12 Tips for Thriving During and Beyond this Pandemic

Life is quite literally coming to a standstill. My generation experienced something like this on 9.11.01, when planes were grounded and fears abounded. But today’s standstill spreads worldwide as at least 150 of the world’s 195 countries have reported a confirmed case of coronavirus. Because our economies are more intertwined, and the internet, media and social media report everything globally within milliseconds of it happening, this is now a global event.

Colleges are closing, schools are sending students home, restaurants are shut down, hospitals are overburdened, uncertainty about symptoms is leading to panic, distress, suffering, and turmoil for many, even though only a few have been infected.

Being a Christian psychiatrist, I have been asked by family, friends, coworkers and ministry colleagues for some help in navigating this unprecedented worldwide predicament. Even though we could write a book, I want to share some powerful, yet practical tips I teach others—and use myself—to navigate uncertain times and adversity such as we find ourselves in today.

Note: You can find many medical sites to learn about COVID-19, but go to the CDC website to get practical cleaning and hygiene tips to avoid getting the virus, for a list of symptoms to look for and what to do if you have symptoms or have been exposed. I want to give you something different, something you won’t find in other places, focusing on the practical, spiritual and psychological aspects of pandemic management, information you can apply to any times of adversity, challenge, or testing.

Here are 12 Tips to follow:

   As he does with all of God’s creation, Satan will try to corrupt, twist, and undermine, using even the blessings God bestows upon us for harm. Just like food, sex, money, work, and rest—all things that were intended for our benefit—Satan’s modus operandi is to twist blessings into potential stumbling blocks. With the corona virus outbreak, information and mis-information is coming fast and furious. My goal, here, is to give you tips to allow you to use the mind of Christ that is in each Christian to thrive during this pandemic and beyond. Let me pull back the curtain on the mind a bit so we can see it is not the big scary ominous Wizard of Oz, but just the friendly little old man behind the curtain, ready to assist you in getting back to Kansas, or the promised land of abundant living.

2. Uncomfortable or disturbing feelings like anxiety, uncertainty, fear, sadness, anger, or frustration are normal.
   These uncomfortable—notice I didn’t use the word negative—emotions are the warning system God designed in our minds to let us know something important, dangerous, or wrong has happened, or to alert us we aren’t looking at the facts accurately. When the smoke detector starts screeching or a red light on the car dashboard comes on, we are stressed but thankful for the warning because they’ve saved us from a bigger catastrophe. Most people are indoctrinated to believe these uncomfortable feelings are bad, and even sinful, so we often see them as a problem or ignore them. Emotions get us in trouble however, when we let them become more than our warning system, allowing them to become our decision-making system. We’ve all made some lousy decisions when we were angry, anxious, sad, lonely, rejected, and etc. Don’t ignore your warning system. But don’t let it paralyze you either!

3. We need to have a Godly perspective of the circumstances and situation.
   Perspective is vital and the key to navigating this pandemic storm, making healthy decisions, not just physically with the flu, but spiritually and psychologically as well. Unfortunately, the main distor of our perspective is our emotions. Think of expressions like ‘green with envy’ or ‘seeing red with anger.’ Emotions can be a dangerous filter for perspective. How about ‘love is blind’? You can’t get much more distorted filtering than blind. We’ve all seen people make horrible decisions in the name of love!

   Usually our emotions push us into a flesh driven, me-centered perspective, instead of a Godly perspective. God is omniscient, knows our future, knows the course of this pandemic, and what our needs are. Most important, He loves us and is an incredible and perfect Father whose goal is growing us to fullest maturity and abundant living. Satan’s goal is to steal, kill, and destroy by using deceit to distort our perspective of God and these world circumstances.

   Several concrete applications to avoid some distortions:
a. God hears and answers prayer. During this adversity, you are hopefully praying. If our prayers seem as if they’re not getting answered as we’d desire or think is in the best interest of all involved, we can be tempted to see God in the wrong way or think we are failing somehow. As I pray during uncertain times, God answers my prayers in only two possible ways: either “Yes, that is the right thing to ask for,” or “No Karl, I have something even better for you.” I go to work then, wrapping my head around what is better than the agenda or outcome I’d thought was best, for me and the world around me.

b. God can use this pandemic to help people realize an eternal Savior, who defeated death and the grave, can provide lasting and eternal help from the sin, danger, and evil. Keep your radar open and antenna up for who He is putting in your life right now. Be a lighthouse built on a rock-solid foundation, shining God’s glory and love and providing guidance and safety for those feeling endangered in this storm.

c. Possibility doesn’t equate to probability. Every day we drive our cars knowing a possibility exists we could die in a car accident. Yet we still drive with minimal anxiety or concern because the probability is low. When we watch the news and see a blizzard coming and then see 1 out of 5 cars in a ditch, the probability of an accident is greatly increased. At this point, our anxiety warning light offers some good data: going out for pizza is not worth the 20% chance of an accident. Unfortunately, our anxiety and fears often make a possibility seem like a high probability. Between 60,000 and 80,000 people die from influenza each year. As I write this, we have just over 1000 deaths in the US due to coronavirus. With the significant precautions being implemented, even tho dire outcomes are being predicted, I think the death toll in the US will probably be less than influenza, and hopefully even less than the 37,000 killed in car accidents in the US each year.

4. Try to stay in routine as much as possible.
We love spontaneity, surprises, something new. At least that is what we think. In actuality, we function our best when we are in a routine. We like to drive to work the same way, we go to the same restaurants, we wake and eat around the same times most days. We watch the same shows, hang out with the same people, and engage in the same activities. In fact, we usually have routines for how we wash our body, brush our teeth, put on makeup, and even which leg we put first into our pants. (Tomorrow, try starting with the other leg!) As much as possible, try to keep to the same wake/sleep schedule as well as meal times and what you eat. We will discuss shortly what to do with some of the changes in life rhythms due to the social isolation recommendations of the government, but whatever you can continue that is healthy within your usual routine, continue those routines to maintain familiarity, comfort, and connection to the pre-pandemic way of living.

5. Isolation recommendation is physical, not emotional or relational. You can and should still connect with God, others, and self.
The biggest changes being imposed is social-distancing or isolation. We need to be careful not to allow the mindset of isolation to spill over into all aspects of our life. You’ll probably have some extra time on your hands with the shutdown of so many workplaces, schools, gyms, restaurants, events, and movie theaters. Isolation from the concrete society doesn’t mean isolation from relationships. We can use this time to connect in these 3 relational areas:
   a. God – Pray more frequently. Have some conversations with Him during the day. Also, add some Bible reading in. I got a Chronological Bible so I can read about Jesus’s life in the gospels and Acts in chronological order, as I was always frustrated jumping back and forth in the gospels trying to figure the order and symbolism from one activity in Jesus’ life to the next, as there is a purpose and meaning to the order and sequence.
   b. Other people – Invest in more connection with those in your household. Plan activities like playing games, watching a movie, learning a new activity, gardening, taking walks outside, cooking, spring cleaning, Easter buildup, and etc. Make plans to connect or re-connect with people outside your immediate area on FaceTime. Encourage one other.
   c. Self – Journaling is a great way to slow your mind down, dig a little deeper inside and learn about what is going on. It’s also an excellent opportunity to vent some of the fears, anxieties, and anger you are feeling below the surface. Start by writing what’s on your mind. Ask yourself ‘why?’ and ‘what if?’ questions as well, and see where God leads you.

6. Know yourself. If you do well with media and more information, great. But limit it. If you get too worked up by all the info, then shut it down. Find a person you trust who is willing to give you an update each day on the current status of the pandemic, and check in with them.
   a. If you’re older or have chronic illnesses that weaken your immune system, then self-quarantine and be careful to apply all the hygiene directions from other medical sites.
7. **Adversity is an opportunity to grow.** Knowing God is a loving and perfect teacher, coach, and parent is vital to having a clear perspective of this pandemic. Like any teacher, coach, or parent, the goal is never to allow the student, athlete, child to stay where they are. The goal is to push them to a higher level of skill, functioning, character, and impact. God knows we were made for more and He wants us to experience and be blessed growing into the likeness of Christ, and living the abundant life. But we all know that in order to grow, “No pain equals no gain.”
   a. In sports, let’s say you’re on the 11th grade and confident in your skills. You don’t want to play against a team of 8th graders for an easy win. You want to play a competitor, maybe the city champions, for the chance to see how your skills match up; you want to get better, to grow.
   b. Nobody likes homework. I just wanted to go play ball after school. But looking back, I am so grateful for all my teachers, coaches, and my parents who gave me homework or drills or chores to strengthen my character and build my skills to serve God in the way He has prepared for me.

8. **Be careful to not impose a premature finish line on a situation.** Many times, when people are in adverse situations, they assume this is the finish line, the game is over and they’ve lost. In reality, you are only in the first quarter of the game, or the second act of a five-act play. Many people leave too early, assuming the worst outcome. As we read through the Bible we see irrefutable evidence that God is the Author of great comebacks, no matter how bleak the circumstances get! I just saw that an Italian hospital was out of valves for complex hospital machine and a 3-D printer from a local business was reprogrammed to make the valves, saving the day for many patients. Don’t assume the game is over. God has incredible plans, comebacks and advances ready to unfold in your life if you maintain a Godly perspective and a long-game approach instead of imposing a premature finish line.

9. **Life is like a bowling alley.** A strike, the optimal and maximum outcome, happens when the ball goes straight down the middle. When the ball veers off course and into the gutter, the worst outcome occurs. We are the ball. We try to stay on course for best living, but we get off course. God is blowing, nudging, sending others to direct us back on course. Often it works, and we are back on course down the middle. Sometimes, though, we prefer the gutter. The gutter looks easier to us than striking those ten pins. Remember the Israelites were always thinking, especially in Judges, that they could get more someplace else. Thankfully, God redirects us—He’s like the bumper that saves us from the gutter ball and all its consequences. He puts us back on course. View this pandemic as God bumping you back on course and saving you from something. Like getting a flat tire that causes you to miss a car accident at the next intersection. Because the flat tire prevented the accident, we don’t even realize God saved us. Take this opportunity to see God redirecting you back on course to what is most important, life-giving, and eternal in your life.

10. **If you are really struggling psychologically, don’t be afraid of professional help.** So many times, I’ve seen Christians struggle psychologically, afraid to seek professional help from a psychiatrist or therapist. I have treated many Christians and ministry leaders and seen amazing life turnarounds and significant healing occur. We tend to forget that Jesus is the Wonderful Counselor and Great Physician. Yes, Jesus is the Perfect Psychiatrist. He came to set the captives (psychological bondage) free, heal the broken-hearted, and give us an abundant life—not material abundance, but a psycho-spiritual abundance here on Earth in this pre-eternity lifetime. Jesus’ psychospiritual healing is available to all, and psychiatry and psychology are the science God has revealed to us about how He designed our minds to work so we can better steward our minds for His glory. Find a Christian therapist or psychiatrist to make sure the science is being interpreted accurately to maximize the healing process. Don’t be afraid of psychiatric medications. I have prescribed them for 30+ years. As a temporary patch on our defective brain circuits, they help reduce psychological symptoms for many. But realize, they are not a cure. As meds lessen anxiety or depression symptoms, your ability to function will improve and then psychological and spiritual skills will be easier to learn, practice, and use to renew your mind and transform your life.

11. **Pray!**
   a. Pray for others’ wisdom, courage, humility, compassion, energy for our leaders and decision makers. Pray for our President, Congress, financial systems, state and local government officials, business leaders and owners, ministry leaders, and parents.
   b. Pray for those with symptoms for peace, joy, the feeling of God’s love and grace in their life, and for their healing.
c. Pray for yourself, for wisdom, humility, empathy, compassion, thankfulness, and a grateful heart. Ask God to show you people to serve, and that His power, grace, love, joy, and peace are extra clear and meaningful through this challenging time.

12. **To avoid getting psychologically and spiritually dizzy, keep your eyes fixed on Him.** I want to share my life verse with you. This sustains me during any storm, no matter the size. Isaiah 26:3 states, *He give him perfect peace whose mind is fixed on Thee, because he trusts You.* Let me explain. When I was a kid, we had these rides on the playground we called ‘roundabouts.’ They were circular platforms about 20 feet in diameter, about one foot off the ground, that had some rails on them. The younger kids would get on the platform holding onto an inner rail while the older kids held onto an outer rail and ran alongside to get it spinning really fast. At top speed, they’d jump on and ride with the rest. It spun so fast that when people jumped off they’d be so dizzy they’d stumble and stagger, unable to walk a straight line. Their world was spinning! *Then we do it again.* At some point, you learn that if you keep your gaze fixed on a stationary, immovable object, like a tree, pavilion, or water fountain, you don’t get dizzy. Life, and this verse work the same way. God is immovable. The same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Unfortunately, many impostors that seem to have gravity, stability, power, or at least declare themselves to—political leaders, stock market, alcohol, food, status, bank account, our education or status, job—catch our attention and gaze. If you find yourself dizzy, disoriented, confused, overwhelmed, or feel like psychologically or spiritually stumbling, veering in the wrong direction, your gaze is probably not fixed on God. Recalibrate. Tune into GOD, and tune out the WORLD.

I pray these tips, although different than the usual tip lists you see, will be beneficial, practical, and impactful for you. Remember, decisions determine your life … so choose well!

by HIS grace,

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