mental and physical energies in ways which allow us to be more effective while acknowledging this difference. If we can come out of this difficult period with at least having greater personal awareness in these areas, perhaps we'll all become stronger going forward.

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