



# Watch Your *(Knowledge)* Diet

## IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS

BY BRETT MCCRACKEN

**T**he last few weeks have removed any remaining doubt: we are living through an epistemological crisis. Among the many distressing aspects of the COVID-19 global pandemic is the stress of information overload. Everyone has something to say about it. Millions of self-proclaimed experts chime in online, crowding out or contradicting real experts. Our minds are spinning because of this article we read, that tweet thread we saw, or any number of other charts, graphs, scenarios, and projections we've picked up on our streams.

Meanwhile, the existing crisis of politicized "news" has worsened. "Alternative facts" proliferate, plenty for every side to marshal for whatever opinion they wish to perpetuate. Incessant

commentary and clickbait leave our heads spinning. When something as biologically objective as a virus becomes politicized and subject to one's own partisan interpretation, it's obvious just how post-into the post-truth era we've come.

In a world like this—with more and more information but less and less wisdom—what are we to do? How can we stay sane, mentally and spiritually healthy, and wise? A few years ago these questions led me to create "The Wisdom Pyramid," a visual aid inspired by the food pyramid but applied not to food groups but "knowledge groups." The idea—which I've since turned into a book that will be released in early 2021 by Crossway—was to help people build a knowledge diet conducive to wisdom

in a world glutted with untrustworthy sources.

A key idea in my wisdom pyramid is that social media should occupy the smallest (as in the “use sparingly” fats/oils/sweets category in the food pyramid) segment of our knowledge diet. The problem is, most of us have made this unhealthy category one of the staples of our diet. And that’s why we don’t know what, if anything, is true or trustworthy. That’s why anxiety and mental illness have been skyrocketing in recent years. Our diets are totally imbalanced.

In this article I want to apply the logic of the wisdom pyramid (see the graphic below) to our present COVID-19 moment.

## SCRIPTURE

To become wise, our information diet must begin with the Bible. It must be our solid foundation, as well as the grid through which all other sources of wisdom are tested. Instead of starting your day with social media or the news, start it with the Bible. Join The Gospel Coalition in our Read the Bible initiative ([tgc.org/readthebible](http://tgc.org/readthebible)). Immerse yourself in the eternal wisdom of God’s direct speech to us—the most trustworthy, authoritative, comforting, and illuminating voice to which we could possibly tune our ears. Does the Bible speak specifically about 21st-century pathogens like coronavirus? No. But Scripture is rife with ironclad wisdom for how we can live, love, suffer, and hope in times like this.

## CHURCH

Yes, church will look different for the foreseeable future. But it has never been more important. The local church offers us groundedness in place and community, which is especially key for our sanity in a world where distant concerns and headlines can suck all our energy. Church history and tradition also offers groundedness in time, giving us the security of continuity in a world where everything is rapidly changing. Look to the church’s past to be reminded that the bride of Christ has often thrived under duress. Look to the church’s present—your local church family (necessarily virtual for the time being)—to be reminded that a strong community, where members push one another to grow into

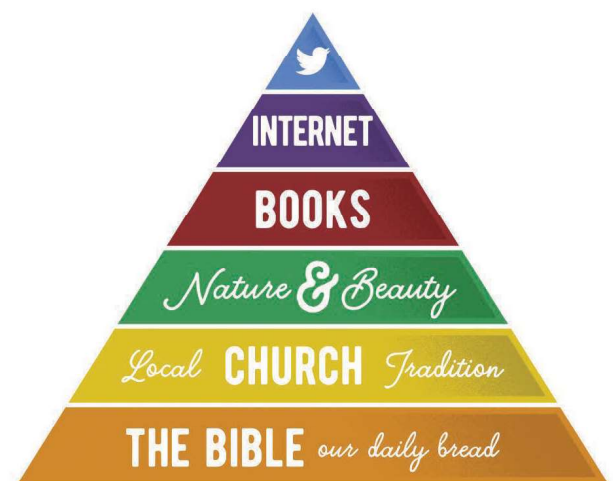
Christlikeness, is essential for our flourishing, never more than in times of isolation and fear.

## NATURE

Nature is an indispensable source of wisdom and sanity in a world gone mad. There is an objectivity to nature, biology, weather, the seasons, and so forth that is crucial in a world awash in a sea of subjectivism. God’s creation offers perspective and comfort to us because it has much to communicate about his glory (Psalm 19:1), if we only listen. The problem is we are often too plugged in or cut-off from nature in the modern world; hence our declining mental health. Researchers have found that today’s excess of digital stimuli causes our brains to become overwhelmed as they filter and sort through the glut. Being in nature, by contrast, gives us fewer choices, allowing the brain’s attentional system to function better in higher order things like deep thinking and reflection. In our current crisis, then, it’s important to go outside. Get off your computer, put away your phone, and get some fresh air. Go on walks. Garden. Let the joyfully singing birds—oblivious to crashing stock markets and pandemics—teach you lessons Twitter can’t (Job 12:7).

## BEAUTY

The wisdom of beauty is tied to the wisdom of Sabbath. Both feel superfluous—at best “nice-to-haves” in hectic, intense times. But therein lies their necessity. Beauty slows us down, quiets our busy minds, stills our restless souls. Beauty helps us rest



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and gives us more tranquil space to contemplate, consider, and synthesize. Don't neglect beauty in a crisis! Sometimes a far better thing to do than panic shop or aimlessly scroll through Twitter is to just listen to beautiful music. That's why I created a "Songs of Comfort for Anxious Souls" playlist and a similar list of music videos. Beauty and the arts don't necessarily help solve a grievous crisis like this, but they can help us cope with it, and in time they will help humanity make sense of it.

## BOOKS

In our presentist, distracted, inattentive age, books give us perspective, focus, space to reflect. Reading books—a wide variety, from different eras and places and worldviews, both fiction and nonfiction—keeps our anachronism and self-centeredness in check. They educate us, cultivate in us empathy, help us make connections across disciplines, and open up the world. In times of global crisis the temptation might be to watch CNN constantly. Don't. Read Augustine's *Confessions* instead, or a work of classic fiction. Read books that have stood the test of time, offering wisdom and help to readers across the decades and centuries. Instead of sitting in front of your computer screen during this crisis, sit down under a tree outside and read a book while listening to the birds.

## INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The internet is a massive blessing in many regards, especially in how it connects us even when we are unable to get out of the house! But it's critical that in the digital age—and especially in times of heightened anxiety, fear, and misinformation—we limit our exposure to the online world. Yes, stay informed about COVID-19 (and especially the official guidance, from national and local authorities, for how you can stem its spread), but

don't immerse yourself in the news any more than you need to. Especially if you struggle with anxiety, stay off Twitter right now. Look to trusted doctors, epidemiologists, and credentialed medical experts before you look to clickbait-seeking bloggers, amateur virologists, and armchair economists. For your short-term sanity and long-term wisdom, please don't build your epistemological diet around the fleeting ephemera of social media.

As our world today has made painfully clear, wisdom is not the result of simply having easier access to more information. It's not about the amount of information we have, but its quality and reliability. Wisdom is less like a repository for knowledge than a filter for it, like a healthy kidney: retaining what is nutritious as it filters out the waste. A. W. Tozer compares wisdom to a vitamin: "It does not nourish a body in itself, but if not present, nothing will nourish the body."

There is not yet a vaccine to boost our immunity against COVID-19. But in terms of the many toxins of untruth and epistemological pathogens that make us mentally and spiritually sick, there is an immunity-boosting defense: wisdom. That's why a healthy, wisdom-building diet of knowledge and information should be a critical priority for Christians in today's uncertain world. ■

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