

Mitigating Stigma and Fear: Towards an Appropriate Christian Response to COVID-19¹

Words matter. We learned from the HIV and Ebola epidemics¹ how catastrophic fear, stigma and misinformation can be - this is also very true for COVID-19. Stigma and fear can isolate people. It can prevent them from seeking medical care or adopting healthy behaviours. Stigma and fear rob people of necessary support during a difficult time.

Watch this [short video](#) from the World Health Organisation (WHO) to learn more about how you can help to tackle stigma associated with COVID-19.

Below are some “dos” and “don'ts” on language when talking about the new coronavirus disease (COVID-19):

DOS and DON'TS²

- ✓ **DO** talk about the new coronavirus disease (COVID-19). The official name for the disease was deliberately chosen to avoid stigmatisation - the “co” stands for Corona, “vi” for virus and “d” for disease, 19 is because the disease emerged in 2019.
 - ✗ **Don't** attach geographic locations or ethnicity to the disease to express contempt or disapproval.
- ✓ **DO** talk about “people who have/may have 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.”
 - ✗ **Don't** refer to people with the disease as “COVID-19 suspects,” “COVID-19 cases” or “victims” which are ways to devalue and disrespect individuals.
- ✓ **DO** talk about people “acquiring” or “contracting” COVID-19.
 - ✗ **Don't** talk about people “transmitting COVID-19” “infecting others” or “spreading the virus” as it implies intentional transmission and assigns blame.
- ✓ **DO** speak accurately about COVID-19 risks, based on scientific data and the latest official health advice. Know your facts to be able to correct information when needed. Share only facts and information confirmed by official health sources. (See [WHO myth-busters](#))
 - ✗ **Don't** use hyperbolic language designed to generate fear like “plague” or “apocalypse.”
- ✓ **DO** emphasise the effectiveness of prevention and treatment measures. There are simple steps we can each take to keep ourselves, our loved ones and the most vulnerable safe.
 - ✗ **Don't** share “funny” clips or photos with stigmatising messages.
- ✓ **DO** honour the scientific and health guidance from your government to stop the spread of COVID-19. We follow a God who created a world with structure and order. We need to model hope and truth to keep the most vulnerable among us safe and not promote threats or fear.
 - ✗ **Don't** emphasise or dwell on the negative or threatening messages that drive fear.
- ✓ **DO** [speak to children](#) in an age-appropriate way about COVID-19. Help [parents learn how to speak to children about God and COVID-19](#). Make sure [families have fun and stay fit](#) during this time.
 - ✗ **Don't** hide facts or use technical terms. Be sensitive to what children see and hear.

¹ https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/JC2118_terminology-guidelines_en_1.pdf

² <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/covid19-stigma-guide.pdf>

- ✓ **DO** support families, caregivers and health care providers affected by COVID with love and compassion without putting yourself or anyone else at risk. Find innovative ways to “meet” with your family and faith community without physically being in the same place!
- ✓ **DO** take physical distancing seriously. Follow the guidelines of your country, state or city. Social interaction, however, remains essential in this time.
 - ✗ **Don’t** stigmatise those recovered from COVID-19. They cannot infect anyone else.
- ✓ **DO-** offer compassionate support to those who are sick or impacted while physical distancing.
 - ✗ **Don’t** allow social isolation. Those impacted need your compassionate support while maintaining physical distance.
- ✓ **DO** celebrate God as Immanuel, God with us especially during times of crisis. Share His faithfulness and love through Jesus becoming one with our suffering through his own suffering and death.
 - ✗ **Don’t** use theological language that fuels fear like “punishment from God” or “curse.” COVID-19 is not a punishment from God or a curse. As God’s people we have the responsibility to show love and compassion in the face of pain and suffering.
- ✓ **DO** pray—for healing, for wisdom for scientists, insight for public health officials and politicians, for compassionate responses, for protection of children, for a speedy end to the crisis and for generosity in the face of a global economic crisis to ensure that the most vulnerable are supported.
- ✓ **DO** practice relevant and responsive use of Scripture to encourage and lead people. Emphasize who God is and how he acts through the ages.
 - ✗ **Don’t** apply Scripture out of context or in a random manner to make your point.
- ✓ **Do** cry out to God. ([Ps 13; 22 and 88v](#)) Lament is what happens when people ask God why difficulty or hardships take place and don’t get an answer. We must move beyond our self-centred worry and look more broadly at the suffering of the world. The Holy Spirit is “groaning” within us as we groan with the whole creation. ([Rom 8:23](#))
- ✓ **Do** come up with creative ways to exercise spiritual and religious rituals and apply **safe burial practices while still following public health advice**.
 - ✗ **Don’t** enforce unadapted religious practices that cause more infections and possible death.
- ✓ **And finally – above all: DO** love one another. As [John 13:34-35](#) says ...Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples...

ASSURE

- ✓ Correct scientific information is being shared
- ✓ Mental health and psycho-social support are provided for children and families impacted
- ✓ Child protection mechanisms continue despite lock-down practices
- ✓ Spiritual support for children and their families continues while complying to public health guidance
- ✓ Community and social engagement opportunities through virtual methods
- ✓ Advocacy for essential health services, ongoing child protection services and response to secondary needs (economic, livelihoods, etc.)
- ✓ Care and support for the elderly and disabled continue despite lock down practices
- ✓ Homeless and disabled people are cared for