

When Disaster Strikes: Processing the Pandemic's Psychological Impact

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When the Philippine government announced a comprehensive lockdown in metro Manila on March 16, including the cancellation of classes at all levels, Asian Theological Seminary (ATS) immediately shifted to online learning. Since ATS has been doing hybrid learning for some time, we thought that the full shift to online would not be too difficult.

But the shift was easier said than done. Both students and faculty were impacted by the pandemic, much more than we realized at first. First, there were the technical issues. Some students have no or poor internet connection at home. Teachers had to go on a steep learning curve to figure out how to achieve our learning objectives in the new format. Second, there was the economic and practical impact. With church services cancelled and most people unable to work, there were no more love gifts and offerings to sustain church workers. Then, there were the practical details to take care of. Trying to organize life in drastically different and, frankly, scary circumstances took up much time, mental space, and effort.

But along with this is the psychological impact, so that both teachers and students were finding it hard to focus and were exhausted after internet class sessions. The tragedy of what is happening around the world, the grief for people dead and dying, the worry for relatives and friends near and far away, the uncertainty of it all were too much to bear. Some had panic and anxiety attacks. We looked to God and prayed, but the heaviness, restlessness, fear, and anxiety remained.

The fact is that we are not in a normal situation; we are in a disaster situation. In disaster situations, we are thrown out of familiar daily routines into vulnerability. And it is important for us to process this change; otherwise, the disaster will have long-term traumatic effects.

This brings to mind the project that ATS initiated several years ago among the victims of Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan). 66 trained faculty, staff, students, and alumni were sent to several disaster areas to provide psycho-spiritual support. As Dr. Annabel Manalo, one of my colleagues, trauma specialist, and chair of our

counseling faculty, said, “Psychological first aid is most important in the immediate aftermath of disaster when the usual protective support structures in the community have been temporarily immobilized.”

In the sessions conducted in groups in the aftermath of Yolanda, we asked people individually to relate the story of their experience and encouraged them to express its physical, emotional, relational, spiritual, and mental effects. Then we provided teaching on the traumatic effects of disaster and some techniques on how to cope. We ended by exploring with the group sources of strength and hope so that they can move forward. Many mentioned prayer, being with a group and facing challenges together, doing things to improve the community’s welfare, and getting back to some routines of daily life.

Recognizing belatedly that we are in a similar situation of disaster, in which we ourselves are the victims, the ATS faculty first shared our stories and our students’ stories through email and then through video conferencing. Faculty commented as follows:

- “My anxiety level has been raised to an all-time high. I catch my jaw taut and my stomach tense.”
- “Initially, I was ok, but... I found myself having anxiety attacks. Sometimes, I am unable to even get up from bed.”
- “I cannot help but be anxious about myself, sometimes becoming paranoid (if I sneeze and experience an itchy throat I have this morbid feeling that I may have caught the virus).”
- “Our normal routine is disrupted and, to be honest, we are lost and disoriented as to how we should proceed with life.”

Similarly, some of our students, those who are more prone to stress, anxiety, and depression, saw a worsening of their mental health issues. It is important to validate these feelings and not challenge or interrupt while these effects are being shared. As we pointed out to the Yolanda survivors, the physical and emotional manifestations of stress are natural responses to disaster.

But after sharing our stories and validating each other’s experiences, we needed to look at what resources were available for coping with the crisis. Many of us felt the need for a pause, so that we could, as Dr. Annabel put it, have “the space to reflect on the meaning of this crisis event from the faith perspective and listen to God’s invitation for us as a faith community.” Thus, I used the break during Holy Week to reflect on what Scripture has to say about the current crisis and also to talk to my students individually through an audio call – listening to their concerns, helping them process their experiences, and praying for them. It is important for all of us to come to terms with the fact that things have changed. There are things we need to let go and grieve about so that we can be open to new possibilities.

Praying for each other and not just on our own became central as we poured out our hearts to God. Our chaplain started a 12-hour prayer chain, periodic times of prayer, and a weekly list of prayer items. ATS posted scriptural reflections written by faculty three to four times a week, which helped to give insight for our experiences. Slowly, we went back to a routine of faculty meetings every two weeks, weekly online class sessions but with time given to share how students are doing, regular times for the spiritual disciplines and house chores, and new processes for doing administrative work online. Because of the increased isolation, it became important to continue sharing life together, and this happened through social media group chats in which prayer requests, announcements, and issues that need attention are regularly posted. These group chats, however, are only as effective as they represent the actual physical life of the community before the disaster. Without a strong community life beforehand, it is difficult to maintain an online presence.

In a time of great insecurity, it is easy to become inward-focused and just think of one's personal needs and those of one's family. While disasters lead to an inwardly focus, this should only be a temporary phase. A key part of the normalization process, a key coping resource, is reaching out to others who are in a similar situation or greater need. At ATS, we realized the importance of not being paralyzed, even as we ourselves face a financial deficit, severe limitations in getting work done, and the challenge of securing ourselves and our families as the virus continues to spread. Thus, we initiated the *ATS Love Thy Neighbor* campaign – to be a neighbor to the vulnerable other. In this case, we focused on Persons Deprived of Liberty and frontliners at the overcrowded city jail where there was a COVID outbreak. Our whole community of faculty, staff, students, and alumni came together to donate supplies that would help mitigate the virus's effects and encourage jail inmates and frontliners.

We still face many challenges, such as inability to focus, great financial need both for ATS and individual members of the community, lack of online resources, technological difficulties, the sameness of everyday life, and the blurring of boundaries between work and personal/family life due to the pervasive and prolonged use of online platforms. However, recognizing what is happening and intentionally learning together how to deal with this disaster has helped our community. We learned during this pandemic that creating safe spaces for processing the disaster experience, providing support structures, adjusting routines to the new situation, and reaching out to others are helpful ways of moving forward.



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