

COPING WITH ANXIETY RELATED TO THE COVID-19 VIRAL OUTBREAK

The function of fear is to alert us of a threat to our well-being. It's there to motivate us to take action to protect ourselves. Our sensitive threat system has a negative bias which has benefited us. Because of its sensitivity to potentially negative things, our ancestors were more likely to take action to protect themselves, thus assisting in our species' ascension to the dominant species on this planet. However, this threat system is not without its costs. The same negativity bias we have for perceived threats can also cause us a lot of unnecessary suffering. In repetitive or ambiguous situations it can get stuck "on" and segue into an anxiety disorder. This can be particularly true for those who have medical trauma and have histories of facing uncontrollable health decline which may have sensitized individuals to perceived or actual threats. Viral outbreaks such as COVID-19 are legitimate cause for deliberate and tempered concern; however, they are also opportunities for sensitized nervous systems to go into overdrive, to our own detriment. Consequently, here are a few brief tips for emotionally coping through the current crisis.

Brief Tips

1. Know the facts. Is a viral outbreak an area of concern? Yes. But how concerned should one be? Learn the basic facts of contraction, risk and disease manifestation and progression. Evaluate these known facts with your current behavior. For example, if you've heeded expert advice and have been primarily housebound, have shown no known symptoms, and limit your contacts with others, this would suggest that a worry level based on the facts should be minimal.
2. Normalize the experience. Look back at history and see that history is full of different epidemics, wars, natural disasters, etc. Recognize and honor that your ancestors have successfully faced all of these, and you continue to do the same. At surface level, anxiety is about distrusting external sources as potential threats and working to avoid them, but if we go even deeper, it is sustained and perpetuated by a mistrust in our ability to handle those threats should they be unavoidable. So, first line of defense is to take the precautionary measures needed to protect yourself from the threat, but take it further by reminding yourself that if the worst-case scenario happened, you are strong and will be able to face life on its own terms. You have demonstrated this repeatedly with coping with your illness! It can be helpful to do a brief inventory of all of the really difficult things you have faced, accomplished and navigated in your life. This builds what is known as self-efficacy (i.e., our trust in our abilities to manage things), which increases our sense of confidence and thereby decreases our fear.

Handout created and distributed by:
Timothy Weymann, Licensed Clinical Social Worker
Counseling Services for Utah & Arizona Residents
(801) 707-8723
timothyweymann@gmail.com
www.timothyweymann.com

3. Set boundaries on the news and social media. Media's sole focus is to grab your attention to sustain it so you watch and listen to more advertisements; they do this by offering sensationalistic stories which evoke emotional responses from viewers. There is a common old saying in the news, "If it bleeds, it leads". The media harps on dark and disturbing topics that are recycled through particular news cycles because it maximizes their efforts to keep you engaged. Consequently, we can turn on the radio, television, podcasts, and social media platforms and be saturated with imagery and talk about this virus. There are all kinds of things that are threatening to us that occur at comparable numbers in terms of risk, contraction, deaths, etc., but because we, and those around us, don't focus on these things, we remain emotionally unaffected by them. Again, this doesn't mean that we don't have concern for such things, or make light of those who have been negatively impacted by them, but that we always work to keep our concern in perspective.
4. Understand evolutionary psychology. Humans, are pack animals. We facilitate quick judgments by looking at the herd. This helps us survive because we can save time in evaluating the rationality of a threat and can quickly act without wasting time thinking about it. We do this by quickly internalizing other people's unexamined fear; however, this creates a lot of false positives related to threats, which at times leads us to get overly worked up about issues. We outsource our rational thinking by watching other people get scared and then assume that we should be scared too. Transcend the herd mentality! Be aware of it. Interrupt it.
5. Related to tip #4, recognize that fear is contagious and a public health crisis too. When we get afraid, we suffer and we can transmit that fear to others. From a neurobiological perspective, fear helps us quickly act in immediate and threatening situations, but sustained over time, it inhibits our prefrontal cortex which is associated with intelligence, forethought, etc. Consequently, it could be said that the more afraid we get, the less intelligent we can become. This is particularly relevant because afraid families and afraid societies are stressed ones. This stress and unattended fear can give way to poor coping which has other detrimental consequences. For example, afraid societies often cope with their fear in mean and unintelligent ways (e.g., in its most extreme examples think of Nazi Germany, Rwandan genocide, etc.).
6. Maintain a dual-consciousness in which you listen to the medical professionals, take the necessary precautions based on your individual needs AND then LET GO. Letting go first comes as a behavior (i.e., we redirect our resources, attention, energy and focus to non-related concerns), then it comes as a feeling after that - people often get caught in cycles of anxiety because they're waiting for the feeling to go away first, but in anxiety treatment we change the thinking and behavior and then the feeling follows after repetition of those changes.

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Outside of following trusted and professional advice, everything else is out of our control. Make peace with this by engaging in mindfulness exercises that reinforce detachment and disengagement and a desensitization to the lack of ultimate control we all have in life. Dr. Tara Brach provides many free and helpful talks and meditations which integrate the psychological science of anxiety and fear with an existential framework here:

<https://www.tarabrach.com/>

When we are facing uncontrollable events it's interesting that often the more we seek control, the more we lose it! We get locked in rigid flight or fight responses which escalate ours' and others, suffering. Distract yourself by focusing on things unrelated to this issue; things that calm, invigorate, soothe or rejuvenate you.

7. Purposely plan and structure daily times to laugh. Put on a funny comedy or comedian on your television. The research shows the importance of us having a higher ratio of positive emotions than negative emotions to sustain well-being, especially amidst difficulties.
8. Use cognitive therapy to challenge distorted and disturbing thoughts you have about the virus. It can be a very effective method to cope with anxiety and you can find a helpful worksheet here:

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/ThoughtRecordSheet7.pdf>

9. If you're still finding everything too overwhelming, ask for help. Seek out a professional counselor to assist you in overcoming your fears. There are a number of effective therapies (i.e., traditional cognitive therapy, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, exposure and response prevention therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy) which reduce anxiety and improve people's well-being.

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