

**How Some People in our Narrative Community Have Responded to Worry, Panic, and Fear**  
**A collective document created by Jill Freedman and Gene Combs**  
**Evanston Family Therapy Center**

We understand that the people of China are currently struggling with a virus epidemic that is affecting everyone. Our colleagues there have let us know that many people are affected by worry, panic, and fear. In hopes of providing some support, we have asked members of our community to share whatever knowledge and skill their life experience has brought them concerning how to deal with frightening situations. What follows is a summary of what they told us.

**Writing**

We have found that writing can bring comfort. For some of us writing has long been a way to create some space from overwhelming feelings like panic. It can be helpful to take the circulating thoughts and worries and put them to paper which can then be edited until they make sense. This process can quiet and calm the body and mind so that people can trust themselves to act thoughtfully.

One of us said that in her 30's, when her daughters were still very young, she had two back to back cancer scares. Both were detected early and thankfully eventually resolved. But before she knew that she would be ok, she was in shock and very afraid at the thought of her daughters growing up without her - without the unending protective and profound love she was imagining would die with her. She found herself writing all her thoughts down, all the things she wanted them to know. She realized that fear was having her believing in a future that she couldn't possibly predict. Writing reaffirmed and reconnected her to what was most important, and also helped her stay more present and catch the impulse to jump into a not yet known future.

**Realizing that although some things are beyond our control, we can still respond**

It is possible to shift our attention to what we can do or what we would like to do that could help with the situation. We can reduce the time and energy we spend attending to repetitive scary news. That will allow us to focus more on our family and friends, and on actions we can take to care for each other. We can put our energy into our work and into those things we enjoy and are good at.

**Remembering that worry means caring is happening**

It is helpful when we worry to understand that that means that we care, that our hearts are involved.

**Seeking out other people**

Community and connection help us face panic and fear. There is a lot of history to this type of sustenance. People do this all across the world...people find people to be with them and help them find a way through, or a way forward. We have witnessed this time after time. Someone

makes a difficult phone call to share news about something scary, or horrible, or terrible and then others start showing up. Even though they don't know what to do, it doesn't stop them. They come anyway. It is the connecting and being together that helps us and our families reduce, or at least be able to endure, the effects of fear and worry. There are lots of ways communities can help people come together...running club, book club, people coming together to meditate, pray, dance, sing, play music, make art, hold hands, walk, talk. The activity is secondary to the being together.

One of us said, when I am dealing with worry and over-nervousness, I try to talk to close friends or people who have similar experiences. Usually people are supportive and encouraging with each other. A community of people who I can talk to helps me a lot when I worry.

### **Showing up for Others & Sharing Hopeful Stories Even when We don't Know What to Do**

Sometimes the most important thing we can do is show up and join with others.

One of our community members told this story: I'm remembering the time I received a phone call from one of my brothers, confirming my mom's life-threatening illness. I was shocked, scared and could not talk, only listen. Fear had me by the throat. I was telling myself to "be strong" and to go about my business of taking care of my kids and to give my folks time to process this news. But, I couldn't! My heart took over my brain (thank goodness) and told me to drive out to my parents' house. Little did I know one of my brothers was doing the same. He, too, headed to their house after finding out the news. When I got there, my parents and my brother looked scared and worried. I sat with them. At first, we didn't know what to say, we just showed up. There was an awkward quiet, but eventually we all started talking. Somehow our talking turned into sharing stories of everyone we knew that survived a brush with death. Next thing we had a little hope and the fear decreased enough for us to come up with an action plan of finding doctors and making appointments, but first we had to find strength and we did that by finding each other.

### **Finding Distraction**

Sometimes it can be helpful to find something to immerse ourselves in as a way of distraction or taking a break.

One of us works with a young person who shared this idea: One of the things that has helped me after witnessing a traumatic incident is an app called Kaleidoscope. For a few months I volunteered as a Red Cross Citizen Responder. In this role, I helped my local first responders by responding to medical emergencies often several minutes before paramedics to either start CPR or offer basic medical assistance. Although it was rewarding, there were some situations that left me feeling overwhelmed. Unfortunately, the last accident that I volunteered for truly left me feeling traumatized

and shaken. I found myself feeling constantly on edge and having flashbacks of the scene. The **Kaleidoscope** app worked in a way that allowed me to drown out the negative images and feelings that I was having. It felt like being hypnotized and within a few minutes I began to feel calmer and more centered. After the using the app multiple times over a week or two I felt less overwhelmed by anxiety."

We don't know if this app is available to you but we imagine that some app like this is. This one makes simple movements of your finger on the screen into colorful patterns.

### **Taking Control of our Breathing**

Using conscious awareness of our breath, paying attention to each breath as it goes easily in and easily out, is a way to stay in the present. Breath is something we can control as well as something our body does automatically. When our breathing is quick and shallow like when we are afraid, we can consciously pay attention and slow down our breathing. When we become aware of where fear and tension resides in our bodies it is easier to release some of those feelings as we exhale.

### **Making and Listening to Music**

The sharing of music is a way of relating and connecting that could open up connections beyond language barriers and beyond national borders. Music can sometimes transcend the artificial political boundaries, and other less visible boundaries that leave us thinking we are so different from each other, or alone! Music it has been said, is a universal language. Music making has sometimes been a special part of our narrative community. It has served to bring us together in relaxing and enjoyable ways, promoted caring and love—and also a sense of community that is uniquely our own—even during times of stress. We hope to send these precious expressions to you folks in China during this most challenging of times.

One of us hopes you will be able to access this video of a song: *Journey Home*, by Abigail Washburn. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zepC3LdSAXo>. It was filmed in 2007. In this video, Abigail sings in Mandarin, something very unusual indeed for an American singer! This is a love song, that expresses a longing even as the world just goes on... In offering this song, we hope to offer some witness to the difficulties and uncertainties you are experiencing in China in relation to the coronavirus. Even if you can't hear this song, we suspect you know music you can share among yourselves, and that comfort can be found in such sharing.