

NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY

A Simple 3-Step Plan for Living Through Crisis

"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

– Victor Frankl



INTRODUCTION

I've been coaching professionally for 17 years now. Whether I'm partnering with a faith leader, an artist, a business owner, a writer, a homeschool mom, or another coach, I can tell you there's one thing every one of us struggles with on a daily basis: Uncertainty.

We just don't like not knowing...

...will I be able to pay my bills this month?

...will my family stay healthy this year?

...will my spouse and I be able to work through this challenge?

...will we ever be able to have kids?

Throw in a global crisis like COVID-19, and our feelings of uncertainty explode exponentially—along with the number of questions that begin to hound us. *Will my family be okay? Will I be able to keep my job? Will someone I love get sick? How many will die? How safe is safe enough? How long will this last? Is this our new normal?*

When confronted with a threat of this magnitude, our minds naturally slide into Fight-Flight-or-Freeze Mode. We stop thinking with the front part of our brains—our creative, rational, prefrontal cortex—and start operating almost exclusively out of the more primitive, animalistic parts of our brain—the amygdala, along with the rest of the limbic system. These systems work great if you happen to be confronted by a grizzly bear in the wild. But they're not much help to us in a complex, multi-faceted situation like the one posed by the coronavirus. When confronted by COVID-19, your Amygdala might be screaming at you to get out there and buy a truckload of toilet paper, but that's not really going to help you survive this crisis, and as we've now seen, that kind of reactive behavior creates additional problems for all of us to deal with.

But here's the good news: **You are not a slave to your primitive brain.** And while your fear is understandable, you have a powerful set of skills and tools you can use in this situation to give not only you and your family the best chance of making it through this crisis unscathed, but also to serve other people and make their world better in the process.

A 3-STEP PLAN

To stop living reactively (i.e. with your primitive “fear” brain running amok), there are three things you need to do:

- 1. Calm Yourself**
- 2. Assess Your Situation**
- 3. Take Positive Action**

In the following pages, I’m going to show you how taking these three steps can lower your stress, reduce your fear, and empower you to take meaningful, smart actions to help you and those you love navigate this crisis well.

Let’s begin with Step #1: **Calm Yourself.**



CALM YOURSELF

As I mentioned earlier, whenever we perceive a threat coming toward us, we naturally slide into our primitive brain in an attempt to survive the threat. The problem is that part of our brain is neither creative nor rational. Faced with any crisis, it gives you only three possible responses: Fight. Flight. Or Freeze. Again, this may be good when faced with a charging rhino, but it's just not up to the challenge of dealing with the complex issues involved with something like a pandemic.

But the front part of your brain **is** creative! Research in neuroscience has shown us that when your Amygdala is activated (i.e. the primitive brain), you stop using your prefrontal cortex entirely. That means as long as you stay in that fear-based fight-flight-or-freeze mode, you cannot think rationally or creatively about your situation.

This is why it's so important that you learn how to calm yourself—literally, to soothe and calm your fear-driven brain so that your rational, creative mind can come back online. This is actually easier to accomplish than you might think. I'm going to give you three simple practices that you can start doing every day—even several times a day—to keep your fear-brain from hijacking you.

1. Breathe. I know this sounds a bit ridiculous, but I promise it's anything but. Your body has built-in systems that help you calm down after a shock or a sudden crisis. Some of the most powerful of these can be activated through focused, intentional breath work. There are many varieties of breath work (all really good; you should look them up)—I'm just going to give you one. It's called Box Breathing, and it goes like this:

Step 1: While slowly counting from 1 to 5 in your mind, take in a deep breath, one that fills your whole belly (not just your chest).

Step 2: Hold that breath for another slow count of 1 to 5.

Step 3: Following the same count of 1 to 5, slowly let that breath out.

Step 4: Refrain from inhaling for another count of 1 to 5. Then repeat the steps.

Try it now. Just by repeating the steps five times, you'll notice a significant change in the stress levels of your body. Whenever you're feeling really wound up and your mind is spinning with worry or fear, repeat the sequence 10 times.

CALM YOURSELF

2. Exercise. Anxiety is like constantly revving up an engine without letting it go anywhere. Physical exercise gives your anxiety somewhere to go. Just by taking a simple walk around the neighborhood, you can literally burn off anxiety right along with the calories. Too often, when faced with stressful situations, we cut back on regular physical exercise because we think we “don’t have time” for it. But the truth is actually quite the reverse: We need to exercise more when we’re experiencing prolonged periods of stress, so that we can disperse our stress through our bodies and thereby think more clearly, calmly, and creatively about the challenges before us.

3. Share. You know how your problems always seem worse when you think about them in the middle of the night than they do in the full light of day? That’s also what happens when you keep your fears and worries stuffed inside and don’t express them. When you’re feeling stressed, one powerful way to diffuse your anxiety is to literally get it out of you. Talk it out, write it out, pray it out—use whatever approach works best. The point is to get your feelings out in front of you where you can see them in the full light of day. Worries and fears have a way of bouncing off one another and multiplying in our heads until they look like monsters we feel completely unequipped to face. Pulling them out of the dark of your own thoughts and putting them out in front of you where you can see them not only helps you see them more rationally, but clears your headspace so you can think more creatively about what to do next.



Only once you’ve calmed yourself will you be in the right headspace to move on to the second step: **Assess Your Situation.**

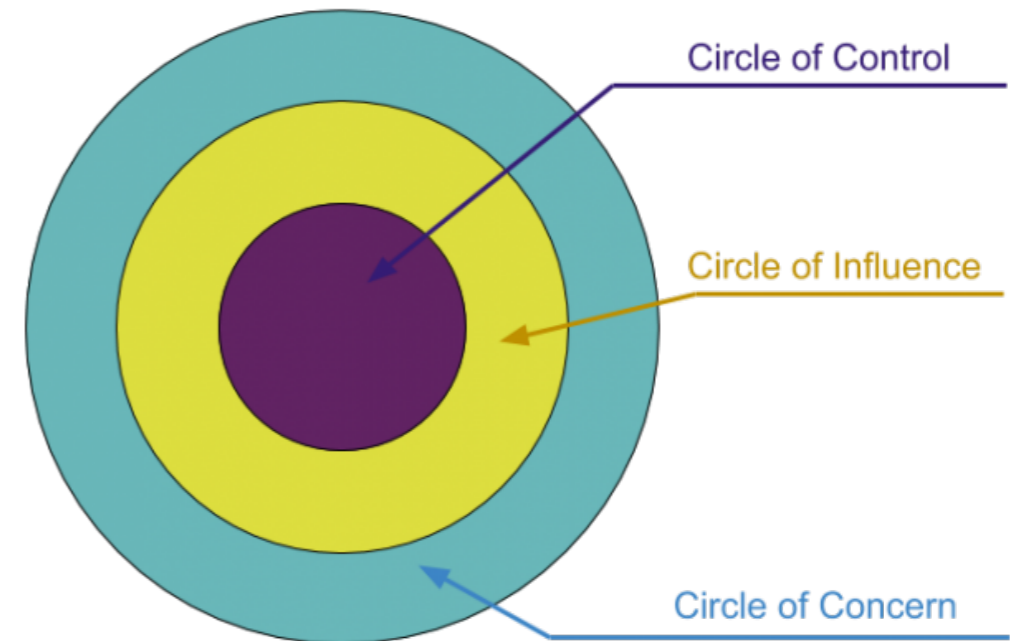
ASSESS YOUR SITUATION

To effectively navigate through crisis, you have to honestly assess the reality of your current situation. This involves not only acknowledging the legitimate threats and risks you are facing, but also recognizing the many assets, tools and advantages that are available to you. It even includes identifying any creative opportunities that the crisis has made possible.

To get you started, I want to show you a tool that, while simple, can really help you think more clearly and more creatively about your current reality. This tool was created by Stephen Covey (author of the *7 Habits of Highly-Effective People*), and it's called the Circle of Influence and Control. Here's how it works:

On a blank sheet of paper, draw a big circle—one that fills the whole page. Title it "My Circle of Concern." Along the inside edges of this circle, write down all the things related to this current global crisis that really concern you or trouble you, but that you don't personally have any control over. For example, how many people will ultimately be infected, or how many of those people will die.

Next, draw a second circle inside the first one. Make it about half as big as the outer circle. Title this one "My Circle of Influence." Along the inside edges of this circle, write down all your concerns related to this crisis that you may be able to influence in some way, but don't fully control. For example, whether your friends or loved ones employ all the recommended practices for avoiding the virus.



Finally, draw a third circle inside the second one. Title this one "My Circle of Control," and in it write down all the things you actually have full control over related to this crisis and your current situation. For example: your thoughts, your choices, the actions you can take to help others, either online or in person.

Already, you can see how clarifying this is, right? The fact is that most of us are spending a **lot** of our energy and attention at the moment on things that fall exclusively within our Circle of Concern—things we care deeply about, but over which we have no control. You can't control what the government does, or whether your job lays you off, or whether the crisis continues into the Fall, or what people are saying on Facebook about it all. When you focus too much of your energy exclusively on your Circle of Concern, it actually leaves you feeling *more* stressed and *more* powerless than you would otherwise.

ASSESS YOUR SITUATION

It's understandable that these things matter to you; that's why they're in your Circle of Concern. But to really navigate the current crisis effectively, you need to shift your focus first and foremost to your Circle of Control: *What are the things that you have full control over in this crisis? What are the attitudes and actions available to you right now that can best help you and those around you navigate this difficult time successfully?* Write down your answer to those questions. Can you see how your answers form the bedrock of your Action Plan for navigating through this?

Once you have outlined your action plan around the things you can control, then shift your focus to the next circle—the Circle of Influence. What are the specific actions you can take in this circle to influence other people or circumstances toward the outcomes you want? For example, do you want to see your neighbors support one another in meaningful ways during this crisis? If so, what can you do to influence that outcome? Really think through where and in what ways your influence will have the greatest effect. You can't do everything. But you can do something. How can you leverage your influence for the common good?

Once you have an Action Plan for your Circle of Control, and your Circle of Influence, then you're ready to move on to the third and final step: **Take Positive Action.**



TAKE POSITIVE ACTION

As you enact your Plan, it's important to keep these guidelines in mind:

1. Don't try to do everything at once. Rather, start with your personal practices—your attitude, your daily practices around self care and disease prevention. Give yourself time to adjust to these changes. Then add in the rest of your plan, one action at a time.

2. Adjust as you go. Once you put your Plan into action, you'll most likely need to make changes. Some things just don't work the way we imagine they will. So feel free to adapt or change your Plan as you go. This is not a failure. To the contrary, this is how all good plans succeed.

3. Keep your attention on what you can control or influence. This means minimizing the time you spend on social media. I'm not saying you shouldn't stay informed. Pick a few reputable websites to check on once a day, then leave the rest alone. Avoid "stress scrolling" through your feeds at all the "news" articles. This will only serve to trigger your primitive brain to come back online

4. Look for the creative opportunities hiding in plain sight. As you navigate the difficulty of the days ahead, keep your eyes open for unexpected opportunities and fresh possibility. What new good does this season make possible—for you? for your family? for your city? for the world? Look there, and let your courage lead you to action.

Finally, what about all those things in your Circle of Concern? How do you deal with all of that?

One word: Surrender.

You need to surrender it. To give it over to a Higher Power. To let it go. I'm not saying don't care. I'm saying don't carry it.

One of the best practices I know of for letting things go is prayer. Lay out your concerns before God, ask for what you want, then leave it in God's hands. This is not always a one-time action. You may have to surrender your fears and concerns multiple times a day before it really sinks in. The thing is to do it as often as you need, for as long as it takes, until you have well and truly surrendered all those things you care so deeply about, but cannot control.

What if you don't believe in God? I'd say pray anyway. Just adapt your approach to make it work for you. Speak a blessing over those issues that most concern you. State your wishes for the people involved and call forth the outcomes you most want to see happen. Then release it all. Lift it all up to the Universe and let it go; or just leave it on the ground where you spoke the words. Again, this may not be a one-time act. If you need to, make it a daily practice.

THANK YOU

These days are not easy. But they need not be overwhelming. You have an abundance of resources, tools, and skills within you and around you that can not only help you face this time of uncertainty with courage, but overcome it with wisdom and love.



Want More? Here's An Invitation...

If you want to continue this conversation, I'm setting up a new group coaching cohort specifically focused on this crisis and how to navigate it well. I'm looking for 9 to 12 people interested in meeting monthly via Zoom to get coaching on the specific challenges you're facing, and to support one another through this crazy time. [Drop me a line](#) if you're interested, and I'll send you more info.

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Hi! I'm Michael.

Writer. Explorer. Poet. Coach.

I'm passionate about people living life to the full, and bringing their gift fully to the world—whether they're leaders, writers, artists, mystics, or some other kind of visionary. I believe everyone is created to be a change agent, uniquely designed by God for a specific and beautiful purpose. I don't think we are ever fully alive until we find that purpose and live it out.

I'm pursuing that purpose every single day. As a part of that, I've made it my mission to help other people discover theirs.

Let's connect. Learn more at michaelwarden.com.

