

LENTEN SERIES – FEBRUARY, 21, 2021

Living Well with and beyond Covid-19.- Perspective of the “Front line worker”

Firstly, let me thank Canon Minott and Dr Milbourn for inviting me to participate in this year's Lenten series. I have been asked to speak on the perspective of the frontline worker and coping with COVID-19 as an essential worker.

I am going to start by looking back to the start of being an essential worker. In 2001, I graduated medical school and chose to do my internship at the Kingston Regional Public Hospitals (KPH, Victoria Jubilee, Bustamante and National Chest Hospitals). I pretty much started my physician career with a baptism of fire. In the very 1st week of internship, I found myself caught in the 2001 West Kingston lock-down and killings, between the security forces, and warring factions between Tivoli and Arnett Gardens. I had thought my first week of being a doctor was going to be about figuring out how to best care for patients and adjust to the hospital's day to day operations. But instead, I got a crash course in ducking bullets and getting accustomed to the background sound effects of Molotov cocktail bombs in my work surrounds. To move from ward to ward at Jubilee or to get over to the cafeteria or on-call quarters the porters and ancillary staff were kind enough to time the explosion of bullets and bombs and would shout “run now doc, run” This I had to endure for 2 ½ days before being able to leave, admittedly a few times thinking– why did I go to medical school. At the end of the weekend, 22 persons were dead and many others injured.

Since then, COVID-19 roughly 20 years later has been the second time in my career where I felt that my physical and emotional health was being threatened significantly, and this threat was directly related to my job. But the distinct difference between these two events was that- whereas I had a pretty good idea what would happen if I were hit by a bullet, one of the greatest stresses related with covid-19 was the uncertainty of the whole event especially early on. What exactly was the implication on the safety and security of my patients, myself, family, colleagues, co-workers, the society and global structure as a whole. I was not accustomed to getting most of the information on

medical issues from the media – traditional and social, and therefore had to question much of what was being said. Furthermore, many persons in the patient population I treat are immuno-compromised either due to their disease or from some of the drugs they are treated with. So, in particular when the first few cases of COVID 19 were reported in Jamaica, I was very cautious in treating new patients as I had no idea if they would get reactions to the drugs I prescribed - some of which overlap with COVID19 symptoms. How would I be able to tell the difference? How would I answer patient queries?

In general, coping with covid-19 as an essential worker/physician with daily exposure to persons from all walks of life has meant being very cognizant of my behaviours as well as ensuring patients comply with safety protocols. More time spent on hygiene and cleaning at work, which probably isn't a bad thing. It also meant resistance from some management staff to change, in order to protect everyone, especially when it would affect income generation. I still count myself blessed as I have friends and colleagues whose jobs require them daily to face a greater threat of Covid-19 exposure and deal with known positive cases day to day. And though I know persons who have passed, everyone very close to me is safe to date and the social problems that exist.

But there has also been a lot of learning from this situation for me, both formal and informal. I for one have I been reminded that so many other persons apart from medical personnel in society are categorized as essential and have to go out and face exposure e.g. security services, food industry workers, transport workers, electricians, plumbers, to name a few. Sometimes, these persons are forgotten when persons are being applauded for their work at this time. I am also so grateful for the kind words of my patients who express their prayers for my safety during this period. Reminding me of the good that still exists inspite of the times when I am frustrated with dealing with other persons.

Nonetheless, this is a time of heightened anxiety for everyone. Change tends to always stressful, even when it is a positive change like buying a home, getting a promotion at work. In this pandemic stress has been induced by threatened health of self and loved ones, as well as for some individuals actual loss including death, diminished

independence and financial instability. Usually, stress is alleviated by our social connections with others but that too has been diminished by this pandemic, leaving some feeling isolated.

As people of faith, our main source of a solution to this situation has to be our Christian beliefs. In the mental health world, they highlight the need for resilience in times like these. Psychological resilience refers to overcoming odds and moving beyond challenges. As a frontline worker, I have depended on both constructs in order to survive Covid-19 psychologically.

The bible shares with us the concept of spiritual resilience in many passages. Let us look at a few of these:

Corinthians 4:8 seems to describe the world we are living in for us and hopefully the response we should have as Christians, in saying: **We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair.**

Fostering resilience relies on social connectedness, focusing on whatever positives that remain, pursuing healthy living, and fostering faith with prayer. COVID -19 has required us to all take a rapid and intense course in resilience if we are to come out of this experience on the winning end. I am going to walk us through the basic tenets of psychological resilience and show how the bible directs us to apply resilience in our lives.

Step 1: Involves falling back on positive social resources: family, friends – phone, social media. Remember to engage in practices that cultivate a healthy/balanced lifestyle – exercise (dynamic stretching, deep breathing, tense and release exercises), relaxation/rest, water, good nutrition, music, connecting with nature, engaging in goal-oriented tasks and hobbies.

Drawing on the Lord cannot be forgotten. Philippians 4:13 reminds each of us **I am able to do all things through Him who strengthens me.** In Proverbs 3:5-6 we are also reminded to **Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will direct your path.**

Step 2: Be cognizant of your temperament and attitude – remember to be empathetic to the needs and plight of others and appreciate the positives- extended quality time with family, learning new experiences and mastering a new skill. In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, the writer charges us to be **Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Whatever happens, give thanks, because it is God's will in Christ Jesus that you do this.**

Step 3: Pursue help when you need it – social resources e.g. government financial aid, mental health services/helplines: 888-NEW-LIFE, as well as seeking guidance and support from God.

Psalms 50:15 tells us that we are instructed by the God through the scriptures to **Pray to me when you are in trouble! I will deliver you, and you will honor me!**

Ephesians 6:10-12 charges us to: **Finally, be strong in the Lord, relying on his mighty strength. Put on the whole armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the Devil's strategies. For our struggle is not against human opponents, but against rulers, authorities, cosmic powers in the darkness around us, and evil spiritual forces in the heavenly realm.**

I will close today highlighting further scriptures that we should keep close to us at this time. Job 17:9 in the old testament prompts us to remember: **The righteous keep moving forward, and those with clean hands become stronger and stronger.**

Jeremiah in chapter 29:11 writes so that we can recall one of God's promises: **For I know the plans I have for you–this is the LORD's declaration–plans for your welfare, not for disaster, but to give you a future and a hope.**

These reassurances carry over into the New Testament as Paul tries to give comfort in Philippians 4:19 when he writes: **My God will richly fill your every need in a glorious way through Christ Jesus.**