

MITIGATING STIGMA AND FEAR: Toward a Compassionate Response to COVID-19



Simple advice on how you can prevent stigma and fear associated with COVID-19

We learned from the HIV and Ebola crises how damaging stigma, misinformation and fear can be. The same is true for COVID-19. Preventing stigma can help save lives.

Stigma and fear can isolate people. It may cause them to hide the fact they have symptoms. It can prevent them from seeking proper medical care, adopting healthy behaviours and accessing the necessary support systems. It robs people of their human dignity and sense of self-worth.

Faith and community leaders can use their influence to facilitate dialogue, promote solidarity and to address misleading or inaccurate information.

Here are some simple dos and don'ts – how to talk about COVID-19 in a way that prevents stigma, fear and misinformation.

Dos

Do talk about the new coronavirus disease (COVID-19). The official name for the disease was deliberately chosen to avoid stigmatization: The 'CO' stands for corona, 'VI' for virus, 'D' for disease, and 19 for the year in which the disease emerged (2019).

Do speak accurately about COVID-19 risks, based on scientific facts and the latest public health guidance. Combat misinformation by only sharing information confirmed by official sources.

Don'ts

Don't attach ethnicities or geographic locations to the disease. This can create negative feelings toward those people or places. For example, don't refer to COVID-19 as the 'China virus' or the 'Wuhan virus.'

Don't use hyperbolic language designed to incite panic, like 'plague' or 'apocalypse.'

Do emphasize the effectiveness of prevention and treatment measures. There are simple steps we can all take to protect ourselves, our loved ones, and those around us who may be particularly vulnerable to severe outcomes.

Do speak to children about COVID-19 in an age-appropriate way. Help parents learn how to speak to children about faith within the context of a global pandemic.

Do support families, caregivers and healthcare providers affected by COVID-19 with love and compassion, without putting yourself or anyone else at risk. Find innovative ways to connect with others in your community without physically being in the same place.

Do take physical distancing seriously. Follow the public health guidance provided by your country, province and city. Social interaction is particularly important during this time, so find safe ways to check in regularly with family, friends and neighbours.

Do talk about 'people who have/may have contracted COVID-19', 'people who are being treated for COVID-19', 'people who are recovering from COVID-19' or 'people who died after contracting COVID-19'.

Do focus on our common humanity. None of us are immune to this disease.

Do find ways to exercise spiritual and religious rituals, especially memorial services, while still following public health advice.

Don't use theological language that fuels fear, like 'punishment from God' or 'curse.' COVID-19 is neither of these things. We have a responsibility to show love and compassion in the face of pain and suffering.

Don't share links from Internet sources that are not trusted or reliable.

Don't encourage behaviour that is contrary to public health guidance.

Don't share 'funny' clips or photos with stigmatizing messages.

Don't hide facts or use technical jargon. Be sensitive to what children see and hear.

Don't allow people to become isolated. Those directly impacted by the disease need your compassionate support while maintaining physical distance.

Don't stigmatize those who have recovered from COVID-19. They are no longer contagious and cannot infect anyone else.

Don't talk about people 'transmitting COVID-19' or 'infecting others,' as it implies intentional transmission and assigns blame. Every one of us is capable of contracting and spreading the virus.

Don't refer to people with the disease as 'COVID-19 suspects,' 'COVID-19 cases' or 'victims,' as it devalues and disrespects individuals.

Don't focus on divisive issue statements or expressions that are capable of driving misunderstanding. For example, 'if it was not for these people coming here, COVID-19 would not be killing us.'

And finally, above all, do pray – healing for those who are sick, insight for scientists and researchers, wisdom for government and public health officials, protection for children, a timely end to the pandemic, a compassionate response in the meantime, and generosity in the face of a global economic crisis to ensure that the most vulnerable are supported.