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Understanding Fear and Anxiety in the Time of Coronavirus

By Collin Lodico, Ph.D.

Maybe you sense a growing anxiety and unease overcoming you. At times maybe you even feel a bit panicky. You are not alone with these feelings and that is part of the problem. You see people hoarding food and toilet paper. You sense fear in others. You keep hearing the word pandemic over and over and over. People are ordered to stay home. You can't see your friends and even family members. Everything sounds urgent. It can feel as if death is sitting at our doorstep. It is certain that for many people right now the fear and anxiety is far greater than the risk. This is not to say that the current situation isn't serious. It is, but our fears can quickly become overwhelming and higher than they should be. It is a good time to look at the factors at play in our fears to help us understand what is happening to us.

Since we were born, we have looked to others to determine if we are okay. Joseph Campos of the University of California Berkeley conducted a classic study where one-year-old babies were prompted to crawl across a table to their mothers. However, in the middle of the table there was clear plexiglass which created the appearance of a sudden drop-off. To the baby it looked like he/she would be crawling over a cliff. In the study, the babies would crawl to the visual cliff, hesitate and then look to their mothers for guidance. A happy, smiling mother led to a more relaxed baby who with a little encouragement crawled all the way to mommy. A distressed looking mother led to a more distressed baby who would go no further. We are social creatures and since we were babies it has been instinctual for us to look at others to determine if we are okay or not. What does that have to do with today? We still look at others to determine if we are okay, and when we see others in our community buying up all the toilet paper, stocking up on ammunition for their guns, and stocking up on a month's worth of food, we see the stress in their behavior, and like a baby seeing their mother's distressed face, it registers at an instinctual level that everything is not okay. It triggers nerves, anxiety, fear.

Furthermore, research has shown that stress is contagious. Studies have shown that watching someone else go through a stressful situation can raise cortisol levels, which is the stress hormone. Other studies have similarly shown that being around others that are stressed can trigger our own physiological stress response. So, the coronavirus is not the only thing that is highly contagious—so is anxiety and fear. Can you now see how we can get stuck reacting to each other's fear in a continuous cycle that keeps all of us at high, unhealthy levels of anxiety?

Another factor in our fear is that there are aspects to the coronavirus epidemic that tend to make us overreact. New or novel threats tend to make us overestimate the level of threat and overreact, while common or familiar threats tend to make us underestimate the level of threat and underreact. The coronavirus and the social situation surrounding it is a strikingly new threat to all of us. The fact that everything is new and different will trigger a stronger fear response. While more familiar threats will not rattle us, even if they are empirically just as threatening. This is why we can get into a car without a fear response, although there is a one percent chance of death by car accident over your lifetime. Remember when stories of violence in the news elicited a strong fear response? Now we hear them all the time so there is much less of a fear or stress response. Other aspects of the coronavirus trigger heightened fear as well. People tend to be more fearful of stressors that they don't understand, that are unpredictable, and that can't be easily seen or detected. The coronavirus has all these properties. Another factor is exposure. People will overestimate risk based on the level of exposure. We are being bombarded with coronavirus information literally all day long. How can we not think about it with the lockdowns and societal changes? This level of exposure will cause us to overestimate risk and overreact.

One final factor in understanding our fear is a psychological concept called emotional reasoning. This is when you feel a certain way and then distort the facts to justify how you feel. In other words, there is a human tendency for our thoughts to match how we feel. So, if I feel really, really, really fearful then the situation must be really, really, really bad. However, if you are feeling really, really, really fearful because of some of the reasons already described, then your conclusion that things are really, really, really bad is not accurate. This is not to say that the coronavirus isn't serious. It is and we should take all the necessary precautions. However, our levels of fear are likely exaggerated and disproportional due to all the factors previously described.

For most of you, there is over a 99% chance that you will be okay. Even for the vulnerable, the chances are still incredibly high that you will be okay. Taking all the precautionary steps is good judgement and will raise the odds in your favor even more. Remind yourself of that every day.