

# How to Handle an Unexpected Extended Period of Isolation: A Few Guidelines

By Lisette Gabre

## Background

As people, we have some built-in reflexes to deal with danger, crisis, or the unseen.

The most well-known options are the fight or flight reactions. These are two possible physiological reactions to highly stressful or threatening situations: to defend oneself (fight) or to run away (flight).

As we go through life and face different situations we grow and learn how to deal with them. Yet when the unforeseen happens or when a new situation occurs which we have not faced before, such as the coronavirus, we suddenly find ourselves in a totally new situation. In that situation, we tend to go back and react with our basic instincts.

Any stress or trauma which doesn't have an end in view is always much harder to deal with. If we know that it is for a limited time and people can assure us of some facts about the light at the end of the tunnel, it is often easier for us to face today.

*More on how we all deal and react under the part "We are all different"*

One difference in approach that I have heard from expat friends who are now sitting in their apartments in China to that of some of my Chinese friends sitting in their apartments in the same country is that the expats are allowing themselves to have fun, "to make the best of a bad situation." Whereas I have heard from more than one Chinese Christian friend that this is the time to be serious and focus on the word of God and prayer. Time for prayer and taking the opportunity to grow in the word of God are two wonderful things to do at a time like this. However, we are also allowed to rest, laugh, and have a bit of fun.

## A Few Basics

### Follow a Daily Routine

When the situation around us is chaotic is very important to keep a few things in our daily lives stable and certain. One way to do that is to make a daily/ weekly routine and follow it. Make a little bit of a schedule and decide on a few things and stick to them. For example:

- **A time to get up:** Please note, this doesn't have to be your regular time. This may actually be a good opportunity to sleep in (if you like that) or stay up later or go to bed earlier, but the important thing is to try to keep to a routine during this time.
- **Daily exercise:** Even if you are stuck in an apartment or in hotel room, your body still needs to move. In fact, it is proven that if you move your body, your soul and mind will do better and you are likely to deal with the overall situation better. What can you do? Look around! How much space do you have? What is available? You can always stretch or do some simple aerobics. There are many activities available online. If you have children, this is even more important as children really need to move around every day. Be creative! Play games where you need to move.
- **Family time:** Decide on a special time in the week (or several times) when you spend time together as a family on a common activity. (For suggestions on what to do, please look below)

- **Time with God.** This is something you can do at a set time as a family. You can also set aside time for your own journey with the Lord.
- **School work.** Decide when this should be done, so that the child (and parents) know when it is free time. It is important that your child /children keep up with schoolwork, but it is also important that there is not too much pressure during this time of special circumstances. Remember that the child also is feeling that things are not normal and needs time to process and just be.

Make memories

Take this opportunity to make special memories. Memories which can grow you together with each other and which you can look back on and say, “Do you remember?”

Focus on the Positive While Taking in Reality

- **In a crisis it is easy to get frustrated.** Especially when we don’t have an end date in sight. At a time like the coronavirus where you did not choose to have an extra family holiday and stay at home it is easy to feel forced into a situation. That adds to the pressure of being stuck together for an unforeseen time. It is easy to focus on fear and anger rather than the positive. It is important to keep up with news and maybe even keep your own journal or document on when and what happened. This will help you later when you can debrief and process your experience.
- **“Seize the day.”** We are all familiar with the idioms “Seize the day” and “take time to smell the flowers” but at a time like this it is actually a great opportunity to put them into practise. Below is a list of things you may consider doing

Suggestions on What to Do

- **Rest and sleep!** Maybe you feel overworked and tired: here is your opportunity to catch up on rest and sleep. Also remember that even if you don’t think you are experiencing crisis, you actually are facing an unexpected situation and this makes your body and mind much more tired than you normal.
- **Do the things you never have time to do!** Most of us have things in our lives we never get around doing. We find ourselves thinking: “oh, I should do this;” “I really need to do that.” And yet life is busy and quite full and some things often fall behind, even if we know that we ought to do them or actually really want to do them—things like spending time with our loved ones. If you live with family members take this opportunity to do things together. It might be that you have to re-learn how to be together for so long especially if you have restrictions and are stuck together.
- **So what are some things we can do at a time like this?**
  - Try to do something special or fun every day. Something you normally don’t do.
  - Be creative! Maybe you can draw or colour something together. If you have any magazines with pictures, make a collage together or individually.
  - Play games! “We don’t have any games” you may think. Think of some fun games with minimum of things. Maybe charades or word games. If you have kids, maybe some simple English games. Make your own games. If you have a deck of cards there are many games you can play.
  - Do a few minutes of daily exercise. You can find online aerobics or do some simple stretching.

- Share stories from your childhood! If you have kids let them ask questions about your childhood and maybe about your parents and relatives. Make a family tree! If you live together with your parents take this opportunity to record their life story. What was it like when they grew up? How did they go to school? What did they do as kids? What did they play? How did they come to faith? The same goes if you are “stuck” with your spouse: take this opportunity to learn more about each other.
- Share memories! Remind each other of fun memories and also some hard ones. Also, remind each other on how you have seen the Father’s hand at work in your life in the past. He is a good, good Father.
- Have fun!
- Do the things you used to do but never do any longer. Maybe cook together or bake if you have an oven.
- Worship, study God’s word, and pray together. There are many online resources available. Make it personal, share your time with God together.
- Write! Write a poem, a diary, or do some journaling.
- Declutter and clean out your wardrobes, drawers, and shelves from things you may not need. Or at least get some order.

We are all different

God created us in his own image and yet he decided to create us all as different individuals and each one of us with our own personality. Being God and almighty he could have very well used a cookie cutter and made us all the same, like little gingerbread cookies—looking the same and being the same emotionally and physically. But he didn’t. He made us differently. He created each one of us with our own personality. On top on that life has also shaped us depending on our childhood, experiences and situations all the way from the day we we were born, until today.

This is important to remember as we share and do life together with people around us as well as in our ministry, but it is also extremely important to remember when it comes to crisis.

Maybe someone would say: “Crisis? This is not a crisis. We just got extra time to spend at home.” While someone else may feel very stressed and worried about the uncertainty. “How long will be be here?” “How big is the risk of getting sick?” “Will there be enough food?” “What about an income?” While someone is at peace, someone else in the very same room and family may be very worried and stressed. **Both are normal.** Neither is better than the other. Neither is more sinful than the other.

We also need to remember that because someone is acting as if everything is fine, it may not be so inside. Some people process by talking. Talking, talking and more talking. Other people withdraw and get very silent—even more silent than normal. **These** are the people to look out for. When people lock up their emotions and feelings, worries and thoughts inside it can lead them into a dark and heavy place where depression could lurk. You can never force anyone to share what they are thinking, but you can encourage them to.

In a situation when people are withdrawing and prefer to be alone and sleep or do nothing it is important to allow them space to be alone—for some time. But you need to make sure that they eat even if they don’t want to. They may eat less than normal and this is perfectly OK. But eating three meals a day is important. As is keeping some kind of routine. (see above). If a child doesn’t want to eat, try not to force him or her to eat as this may cause more drama, but instead try to get her or him to at least eat a little bit and in order to do so, maybe make his or her favourite food.

When we are faced with an unusual situation, one beyond our control some people react with anger and frustration. What may look and sound like anger and fighting, may actually be a sign of the same worries the silent one or the sad one is having.

Anger and fighting between people, including good Christians, are normal when we are faced with situations like this and feel overwhelmed. What often makes it worse is that we become disappointed—disappointed in ourselves, our spouse, parent, child or family member.

When we finally have this time together and we end up quarrelling! What's with that? It is normal. Just as it is very normal that when the family goes on a family vacation or a couple gets some time to themselves they often find themselves quarrelling and having more heated discussions (aka fighting) than they do in daily life. Why? Partly because of expectations. But also because in daily life we are busy. We don't always have that much time together and sadly we sometime don't have enough time or energy to deal with these matters. If we only pass by each other in daily life, we may not have time to be so irritated at our spouses as if we are together for long hours every day, for a long time.

So what can we do, instead of being irritated with each other? It is OK to "lose it" and be irritated and upset with each other. Sometimes. Make sure you don't get stuck in a bad habit. It can be very hard to break out of. Be honest about your emotions. Share with each other if you are worried, scared or upset. Pray together. Comfort each other.

What about the Kids?

Just as we adults are different and unique, so are our little ones. This can often be seen very clearly in a family with several siblings and the same parents. At times I have looked at my own three children, which I as a fact know have the same mother and father, and asked myself **how** is it possible that they are so different? Same parents, same rules, and yet so different.

The same goes emotionally. There will be children who will not worry very much, whereas another child may be very worried and show clear symptoms of stress.

How do we best handle the situation with our children?

- **Be honest.** They deserve to know that mom and dad also don't know what will happen. A child feels safe when parents are honest. "It will be OK" as the only answer doesn't help. In the end they may realize that maybe it will not.  
Some of the most beautiful and special moments I have had with our own children are the times when we have cried together. Where I have shared with tears rolling down my cheeks that this is very hard for mom as well. "Mommy is also very sad."
- **Debrief and share what you know about the situation.** Depending on the age of the child, you don't have to share every detail about the situation, but be honest and share what you know. "Yes, people are dying. Some people are recovering and coming home from the hospital."
- **Answer their questions.** Some kids do have many questions. Some keep them to themselves. Try to encourage your children to risk asking you. Answer them as well as you can. Be honest, but make sure that they feel safe and secure.
- **Remind them that God is a good Father and that he is in control.** Listen, share and pray together with your children.