

“Ask Them for Their Wisdom”  
a Project of FaithNet  
NAMI-SCC

Many people are asking the question, *“In the face of COVID-19, how can we best help those with mental illnesses?”* This is an important question as we scramble to provide medications and therapy to those who need our steady support.

But there’s another question, equally important, that almost no one is asking: *“In the face of COVID-19, what can those with mental illnesses teach us?”*

A pandemic has brought anxiety, paranoia, obsessive compulsive behaviors, and isolation to all of our doors. But there are those among us who have a lot of experience dealing with such things and who have rich insight and even skills born of their ongoing struggles.

Something you can do for your own mental health—and for theirs—ask them for their wisdom.

Call someone you know who has experienced a mental illness and say: “Can you give me some pointers on how to take care of my mental health?”

Even as we shelter in place, you can break down mental health stigma.

Be Inspired

Around world people are struggling to adjust and adapt to the living circumstances surrounding COVID-19. Living with a mental illness at the same time can be extremely problematic.

My mother is a Registered Nurse on the front lines of the global pandemic. She isolates in her room after work. We bring her food and clear the bottom floor when she needs to do laundry. The fact that she continues to work and cannot come near the ones she loves for fear of getting them sick is an inspiration to me. I admire her perseverance in the face of certain danger and how she fights the good fight on behalf of others.

I have lived my life overcoming a mental illness, something that could have claimed my life, but thanks to good medical care and the support of my family, friends, and co-workers, I am now symptom-free and studying to be a Social Worker. I want to touch the lives of others who are also suffering with a mental illness. I find a source of strength and determination in my mother as she pushes on and brings back light where there is darkness. Where it may seem like all is despair and loss, there is still some good out there, we just have to change our perspective.

## Establish a Daily Routine

I have struggled with severe depression and anxiety that upended expectations I had for my future. I eventually recovered and what I found invaluable in grounding myself was the implementation of a daily routine.

We are undoubtedly living in extraordinary and strange times because of the novel coronavirus pandemic. Many of us may find ourselves anxious and distressed by the disappearance of normalcy.

I know establishing a routine may sound like boring advice. But it's not. It's entirely about getting the most out of your life. And part of that daily routine needs to be adhering to a regular sleep schedule. It helped me to feel less anxious and better able to regulate my emotions. Even my memory improved.

A routine can help to give much needed structure to one's life during a time when the overall structure of our lives has taken on a dramatic redesign.

Stay safe.

## Have Faith

I have been facing stressful situations as long as I can remember—during my married life and then as I raised kids as a single mom while working full time. All I do when I face stressful situations is to turn to God and ask Him to carry me through what I am facing.

A lot has been written about having or learning “coping skills” to handle a stressful experience. Yes, we need to have coping skills to handle situations small or big. As a care giver to my son with a serious mental illness, I face ongoing challenges which require me to try various ways of coping. I have to cope with the anxiety and agitation of my son when he has the episodes. I also need a strategy to fight the stigma other people have about my son's illness.

For me what keeps me grounded at all times is starting the day when I wake up in the morning praising and thanking God for the sunshine and for my breath. I then ask God to give me strength and wisdom to handle the stress and anxiety coming my way during the day.

## Keep Moving

During this quarantine, I found myself feeling both trapped and comfortable. I think this odd mixture was due to my introverted disposition and my love of productivity, but also from past involuntarily hospitalizations for my mental illness.

To explain further, I've learned something having had to endure being held in locked facilities against my will for weeks or months at a time. With nothing to really do during my stays in psychiatric inpatient units, I resorted to pacing. I would pace for hours every day, even to the

point where the nurses and doctors got concerned and started to pathologize this harmless survival behavior. Every time I was involuntarily hospitalized I would pace, down the halls or in circles outside. Why?

One stay I wrote a poem inspired by Maya Angelou, aptly titled “I Know Why the Caged Lion Paces.” Not that I thought myself as a lion, but because I believe we were all created noble. Part of my poem reads as: “I know why the caged lion paces / ... For stillness would be a step closer to death / There is life in motion / I know why the caged lion paces / The injury of captivity a pain to be walked off / ... It yearns to be free / Each step married to the slow march of time / Remain in motion / Defy captivity / I know why the caged lion paces...”

Looking back at this poem I wonder why stillness brought so much discomfort to me when my freedom was taken. I might think differently of stillness now that the world is still and some of us are feeling captives of ourselves. If I can offer some reflections during this time, it is to find ways to keep moving and, also importantly, to find ways of being okay being still.

### Listen to Your Body

I was constantly hungry and tired and couldn't figure out why. Then I came across a social media post which explains that our body during this unprecedented pandemic is on a survivor mode and that it requires more energy, even though we may be physically and mentally less active.

I was surprised to realize how much this validation from a random tweeter relieved me of feeling out of sort, lazy, and guilty. It was giving me permission to feel what I'm feeling and be kind and tend to what my body needs right now.

Contrastingly, I was beginning to feel worn out by so many well-meaning church leaders preaching on “Be anxious for nothing (Philippians 4:6)” and quickly learned that it was not helping nor comforting. Don't get me wrong, I am a person of faith and it absolutely grounds me to practice my faith, and yet, what I needed to hear now was on how to manage, thrive even, in the midst of these anxious and uncertain times, not a blanket statement on how we need to be thankful and power through as if nothing has changed.

The obvious big flaw in the logic is that everything did change. No doubt about it. And I slowly accepted that. As a self-prescribed remedy, for the month of April, I challenged myself to go for a walk for at least 30 minutes everyday. The walk has been gradually getting longer as I feel a bit stronger and more energetic. But I still take naps when I'm feeling tired, and the other day I bought myself an ice cream cone during my walk.

It was delicious.

## Take Care of Others

My auntie got infected with Covid-19. I had always wanted to make a lot of money so I could bring her out of the nursing home to be with us and make my grandma very happy. After my auntie got diagnosed, I really didn't have time to think about much or be sad, I had to watch out for my mom, so her heart didn't break.

At first sheltering at home was almost a peaceful gift from God, especially after the struggles my stepfather had put me through when I was younger. I still had my job and I had my mom here visiting me. We were together. I just kept working, cooking and taking care of things, and made my self very busy. Only when I thought about the people and the families who were facing and fighting with this crisis did I feel the pain in my chest.

Then my aunt passed away. I still do my work, only with lots of caution so I don't disturb my mom in any way: checking to see if she is able to sleep at night; making delicious food so she has an appetite; cleaning all the things from the store; taking her outdoors to have a fresh mind. I guess this is really the time I should think about what is my coping skill for all of this. But I don't have the time.

So I bear the burdens, find strength in pain. Like I told my mom: live the pride of my aunt.

May we all find strength and live our pride.

## Keep a Journal

A practice I've picked up again since the pandemic forces us to stay at home is that of journaling. I've done it before, but had fallen out of the habit either because I was busy or simply didn't feel like it.

In my treatment for mental illness, I once got frustrated at my therapist and told her that I didn't feel like therapy was helping; that there was no forward movement. In consultation, we decided that I would do some daily reflection work to see if we could get a better perspective on the pattern of my symptoms and thoughts over time. So I created a journal.

In addition to daily tracking my symptoms, I track my habits, rate myself on spiritual qualities like humility and generosity, and free write. Quickly patterns began to present themselves and I started to understand myself better. Understanding led to self compassion and greater hope for recovery, and teaming up with my therapist I made progress. But like I mentioned, I fell out of the habit as the months went by.

During the isolation and quiet of the quarantine, I find myself journaling again. As I once again receive the benefits of it, I wish I hadn't stopped this spiritual practice. But now the world has stopped, so maybe I can catch up with myself.

## Fight Big Distractions with Little Ones

Mom always said, "take care of the little things and the big things will take care of themselves". I always said, "live by the cliché, die by the cliché." But never mind that.

The important thing is that little things are often overlooked in the midst of turmoil and trauma as the giant feet of fears and helplessness stomp mercilessly upon our serenity. A crossword puzzle, a round of "Candy Crush", a bean bag toss game from the back of the closet may have the power to bring the tiny ray of sunshine that gives growth to a healthier disposition.

Fight the big distractions with some little ones. And give your dog a hug.

## Learn from Nature

Did you know that you can cut a stem or leaf of pretty much any plant, put it in water or soil, and with the proper conditions it will grow new roots? When I first learned of this propagation process, I was mesmerized. I watched video after video to verify that it really works. Then I had to give it a try myself, a real test.

I followed the instructions of where to cut, put the stem in a jar with water, and waited. For two weeks, absolutely nothing changed. Just when my skepticism started to take over, lo and behold, I saw a tiny, little root growing out of an ugly nub. How wonderful is nature? How resilient is life?

Sometimes it may feel like nothing is happening. We may feel anxious about being unproductive or stagnant, especially during these strange times. We may even feel like the struggle is too much to bear. But we have to remember that we are stronger than we know. Life is still moving in us, even if we don't see it. With the proper nurture and patience, we will soon be gifted with new growth.

## Escucha, Pero Escucha Bien

This pandemic paired with depression and anxiety did not bode well for me. Thanks to NAMI Santa Clara County, I have been able to deal with my ups and downs. My main concern is for my family in Mexico, especially my mother. For a culture that will always have large get-togethers with family, isolating is very difficult. At least technology has been helpful in keeping us connected.

Although there is so much stigma around mental health in the Latino community, my family and friends know they can turn to me as they deal with isolation and anxiety (or nerves as they call it). The education I have received regarding mental health has been helpful in talking to my loved ones in Mexico. I don't really talk though. I just listen. I can empathize with them and help them to see there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

What can we do to help one another cope with this coronavirus? *Escucha, Pero Escucha Bien.* Listen, just listen.

## Organize Your Day

Because the Quarantine presents me with a lot of unscheduled time, I try to organize my days not only to be productive but also to give myself a feeling of achievement. Most mornings I begin the day with a regular ritual: a cup of coffee in the living room, taking my pre-breakfast meds, and writing a "to-do" list for the day.

I start with easy, short-term goals such as trimming my beard, getting dressed, making my bed, etc. Next I proceed to somewhat more complicated tasks, such as starting a load of laundry, grocery shopping, or mowing the lawn. Toward the bottom of the list, I add relatively long-term goals, such as managing my bank account, paying bills, or changing the oil in my car.

Because I take so many meds -- both prescribed and over-the-counter -- as well as vitamins and other supplements, I made a weekly timetable. At the top of the page are the dates for the current week. Below this is a grid with the days of the week listed along the top, and all of my meds and supplements listed down the left-most column.

And of course, as a citizen of the 21st Century, I have a cell phone with a calendar, which I also use to keep track of doctor and other appointments.

All of this still leaves me "wiggle room," or freedom, to walk around the block, listen to music, or watch TV.

## Use Imagination

My grandson thinks he's a dragon. At 2 ½, he stomps around the house breathing his fiery breath on his parents and his sister. During a global pandemic, a two-year-old spewing imaginary flames—and untold aerosols—into the air is an epidemiologist's nightmare.

But for me, it's a reminder of how to survive.

Even on the best of days, I battle OCD. Now with COVID-19, I vacillate between wanting to shout, "See, I knew the door knobs were a problem all along" to being worn out by the hyper-vigilance it takes to bring a few groceries into the house. My dragon grandson, however, dismisses every threat with a roar.

My own imagination is a little rusty, but then again my joints are creaky too. With some mental stretching and flexing though, even I can begin to see the hummingbird in the backyard as a friend who's come to visit or the morning glory flowers as a purple-throated choir.

Maybe someday I'll work up to imagining myself as something other than a person plagued by fear. A dragon? No, that's not really my style.

I'll be a fairy who meets the coronavirus with glitter-gold dust—and a mask.