

COVENANT

THE SOUTHDOWN INSTITUTE | VOLUME 37 | NUMBER 2 | FALL/WINTER 2021

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Time to Replenish Our Internal Reservoirs

*"I will satisfy the weary, and all who are faint I will replenish."
(Jer 31:25)*



Over these last few months, I have had the great privilege to present our *Mental Health in Times of Crisis* workshop online to priests, bishops, lay pastoral ministers, permanent deacons, men and women religious, and lay individuals across Canada and the United States. Each workshop includes a time of breaking into small groups, where participants are invited to speak about how they have been impacted by recent stressors. Each time, even in initially shy or Zoom-weary groups, it did not take much for very personal and heartfelt sharing to unfold. The words from the Prophet Jeremiah, "I will satisfy the weary, and all who are faint I will replenish," summarize the overwhelming sentiment expressed in our gatherings. The weariness referenced by Jeremiah is described by many as a sense of being tired or exhausted, and feeling worn out or stretched thin. Many share about a sense of loss, disillusionment, sadness, and frustration. For many, the additional layer of distress felt in the wake of the residential schools crisis has added a struggle with shame and anger.

As we navigate our way through the remaining months of 2021, we all carry the wounds of traumatic distress in our systems. For some, the distress may be more prominent and strongly felt, and for others it may be somewhere in the background, but it seems we are all in need of healing. An essential step in the healing journey is to ensure we are not simply pushing forward while *running on empty*. If our internal reservoirs are depleted, day-to-day life, our work, and our ministry become unsustainable and it becomes harder to make good and healthy choices. As people of faith, let us take the offer given by the Prophet Jeremiah seriously and accept the invitation to be replenished.

In this edition of *Covenant*, several Southdown team members share pathways toward that replenishment. Carol Cavaliere, MA (Assessment and Psychotherapy), reminds us of the key function of our emotions and of the importance of regulating them in adaptive ways. Febe Aguirre, M.Ed., CSD (Spiritual Direction) and Nadine Crescenzi (Fitness) point to the importance of mindfulness as an essential spiritual resource, and Deacon Michael Hayes, RMT (Massage Therapy), reminds us to lovingly pay attention to nourishing our mind and body.

It is always good for us to remind each other that we are not alone on our journeys, and that asking for help and support along the way is a sign of strength and emotional intelligence. After all, we are here to help each other to replenish those internal reservoirs.

Sincerely,

Rev. Stephan Kappler, Psy.D, C.Psych., R.Psych.
President and Chief Psychologist

When the Pot Boils Over: Coping with Anger During the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Carol Cavaliere, MA



Over the nearly two years that the COVID-19 pandemic has persisted, many of us have borne witness to a greater number of angry outbursts on social media, in grocery stores, or during protests related to increasingly divisive sociopolitical issues. On a more personal level, we may have found ourselves

more irritable, snapping more readily at relatives, colleagues, or others with whom we interact day-to-day. In a recent study, 56% of participants reported arguments, feeling angry and falling out with others because of COVID-19 (Smith et al., 2021). Further, 22% of participants indicated that they had confronted or reported someone, while 14% reported having been the subject of confrontation themselves.

In context, these results may be unsurprising. After all, anger is a common reaction to stress, and our lives have been undeniably more stressful over these past couple of years. In addition, the restrictions and limitations that have come to characterize our days over the course of the pandemic have also impeded the availability of the coping mechanisms that we have most commonly relied upon to avoid losing our temper. For example, although social distancing has been one of the most effective means through which to curb the spread of COVID-19, it has also restricted the primary modes through which many of us manage stress (e.g., socializing with friends and extended family).

These outbursts may often appear intense and destructive, suggesting that anger is unacceptable, something to be contained or suppressed. However, just like any other emotion, anger is normal; problems only begin to arise when we fail to attend to it, akin to holding down the lid on a pot of boiling water as it bubbles over. Taking a closer look at our anger—lifting the lid—can alleviate some of the internal pressure we may feel and set us on a path towards more productively navigating anger in the midst of ongoing stress.

Put simply, anger is a response to feeling out of control in some way; at its core we often find hurt, fear, sadness, perceived judgement or rejection, and/or unmet expectations. Most critically, anger is very rarely *just* anger! Like all other emotions, it serves several important functions: motivating our actions, communicating to others, and signalling to us what is important about a given situation (Linehan, 1993). Indeed, although it can feel uncomfortable and at times veer into an undesirable response (e.g., verbal outbursts, physical aggression), anger is fundamentally intended to energize us and orient us towards seeking what we need.

Emotion regulation is a means through which we may allow anger to function in the way it is intended, making those healthy outlets increasingly available to us. In the simplest of terms, emotion regulation is the ability to influence how we

experience and express our emotions without making them worse (Linehan, 1993). This does not mean smothering or attempting to eliminate our emotional experience; rather, emotion regulation strategies put us in a position to access and utilize emotional information in a way that may support us in meeting our underlying needs and/or communicating more effectively, as opposed to fueling actions that will spiral us further into anger and deepen our emotional suffering.

As a starting point, regulating our anger will always first entail identifying our emotional experience. Research has shown that simply naming our negative emotions serves to reduce emotional reactivity (for a review, see Torre & Lieberman, 2018). For example, Lieberman and colleagues (2007) have shown that labelling emotions appears to decrease activity in the brain's emotional centre, which then allows the frontal lobe—the area primarily involved in higher-level reasoning and decision-making—a greater role in navigating the situation at hand.

Put simply, anger is a response to feeling out of control in some way; at its core we often find hurt, fear, sadness, perceived judgement or rejection, and/or unmet expectations.

There are several ways through which we can broaden our awareness and acceptance of our emotional experience. For instance, elsewhere in this issue of *Covenant*, my colleagues presented the benefits of mindfulness practice in this regard. Exploring our emotions—especially the seemingly “unacceptable” ones like anger—from a non-judgemental lens can enhance our insight into the triggering situation and our reaction to it. Stepping back to examine things more objectively can bring us greater insight into what is most triggering to us, or what thoughts or feelings often precede

our angry reactions; this lays the groundwork for us to begin to express this understanding in a more mindful and responsible manner.

Greenberg (2002) also identified a process through which we may deepen our awareness of our inner experience. Generally, this involves two phases: *arriving at* and *leaving* the emotion. The basic premise here is that we cannot leave a place without having first arrived there—that is, we must actually make contact with our anger in order to move on from it in a productive manner. The process of arriving at our emotions involves acknowledging and accepting our emotional experience, both “good” and “bad,” and putting words to these feelings. From here, we can evaluate whether our anger (as is typical) belies a deeper emotional experience. The process of leaving our emotion encourages us to build a guide to action—a healthy, alternative response to our current situation based on the more nuanced understanding of our emotional reaction developed during the arrival phase. In gaining a more complete appreciation of our core emotion, we may be better equipped to “leave” our anger by way of seeking fulfillment or resolution of its underlying needs.

Alongside this practise of building awareness and acceptance of our emotions, Golden (2016) has promoted

the importance of self-compassion in the healthy management of anger. Research has shown that people high in self-compassion appear to perceive negative life events in ways that reduce their impact (Leary et al., 2007). As opposed to being self-critical or shaming of our emotional experience, self-compassion involves being sensitive to our own suffering—ultimately coming to accept and address our underlying pain. This becomes particularly relevant when confronting anger since, as mentioned, it is often only the tip of the iceberg. Consider how we might address a friend or loved one who approaches us with their own pain and suffering; can we extend ourselves a similar

kindness, especially in the knowledge that our anger is a signal of something much deeper?

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are collectively living through a time of intense and unprecedented challenges. Our emotions, including anger, are intended to equip us with a means to navigate such difficult times. Rather than *reacting* to our anger in ways that may serve to amplify or perpetuate these existing difficulties, approaching our anger with the intent to understand and accept it may help us *respond* to it more adaptively; we may still be in hot water, but taking the lid off the pot, and perhaps even turning down the heat a little, can keep the water from boiling over. ■

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Tips To Refresh Our Inner Reservoirs

By Michael Hayes, RMT



Who ISN'T weary and carrying heavy burdens these days? You are not alone. Like the disciples in the boat on the Sea of Galilee when a great windstorm arose and the boat was being swamped, we are all in the same boat together during these stormy times. However weary and burdened you may feel, we know that storms end, and the light always returns. William Arthur Ward said, "The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails." Let's adjust.

There is a wide variety of helpful, evidence-based, holistic practices available to help us manage stress and optimize health and well-being. One practice that many find helpful for its healing properties is the clinically-oriented healthcare option of massage therapy, which includes many different types and techniques provided by qualified and licensed Registered Massage Therapists to treat different needs.

In 2020, as part of our circle of care, Southdown introduced a voluntary massage therapy program for residents. As an RMT, I have learned that in our increasingly touch-averse society many have not had much previous experience with massage therapy. So why do people like it? The answer to this question is deeper and more complex than it first appears. Some use it to help with such things as a sore back and others find it helps them in a multitude of other ways.

The practice of safe, ethical and effective massage therapy can actually do much good, and considerable evidence has accumulated to support a wide range of benefits. As an example, leading medical centres, such as Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Centre in New York City, have been requiring cancer patients in their care to receive frequent massage therapy treatments as an important part of the

healing process. Toronto's Princess Margaret Hospital, Toronto General Hospital and other hospitals, offer massage therapy to many patients. Harvard Medical School has researched why massage therapy is effective at relieving extreme, unremitting pain. It is often offered to people in treatment programs for addiction to help reduce the stress of withdrawal. To say that this form of therapy reduces the patient's anxiety would be an understatement, and it has been clinically proven to reduce the stress hormone cortisol in as little as 30 minutes. It is also used to bolster the body's immune response system and help restore healthy sleep. How all this happens at a cellular level remains unanswered. However, one thing is very clear: therapeutic massage helps people with all sorts of issues and it has an undeniable, holistic effect that improves one's body, mind and spirit, sometimes with remarkable results.

Massage therapy is not just a physical treatment; there are distinct mental and emotional benefits as well. Increasingly, massage therapy is used to help people dealing with a variety of issues, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, eating disorders, grieving a loss, reconnecting with their bodies, lifting spirits and improving mood. The power of therapeutic touch is profound. Massage has a spiritual quality that benefits the whole person in their overall healing, as the mind quiets down and the body relaxes.

Each of us can increase our protective resilience by combining a variety of holistic practices and skills. Just as our bodies become stronger when we exercise regularly, we are able to refill and refresh our reservoirs of inner strength, in our minds and spirits, with regular practice. Where would you like to see improvements? What can you identify that would be helpful to you? Small steps add up to a long journey in the right direction. Adjust a sail or two. ■

Mindfully Replenishing Our Spiritual Reservoir

By Ma. Febe T. Aguirre, M. Ed., CSD and Nadine Crescenzi, Fitness Instructor



We live most of our days with our minds full—full of our to-do list, full of what we did or did not accomplish, full of doubt and worry, or full of “what ifs” for the future. Our mind oscillates between the past and the future, stimulating stress,

fear and anxiety, and for many the COVID19 pandemic has only exacerbated these feelings. Rodski states “stress is not caused by an event—it is caused by your perceptions or beliefs or decisions about that event.” (Rodski, 2019, p. 12). As such, stress or distress can be paralyzing.

For many of us, slowing down and being still can be challenging. Inner and outer silence can be threatening. It is easy then to fill each day within the busyness of our ministry. While our ministry is life-giving, if it is used to fill our emptiness, over time, the toll will soon become evident in the form of stress or distress. This results in lost opportunities to really listen and discern the call to be present, in the here and now.

Jan Chozen Bays defines Mindfulness as “deliberately paying attention, being fully aware of what is happening both inside yourself—in your body, heart and mind—and outside yourself in your environment.” (Boyce, Barry, ed, 2011, p. 36). Mindfulness is an invitation to step back. It is a call to observe our full mind, feelings, experiences and day without judgement or having to respond or react to our thoughts or feelings. It is about paying attention and being silent because “without silence, we do not really experience our experiences” (Rohr, 2014, p. 4). All of these mentioned actions are so intertwined because they require mindful attention and intention. Our actions of observing our full mind demand a departure from our usual and habitual doing.

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Mindfulness is a state, a mental space of awareness and calmness, stabilizing the mind. This enables us to have more clarity and focus, allowing us to observe our internal experiences, feelings and emotions, whilst reducing stress and anxiety. And in turn, improving our ability to self-regulate, discern, and make choices in our daily life.

Mindfulness can be deeply spiritual. Giving ourselves permission to enter this interior space and to listen to the deep invitation of being present to our emptiness, grief, and sparks of hope can be sacred encounters. Within this mindful awareness of the sacred, we can replenish our spiritual reservoir. Dwelling in this space, we can find acceptance, without judgment, reaction or defence, of our imperfections and volatilities, which are part of being human, enabling us to gain tolerance of our feelings and emotions with an open heart.

With Mindfulness exercises such as compassion and loving-kindness, one deepens the ability to navigate turbulent thoughts and harsh judgements. We also discover within ourselves that we are not alone, a perspective common to us. We discover that we are held, aware of God’s compassion and mercy, which manifests in the gentleness with which we deal with ourselves, others, and the world. Mindfulness can lead us to become aware that God is good to us even as we fall and fail. Mindful compassion and loving-kindness brings us to a wider perspective—we will no longer see as narrowly as when we were in the valley of sadness or suffering. Mindfulness is to return to the place where we began, transformed by the gifts of increased clarity, empathy and resiliency. In the words of T. S. Eliot, we will “...arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” ■

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Covenant is produced and published by The Southdown Institute. Its purpose is to inform and educate the readership about clinical issues that surface in our work and to invite integration of the emotional and spiritual aspects of our lives.

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