

GUIDELINES FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL CARE DURING QUARANTINE IN RELIGIOUS AND PRIESTLY LIFE

In these last days we are facing a situation that, for most of us, is new and involves a major change in routines, work, schedules, tasks, activity and mission focus. It is time to adapt to a reality that is imposed on us in a relatively unexpected way and not always easy to manage; but it can also be lived, from the Spirit and the trust, as an opportunity for growth and creativity.

For this reason, the Team of Religious and Priestly Life of the Clinical Unit of Psychology (UNINPSI) of the Universidad Pontificia Comillas offers a **simple guide with some indications for the psychological care of the religious communities and the priestly life**. We hope that in this time we can continue to take care of each other responsibly - those near and those far away - and that each one can feel accompanied in their medical, psychological and spiritual needs.

INTRODUCTION

1. **Understanding the reality you are living in as closely as possible** and adapting to it will be very useful. It is important that you recognize the situation - personal, community, social, ecclesial - in which you find yourself and do so seriously and sincerely; but without generating unfounded patterns of alarm.
2. Keeping yourself informed is good and necessary. Ensure that you receive official, adequate, sufficient and truthful information. However, the extreme of an excess of information - especially through social networks - can generate, in some people, psychological discomfort. Over-information can produce feelings of unease, anxiety, fear, over-evaluation, irrational ideas, negative thoughts and other emotional reactions that ultimately backfire. **Avoid becoming saturated and overloaded**, especially when it comes to unconfirmed and dubious data and comments. It may help you to choose a few specific moments of the day beforehand (probably no more than three) to inform yourself as truthfully and as accurately as you can about the current situation.
3. **Follow the recommendations of the official bodies** and the action plans developed by them: Ministry of Health, Autonomous Communities, Regional Ministries, Town Halls, etc. Above all, pay attention if you live with someone who presents symptoms of infection, who has been infected or who needs isolation.

THE COMMON LIFE

You will probably spend more time and share more space with fellow community members over the course of these weeks. This situation constitutes an opportunity to live from fraternity and unity of spirit. But it also requires that we be attentive so that the new

scenario of living together may be, at the same time, a place of meeting, peace, closeness and freedom.

1. First of all, remember that **we are not all the same** and we do not respond in the same way to a situation of tension or a moment of difficulty. Try to understand the reactions of others and accept your own without unnecessary guilt. If necessary, find moments of greater calm and serenity to be able to talk - with maturity and in an honest way - about what is happening.
2. **Generate alternative conversations.** There are many different topics to talk about. Identify them and take advantage of the time to do so with less haste than usual. Expand your view of other realities and people in our world. It is also a good time to take special care of spiritual conversation. It is also a good time to offer free spaces for listening and reflection. And not to abandon our sense of humour.
3. **Collaborate in the planning of the new situation of your community** or of the people with whom you live. Establishing a certain orderly rhythm, both at the level of common life and of your own personal life, favours psychological well-being. It is a time for creativity: think of possible activities of a celebrative type, of prayer in common and also of shared leisure (movies, board games, reading recommendations, etc.) that favour a positive space and a certain distraction. Kitchen and other household tasks can also be very helpful.
4. Try to keep **community schedules that encourage exchange and conversation**, always keeping in mind health recommendations. A clear organization accessible to all members of the community, which favours the participation of young and old, will be beneficial for everyone.
5. **Pay special attention to your assignments and tasks** within the community or the institution to which you belong. At this time diligence is a concrete form of care for the other and is key to the proper functioning of the group.
6. **Respect the common spaces and times of silence.** It is not surprising that you now feel more sensitive to noise, loud conversation or other disruptive sounds. You may also feel more sensitive about using common areas. Think about how the same thing can happen to others.
7. **Receive and convey messages and information** about the pandemic, quarantine and other circumstances related to COVID-19 **in a careful and constructive manner.** Avoid gossip, unsubstantiated rumours, and comments solely about the topic so as not to create unnecessary tension or community hardship. Constantly talking about this issue can increase fear and distance you from states of greater calm and tranquility. Set yourself a schedule to receive news - a maximum of two hours a day at three different times - and, once the time is up, move on to an activity that generates well-being or constitutes a hobby for you.

PERSONAL LIFE

1. Although in a different way, life goes on; and it is good that it does. If it helps, **make a personal planning schedule** that creates routines and encourages you to maintain a certain level of activity. You can readjust it later as many times as you want, depending on how you feel and how things are going.
2. **Take advantage of the time you are living.** You have probably been forced to reduce tasks, both personal and community and mission. This may have left you with more free time than usual. Use it to do activities that help to generate positive thoughts and emotions: reading, delving into some topic of interest, taking personal notes, reflection, etc.
3. **Do physical exercise at home.** If you can't think of how to organize it, there are different apps and tutorials from which you can get ideas to adapt it to your abilities and needs. Sport activates your body, reduces the symptoms of sadness or anxiety and increases the feeling of well-being. Also try to get some natural light and maintain some kind of manual work. Take special care with your diet: anxiety goes straight to the stomach. Another possibility is to spend some time each day doing relaxation exercises, which can be useful in reducing the consequences of quarantine. You will find a guide to this in Appendix 2, which is included at the end of the guide.
4. **Respect personal space and time.** We all need, to a greater or lesser extent, moments for solitude, silence and personal autonomy. Once again, we do not all function the same, but each one has his or her own requirements and demands: get to know them and do not try to force yours or others'. For some people, a certain level of isolation contributes to mental balance.
5. **It is time for peace.** Conflicts exist. Also in our communities, presbyteries, convents, monasteries, institutions, seminaries or houses of formation. Although we would surely like it not to be so, this is a reality that we cannot ignore. However, now is the time to work on understanding, kindness, patience and forgiveness. It is time for Lent, not for conflict. And we need each other. It is time, therefore, to save the proposal of our neighbour and to fast from resentment, envy, quarrels, criticism and disaffection.
6. **Take care of your more fragile companions.** Especially if you live with older people, people who are sick or who require special attention. They may feel vulnerable, fearful, minimize - so as not to alarm - and be afraid to express their concern. You don't need to harass, but you can be aware and available, with humility and discretion, for what they may need. If at any time it is you who find yourself in this situation, do not be afraid to communicate it: I am sure that you have someone close to you who wants to lend a hand and help; moreover, it is a gesture of responsibility towards the people with whom you live.

THE LIFE OF PRAYER AND CELEBRATION

Accustomed to a way of functioning where dynamism, speed and urgency take the lead, affecting also our religious and priestly lives, this specific moment that we are experiencing can help us to enter into a different dimension. A forced stop is now necessary which brings us closer to a greater interiorization of life and of what happens in it.

1. This time in which we find ourselves can be of great help in looking at what is happening with **deep eyes of faith** and trying to process the reality that is presented to us as a time of opportunity.
2. We are in **Lent**, and this liturgical season proposed by the Church is joined by another of **quarantine**. Here too, prayer, fasting and penance are possible and necessary; and, as in every age, they continue to lend themselves to creativity.
3. We are offered an opportunity to **strengthen spiritual reading, personal reflection and prayer life**. We are in a time that is conducive to reading, which is one of the best ways to link dreams, thoughts and feelings; because books help us to go beyond ourselves and connect with the deepest part of each person. It is also an appropriate time to make a prayerful, personal and deep reflection of the special situation we are living. Time, of course, to pray personally and communally in a way that is perhaps even more creative. And, in this sense, to entrust with special attention the lives of those who are suffering more painfully from the disease; to pray for their families, who may not be able to accompany them in the way they would like; and to pray for so many professionals - from the health care world and other areas - who are giving the best of themselves in their work for the common good.
4. Although in some institutions it is not possible to participate in the Eucharist or other sacraments as a community, it is time to pray together and to savour the **Liturgy of the Hours** in a new way.
5. It is also a time to create spaces where we can converse spiritually. Sometimes this **spiritual conversation** begins simply with a question about how we are experiencing this new reality. And time, even if we find ourselves surrounded by fewer people, to feel sustained and accompanied by the prayer of the whole Church.
6. This is a suitable time for us to be where **penance and fasting** have a special relationship with the care of the other person next to us.
7. There are also digital platforms, offered from different ecclesial settings and institutions, which can help us to live this moment through social networks, as long as they do not lead to isolation. One of them is the initiative **at home with God**, developed by the Spanish Province of the Society of Jesus. It is an Ignatian proposal to make this time a time of grace. It offers the celebration of the Eucharist in streaming, every day at 20:00; a prayer guided by Instagram live, three days a week, at 22:15; an interactive talk with the team of vocesesejota; and, in addition, special prayers and articles on the web platforms rezandovoy and pastoralsj.

LIFE OUTWARDS

The situation of confinement that you are experiencing does not prevent you from continuing to participate in your apostolates and your mission. You will necessarily have to do it in a different way than you are used to. However, your presence - even if it is virtual - can be very important for people who do not live with you. Here are some simple guidelines that may be helpful:

1. **Use technology to stay close** to your dearest and most needy people. It is a good time to continue strengthening conversations with colleagues from other religious communities, from your own congregation or others; priests; people from your apostolic works or parishes; family members; or any other group that you feel needs a call or a simple message. Talking with them about how you are facing this new reality, how you are living this special time internally or what you do in your daily life, can help you - them and you. Avoid generating restlessness, fears, dark uncertainties and unnecessary alarmism.
2. Making, as far as possible, **video calls** in which you see yourself with others is a way of compensating for the absence of physical contact, as well as generating serenity and calm.
3. **Stay connected to vulnerable people**. Especially with the elderly, who are currently the most fragile because of their loneliness and physical weakness.
4. **Try to maintain contact with fellow apostolic missionaries**, parish priests, parochial vicars, etc. You can share situations specific to your work or parish and generate a network of collaboration between different people or institutions close to you: support groups for vulnerable people, sharing of social networks for useful and accurate information on developments, virtual spaces for prayer, training, etc.

CONCLUSION

At the same time that we are going through this situation of quarantine and confinement, we are also going through the Lenten journey. Behind these weeks of confinement there is much more than forty days of resistance and confinement. It is also possible to sense, in the midst of what is happening to us, the presence - continuous, mysterious and disconcerting at the same time - of our God, who does not close his doors to anything or anyone. Many are the biblical images that come to mind and become part of our prayer: desert, struggle, thirst, longing, and passion... But, above all, we want to keep our eyes on the One in whom we trust: The Lord Jesus, Crucified and Risen for us. He is water that quenches our thirst, light in the midst of perplexity, life that - in the depths of nonmeaning - struggles to spring up.

We too need to take care of ourselves. We form part of a pluralistic Church in which each of us—priests, members of institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life, seminarians, laity—has a mission that comes from God. We want to continue our commitment to service and help; and, at the same time, we need to learn that we cannot do it without caring for others. The contemplative life possesses deep strengths and very deep intuitions that can enlighten us here.

Certainly the situation in which you now find yourself will depend a lot on whether you read these pages from a monastery, a convent, a flat, a parish, a residence, an infirmary, a school, a house of welcome, a hospital, an insertion community, a seminary or a house of formation. We are also aware that the suggestions that we offer you are not able to answer all the concerns that may arise from the practical aspects of your reality. But we hope that they will serve as a humble guide that will bring you some light. In that we trust. AMDG.

APPENDIX 1: PSYCHOLOGICAL TIPS FOR SELF-CARE

Throughout the quarantine **it is normal to go through different moments and emotional states**: stress, anxiety, loneliness, frustration, boredom, anger, feelings of fear and hopelessness, etc. These effects may last or appear even after confinement.

Taking care of your actions, thoughts and feelings will be of great importance in responding appropriately to periods when your mood may fail and the feeling of uncertainty or uneasiness grows, if at all.

We offer you a series of **recommendations, from a psychological point of view**, in case you find yourself in any of the following three scenarios: (A) you are in isolation but not affected by the disease; (B) you belong to the population at risk; (C) you suffer from the disease by infection of COVID-19. Some of these scenarios have already been discussed in previous sections of this guide, but they are summarized here.

(A) IF YOU ARE IN ISOLATION, UNAFFECTED BY THE DISEASE, BUT ARE NEVERTHELESS FEELING ANY OF THE FOLLOWING EMOTIONS - OR OTHERS WE HAVE NOTED ABOVE - PERSISTENTLY OR WITH HIGH INTENSITY:

- Nervousness, agitation or tension, with feelings of imminent danger, and/or panic.
- You can't stop thinking about anything other than the illness or worrying about getting sick.
- You need to be constantly seeing or hearing information on this subject and have difficulty in taking an interest in other issues.
- You find it too difficult to concentrate, to carry out your daily tasks, to do your work properly or you are paralysed by fear.
- You are in a state of alert, continuously analysing your body sensations and interpreting them -not being pathological signs- as symptoms of illness.
- You find it difficult to control your concern and you persistently ask people around you about your health, warning them of the serious dangers they are in given the situation.
- You avoid contact with other people too much for fear of contagion.
- You notice an increase in heart rate, rapid breathing, sweating or trembling without good reason.
- You have difficulty in maintaining a restful sleep.
- Your emotional problems get worse or return after they have been overcome.

THEN WE RECOMMEND THE FOLLOWING:

1. **Identify the thoughts that make you uneasy.** Constantly thinking about the disease can cause symptoms to appear or become more pronounced, which can increase your discomfort. Try to talk about what you like or are excited about.
2. **Recognize your emotions and accept them.** If necessary, express and share your situation with the people closest to you - those who give you confidence - to find the help and support you need. People who appreciate you will probably feel better knowing how you feel.

3. Question what you are experiencing and **look for evidence of reality**. Know the facts, and trust the information provided by the official scientific media. Be aware that, from some forums, alarmist images can be transmitted, and over-information given from a negative perspective, magnifying the phenomenon and making you perceive greater threat.
4. **Avoid information saturation**. Living permanently connected will not make you better informed and, on the contrary, will increase your sense of risk and nervousness unnecessarily.
5. **Go to official sources** and look for proven information from experts: Ministry of Health, Official College of Physicians, World Health Organization, other official organizations, etc.
6. **Check the information you share**, especially if you use social networks.
7. **Don't contribute to the dissemination of false news** and hoaxes. Do not feed your fear or that of others.
8. **Carry out the appropriate hygiene habits recommended by the Health Department**, but remember that this is not the only thing you have to do throughout the day.
9. Avoid talking about the subject all the time and **look for other areas of conversation**.
10. **Support the members of your community**, fellow priests, family members, collaborators of the apostolic work to which you belong, etc.
11. **Help those around you** to remain calm and to develop adaptive thinking in each situation.
12. **Try to make life as normal as possible** and continue with your usual routines, within the situation in which we find ourselves. In areas where you cannot keep up, reorganize your schedule.
13. **Beware of behaviours such as rejection**, stigma and discrimination. Fear can cause us to behave impulsively, rejecting or discriminating against certain people. If you have felt this way in recent days, also try to understand that some people are even more nervous, and that most likely it was not a direct attack on you, but the result of their discomfort.

(B) IF YOU BELONG TO THE POPULATION AT RISK:

1. Follow the **recommendations and prevention measures** as determined by the health authorities. Trust them.
2. Get informed in a realistic way and **follow the guidelines** suggested in previous sections.
3. **Do not trivialize your risk** to try to avoid the feeling of fear or apprehension of the disease. Pretending that nothing is wrong is a natural way for human beings to protect themselves from what is causing them distress or great concern. But it is healthier to talk about what you are worried about or afraid of so that you can deal with it without having to hide it.
4. **Don't magnify your actual risk**. Be cautious and prudent without being alarmed, knowing that sometimes we can also exaggerate to relieve and protect ourselves from what frightens us.
5. **Don't take actions that compromise you**, pretending to feel unrealistic invulnerability. Avoid behaviours that encourage addictive behaviours.

6. Be objective and **adopt a global perspective**. Think that many scientists throughout the world are working on the issue and are providing us with advice to solve this situation in the best possible way.

(C) IF YOU ARE SUFFERING FROM THE ILLNESS:

Follow the recommendations above and, in addition:

1. The more unknown a disease is, the more restlessness it can generate. However, **try to manage your intrusive thoughts**: don't put yourself in the worst position in advance.
2. **Don't be unnecessarily alarmed**. Be realistic: most people seem to be getting well.
3. When you feel afraid, **rely on the experience you have from similar situations**. You may not associate it now because you have a more serious perception, but it brings to mind how many difficult illnesses or circumstances you have successfully overcome in your life.

APPENDIX 2: RELAXATION EXERCISES

Below we propose three types of exercises that can be useful if you think you need a space for relaxation. There are several variants and different modalities. Some people find them helpful to help with their emotional integration. That is why we suggest them. However, each individual finds benefit in different techniques. If you feel that these do not help or satisfy you, feel free to find what works best for you.

BREATHING CONTROL

It is not difficult for you to experience some feelings of anxiety throughout the quarantine. One of your symptoms is shallow breathing. We offer you a simple technique that you can practice anywhere: breath control.

1. Breathe in through your nose instead of your mouth.
2. Breathe gently and deeply several times.
3. Notice how your abdomen widens on inhalation and narrows on exhalation.
4. Take a couple of deep breaths in through your nose followed by slow, gentle breaths out through your mouth.

DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING

This technique needs a little more training and a quiet place where you can concentrate on it.

1. Get into a comfortable position and try to relax your muscles.
2. Place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen.
3. Breathe in slowly through your nose, extending it to your hand on your abdomen. The hand on your chest should remain still.
4. When you get the air there, hold it for a couple of seconds.
5. Release the air slowly through your mouth, so that you feel it go dropping the abdomen, and the hand on the chest remains motionless.
6. Repeat this exercise several times.

VISUALISATION

This exercise combines relaxation techniques with meditation.

1. Find a comfortable and uninterrupted place.
2. Light up the space in a soft and pleasant way for you.
3. Play music at a low volume, enough to be heard but not to disturb or distract you.
4. Close your eyes and concentrate on your breathing. Feel the air coming in through your nose and going out through your mouth.
5. Think of a blue sky. Feel the energy the sun gives you and focus your attention on the feeling these days give you.
6. Enjoy the view of the sky for a few minutes.
7. Add the sea to your vision. Listen to the sound of the waves.
8. Flood your brain with the vision and focus on the feelings it brings up.
9. You will be more and more relaxed. When you do, visualize yourself, in that landscape, lying on the grass or on the sand of the beach, with no one around you.

10. Enjoy the feeling of relaxation and peace that floods you for a few minutes.
11. Visualize yourself getting up in the landscape and start stretching your muscles of the body, little by little and without opening the eyes.
12. As you stretch, also become aware again of the music that surrounds you. And, when you are ready, open your eyes slowly, without hurrying, in peace.



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