

St Luke's Virtual Clergy Wellbeing Programme

1. Thoughts from a trauma-informed perspective on the Covid-19 crisis

Systemic facilitator and trainer Revd Hilary Ison shares learning from a three-year study on the effects of trauma on congregations.

What we are going through globally, locally in our communities and churches, and in our families and within ourselves is a traumatic situation. Trauma can be a shock event like an accident or attack, but it can also be a slowly unfolding situation over a period of time, as in the current crisis that we are all facing personally and professionally.

First a bit of background to set the context as it is helpful to understand the **main characteristics of trauma** which many of us are experiencing in some form or another in this situation, in order to know how best to approach supporting ourselves and others:

- **Overwhelm** - our normal capacities to cope become overwhelmed and we feel that we can't handle all that's coming at us; it's all "too much, too fast, too soon". The sense of overwhelm can also come from having to receive and handle other people's distress and pain, and to have to keep doing it, while trying to hold our own anxiety and distress.
- **Broken connections** - quite literally our physical connections with one another have been broken and we can't console others with a touch or hug as we would normally do. In parishes, not only are families distressed by the loss of a family member, but also by not being able to have the funeral they would have liked to celebrate and honour the deceased. Our understanding of who we are and how we connect as ministers is being shaken, and how we understand the world and God is being challenged. When previously safe assumptions about how we live, what we think and what we experience are thrown up in the air it feels a scary place to be, in our bodies and emotions as much as in our minds.
- **Trauma is a whole body experience** - we know we are going through something difficult because our bodies, not our minds, tell us first. All sorts of body experiences and symptoms emerge, such as a tight chest, stomach ache, needing to go to the toilet more often, headaches, tiredness, loss of concentration, depleted energy levels, neck and shoulder tension, skin conditions, and so the list goes on depending on where your stress registers in your body.

The amygdala, our 'early warning system' in our 'feeling brain' (limbic system) is telling us we are not safe and is triggering the nervous system to send out the stress hormones

adrenalin and cortisol to get us ready for fight or flight. When these hormones are coursing round our bodies, we quite literally lose connection with our 'thinking brain' (pre-frontal cortex) and we react instead either with fix-it energy, or with collapse. Most importantly, we lose our capacity to be truly present to ourselves or to others.

So, how does this knowledge help us in the challenges we face in our ministries and personal lives?

- **Naming what's happening:** this might sound obvious, but attentive listening to exactly what is going on for us enables us to name precisely what we are experiencing in our bodies and our feelings. Our nervous system starts to calm when we can name exactly what it is we are feeling and it releases tension when this is heard and received in ourselves and, whether in person or virtually, by a warm resonant other. One of our deepest needs is to know that we are understood, so being able to share what we are going through with someone else who can acknowledge with us that what we are facing is overwhelming, difficult, upsetting, confusing etc is a huge resource. Once we've been able to name what we're feeling, then we can begin to work with what we need to move forwards.
- **Normalising:** understanding that what we are experiencing is perfectly normal in a traumatic and anxiety-provoking situation. Knowing that we can't stop our bodies reacting initially in this way helps us to realise that we are not being weak or inadequate, and to let go of guilt or shame that we are not coping as well as we feel we should.
- **Breathing:** when we are agitated, anxious, or distressed we can't think clearly as we have temporarily lost connection with our thinking brain. Calming the triggered nervous system is what helps us to re-regulate ourselves and bring our thinking brains back on-line. One of the most effective ways to do this is to pay attention to the breath and to consciously slow it down, lengthening the inhale and the exhale for a few breaths and bringing our awareness to our bodies being grounded in the present, in physical space and time. A way of doing this is:
 - to stop for a few moments and be aware of your body, your feet on the floor, the chair supporting you, and any areas of tension that you notice in your body;
 - to become aware of your breath and then to take a slightly longer inhale (for the count of 3) and to lengthen the exhale (for a count of 4), and to do this about 5 times
 - to stay with the quiet for a few moments, to be present to the moment and your experience, and then bring it to a close perhaps with a thanksgiving to God for the gift of his presence with us in our breath.

- **Resourcing:** when our feeling brain is calmed then it can connect well with the thinking brain to gain access to our resources. Positive and practical ways forward emerge along with drawing on other resources that may be available to us.
- **Being present:** one of the gifts of this approach is that we can practice breathing, calming and being present to ourself and to others when faced with a challenging situation and be more able to communicate a sense of safety and calm to others.

Compassionate self-care is essential to support our ministry at this challenging time.

For those on the front line of ministry in the Covid-19 crisis, we will be offering some specific thoughts on both healthcare chaplaincy and on funeral ministry in the coming weeks.

If reading this has led you to want to seek additional support or signposting please contact either the person in your diocese responsible for clergy wellbeing or St Luke's via its website below or on 020 7898 1700.

St Luke's thanks Hilary Ison and the Tragedy and Congregations team - www.tragedyandcongregations.org.uk - for permission to use their work as part of its Virtual Clergy Wellbeing Programme.