

Helping others, building relationships, and finding happiness in hard times.

Posted Mar 26, 2020

The emergence and rapid spread of [coronavirus](#) has been threatening the world's order, stability, and wellbeing. Many cities and countries are now under lockdown; many people have been infected, and many have died. The world's economies are threatened. To what extent is it possible to flourish amidst this pandemic?

There will inevitably be painful losses of health, of lives, of livelihoods, and of much that we hold dear. While we must do what we can to prevent or mitigate these, we must also accept that there will, despite our best efforts, still be terrible losses. We must prepare for these. However, we can also look for other ways to flourish, even during this time of uncertainty, difficulty, and loss. Doing so will better help us—on a personal and societal level—to overcome this crisis.

Our [framework for flourishing](#) at the [Human Flourishing Program](#) at Harvard acknowledges that health-related and economic aspects of life (concerning which there will be losses) are central and important. Yet there are other important dimensions to flourishing as well: meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, and [happiness](#). We can still pursue these in various ways, even during these very difficult times.

Helping Others

In one of our recent research posts, we described how research indicates that volunteering, the helping of others, is an especially powerful pathway to enhancing [meaning and purpose](#). Regular group volunteering activities may be more challenging during this time when large group gatherings are being discouraged. However, there are still numerous opportunities to help those around you. A neighbor in my townhouse association recently volunteered to pick up groceries for others, so that the elderly residents, for whom the virus seems particularly deadly, would not be exposed. You can find similar ways to help those around you, increasing your sense of purpose and meaning while shaping your habits towards kindness, helpfulness, and [generosity](#).

Further reflection upon right action and generosity towards others likewise calls into question the practice of [hoarding](#) food and resources for oneself,

potentially resulting in systemic distributional failures. Instead, we should acquire only what is reasonably needed for ourselves and our family. This will ensure shelves are not empty. Considering others in this way is not easy. It requires us to embody principles of love and generosity towards others. Acting in this way helps us develop the virtues that are important for both our own flourishing and that of our communities.

Strengthening Relationships

During these challenging times, you can also seek to flourish by strengthening your relationships and friendships. This too is not entirely straightforward while “social distancing” policies are being put in place. However, if you live with family or friends, this can be a good time to invest—in a child, or a spouse, or a housemate—in ways that may not have been possible before, or which could not previously take place due to lack of time.

You can also use the extra time confined at home to call a friend or a relative who you may have been out of touch with for a while. Call up a parent, or a grandparent. While some of the best public advice is for those over age seventy to self-isolate, this does not have to mean losing touch. Call regularly; use technologies and video calls that allow you to see each other’s face; offer to deliver groceries or other necessities if nearby, while still avoiding unnecessary contact. Start making it a habit to connect.

Furthermore, you can use the time that is available to reflect more generally on your relationships. Are there any friendships that could be strengthened at a distance? Are there any relationships that are in need of reconciliation or [forgiveness](#)? Patterns of bitterness and resentment can hinder one’s relationships and undermine one’s own wellbeing. There are helpful [resources](#) that can be used to work through the process of forgiveness. This may be a good time to do so. All of these things might enhance close relationships.

Finding Happiness

There are also practices that can contribute to happiness, which for many seems particularly elusive at present. For example, there is considerable evidence that writing down (or sharing with others) three things for which you are [grateful](#), three times a week, can considerably improve life satisfaction and alleviate depressive symptoms. You might consider doing this on the phone with friends or elderly relatives who may otherwise be isolated. Regularly practicing acts of kindness towards others likewise has been

shown, even in randomized trials, to improve happiness. We have recently published a brief [guide to evidence-based activities](#) to improve various aspects of flourishing. Many of these, the evidence suggests, contribute to happiness and life satisfaction.

While various institutional [pathways to flourishing](#)—such as family, [education](#), work, and religious community—are likewise under threat, there is much that can still be done. Schools and universities have found creative ways to carry out teaching online. Parents are making efforts to teach their young children at home. Workplaces have found ways to work remotely. While many churches, synagogues, and mosques have now suspended their services, this can provide an opportunity for increased personal devotions and prayer or new practices of family religious ritual.

Facing Suffering and Hardships

While there are things that can be done to enhance various aspects of flourishing in one's life, the actions above will not get us out of the crisis, nor prevent the losses associated with it. Six months from now many of us may have lost a loved one. Many will have lost their jobs and a good deal of their savings. At this point, it is already clear that many of us will confront significant and painful losses in this crisis. For many of us, suffering will be inevitable.

Suffering is not necessarily the opposite of flourishing. Suffering entails the experience of the loss of something good. It is painful. A holistic approach to flourishing requires a way to deal with and to confront the suffering that we will inevitably experience. While our research on [suffering](#) at the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard is still in its infancy, we have begun collecting data on suffering from over 1,200 factory workers in Sri Lanka and from over 5,000 international flight attendants. Our goal is to better understand how suffering relates to and affects flourishing over time. While there is, unsurprisingly, a negative correlation between the flourishing measures and the suffering measures in the data, that correlation, in fact, turns out to be relatively weak. It is possible, at least to some extent, to flourish amidst suffering.

In the midst of suffering, we can still find ways to respond that promote at least some aspects of flourishing. We can respond to suffering by trying to understand the situation and by acknowledging the loss; by turning to others in our communities for support and comfort; by re-evaluating our values, desires, and purposes; by trying to find new meaning and opportunities for

growth amidst suffering; by eventually trying to adjust to the circumstances, regain the good that was lost, or find new ways forward. The theological traditions we draw upon in some of our own work suggest that suffering can be viewed as an opportunity for growth, a sacrificing of the good that was lost for a greater orientation towards the transcendent and divine. However, all of these responses must acknowledge the reality of the suffering itself, the loss of something good or someone loved. The suffering that the present pandemic has brought about, and will bring about, is very real. While we can still try to flourish amidst loss and pain, we must accept that there will be suffering.

Reflecting on Life

Our confrontation with suffering, and even death, provides an important opportunity for reflection. What is it that we value most? What relationships might be in need of forgiveness or reconciliation? How is it that we are to understand our lives and our own mortality? These are not easy questions. For these, we must turn away from the data. We must turn towards our interior life, to those around us who are wise, to our rich theological and philosophical traditions, to try, as best as possible, to discern what it is that matters most.

The [Human Flourishing Program](#) at Harvard University aims to study and promote human flourishing, and to develop systematic approaches to the synthesis of knowledge across disciplines. You can [sign up here](#) for a monthly research e-mail from the Human Flourishing Program, or [click here](#) to follow us on Twitter. For past postings please see our Psychology Today [Human Flourishing Blog](#).