

MITIGATING STIGMA AND FEAR: Towards an **Appropriate Christian Response** to COVID-19



This document gives simple advice on how you can prevent stigma and fear associated with COVID-19.

Preventing stigma can save lives. We learned from the HIV and Ebola crisis how damaging fear, stigma and misinformation can be - this is also very true for COVID-19. Stigma and fear can isolate people. It may cause them to hide the fact they have symptoms and prevent them from seeking medical care, adopting healthy behaviours and accessing necessary support. Stigma and fear robs people of their human dignity and inherent worth as created in the image of God.

Faith leaders can use their convening power and influence to facilitate social dialogue, to promote unity and solidarity, and to address misleading theologies.

Watch this [short video](#) from the WHO to learn more about how you can help tackle stigma associated with COVID-19. Please also refer to the [WHO: COVID-19 stigma guide](#).

Below are some 'do's' and 'don'ts' on how to talk about COVID-19 in a way that prevents stigma, fear and misinformation.

Do's

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 because the disease emerged in 2019.

Do speak accurately about COVID-19 risks, based on scientific data and the latest official health advice. Know your facts so you can correct information when needed. Share only facts and information confirmed by official health sources (see [WHO myth-busters](#)).

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.

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.

Do support families, caregivers and health care providers affected by COVID-19 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.

Don'ts

Don't attach geographic locations or ethnicity to the disease. This can create negative feelings towards those locations or ethnicities. For example, don't talk about the China virus or the Wuhan virus.

Don't use hyperbolic language designed to generate fear, like 'plague' or 'apocalypse'.

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

Don't encourage behaviour that is contrary to government advice.

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

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

Do take physical distancing seriously. Follow the guidelines of your country, state or city. Social interaction, however, remains essential in this time.

Do talk about people 'acquiring' or 'contracting' COVID-19.

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'.

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. Emphasise who God is and how he acts through the ages.

Do cry out to God ([Psalms 13; 22 and 88](#)). 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. ([Romans 8:23](#)).

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.

Do focus on our common humanity, as we all are created in the image of God.

Do come up with creative ways to exercise spiritual and religious rituals especially funerals*, while still following public health advice.

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

Don't stigmatise those recovered from COVID-19. They cannot infect anyone else.

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

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.

Don't apply Scripture out of context or in a random manner to make your point.

Don't use theological language that fuels fear like 'punishment from God' or 'curse.' COVID-19 is not either of these things. As God's people, we have the responsibility to show love and compassion in the face of pain and suffering.

Don't focus on divisions and/or issue statements or expressions that are capable to drive misunderstanding, such as 'if it was not for these people coming here, COVID-19 would not be killing us'.

Don't enforce unadapted religious practices that cause more infections and possible death.



* WHO guidance on funerals and safe burial is contained in their "[Practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19](#)"



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...”