

Coping with Coronavirus: How to Guard Against Emotional Contagion

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The threat of the coronavirus is hanging heavy in the air since it was first identified in early January in the city of Wuhan, China. We can't escape reminders of the virus. It is dominating news stories and social media, creating an eerie stillness in many cities, and impacting our everyday lives. Naturally, tensions are running high as people try to cope with the uncertainty of a quickly spreading virus. For those who are already more susceptible to anxiety, this can be a particularly challenging time, however, no one is fully immune.

This is in part due to a phenomenon called **Emotional Contagion**. It turns out that emotions can be contagious, just like a virus, and spread throughout our communities. This is true of pleasant emotions, like joy, as well as unpleasant emotions, like fear.

Understanding how we as humans respond to fear can hopefully help us gain perspective, temper our worries, and improve our overall well-being to help us all cope during this stressful time period.

First, it is important to highlight that fear is essential for our survival and is our instinctual response to an unknown threat. If you are experiencing fear, your body is responding as it was designed for your survival. Fear is an activating emotion that can lead to behaviors that help us respond to threats. Fear or concern for your health, for example, may cause you to follow the recommended precautions to guard against illness, like washing your hands. Understanding the importance of fear can help us accept it and use it as a constructive signal to take reasonable precautions.

However, our fear also has the potential of growing in such a way that it interferes with our ability to cope and live our lives. When we witness other people expressing fear, our natural response is to mimic that fear, so that we too can protect ourselves from any threats. For example, if you came across a group of people running in fear, would you stand still and try to assess the information around you to determine if there was, in fact, a real threat, or would you join the pack and run? This is often referred to as **Herd Behavior**. This idea is further reinforced by a principle known as **Social Proof**, which describes our inclination to reference other people's behavior as a way to guide our own. Our response to others' fear is often unconscious and automatic, and so we feel fear without even understanding why. This makes it that much more important to be aware of the potential spread of fear so that we can regain objectivity and make sense of any fear we may be experiencing. Ultimately, we want our fears to work for us and provide protection, instead of feeling so consumed that it starts to negatively impact our behaviors.

Emotional Contagion is further inflamed by how we respond to threats on an individual level. When fear is heightened, our emotions flood our brains, impacting our ability to think clearly and logically. In these moments of anxiety, we are that much more likely to use mental short-cuts and fall into automatic thought patterns. These short-cuts typically help us make sense of a

complicated world and process information quickly. However, anxiety has a way of distorting our thoughts so that they no longer offer us a balanced sense of reality.

One of the factors that can greatly increase anxious thoughts is the **Fear of the Unknown**. A lot remains unknown about the coronavirus, and new information continues to be collected and disseminated every day. With so much ambiguity surrounding the threat the coronavirus poses, and its eventual impact, it is not surprising that our minds may be more vulnerable to a pattern of thinking called **Catastrophizing**. This is our mind's tendency to jump to the worst-case scenario, even if the likelihood of an event occurring is small, or completely unknown. As a result, we may feel even higher levels of anxiety and distress, making it that much more challenging to cope effectively. This is compounded by both the **Negativity and Confirmation Biases**. Our minds have been programmed for survival and so we naturally give more weight to negative outcomes or threats (such as the spread of a virus) than we would to favorable outcomes. And we have a tendency to seek out evidence to support or confirm our fears and beliefs while ignoring evidence to the contrary. In the case of the coronavirus, if we were to hold a belief that the virus is far worse than reported, we may seek out further evidence to support this belief by scouring the internet, regardless of the reliability of our sources.

In addition to our thought patterns heightening our fears, our bodies also play a role. Evolutionarily, our bodies respond to fear through the activation of the sympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for our fight or flight response. When triggered, our heart rate and blood pressure increase along with other autonomic responses that prepare our bodies to respond to threats.

Unfortunately, our bodies cannot distinguish the difference between a threat that requires physical action, like fighting off an intruder, and stress that does not, like coping with the uncertainty of the coronavirus. And if we can't physically expel the body's energy build-up, this creates physical tension and stress on our bodies. The more our bodies are stressed, the more our minds are stressed, and vice versa.

Despite our human tendency towards unhelpful thinking patterns and a reactive nervous system, there is good news. There are strategies that can be used to help inoculate against the spread of fear contagion. Simply understanding how we respond to threats can go a long way in protecting us from becoming consumed by fear. We can transform what feels confusing and unmanageable into a clearly defined and reasonable response to a threat. Once we gain this perspective, we can then choose to take actions that keep our fears contained in a way that ultimately promotes our health and wellbeing. Below are some potential strategies:

- *Be a thoughtful consumer of news. Try to be analytical to guard yourself against fear-based reasoning, which distorts reality. And be wary of social media. There is a lot of information from unreliable sources, and that information is meant to be emotionally charged. Instead, focus on the facts as they stand today; this will help counteract any tendency towards Catastrophizing and will reduce the Fear of the Unknown. Also, limit your news coverage of the coronavirus, which can feed the Negativity Bias. See if you can find a balance between remaining informed, while not over-saturating yourself with*

content.

- *Remind yourself of, and try to participate in, aspects of life that make you feel fulfilled and grateful. Whether it is time with family, playing games, or listening to music, try to remain connected to what you love. In this way you are not allowing fear to consume your life. This will further counteract the Negativity Bias and can even improve the emotional and physical well-being. And from what we know about Emotional Contagion, it may be beneficial to share your thoughts with friends or family.*
- *Do not isolate yourself. Even connecting over the phone is helpful in reducing stress levels and increasing endorphins.*
- *Know what you can control. Anxiety increases when we feel powerless. At present, we know that we can at least take the following steps to promote our health: wash our hands, wear a mask, use a tissue to cover coughs and sneezes and then discard the tissue, avoid close contact with people who are sick, and avoid touching our eyes, nose, and mouth.*
- *Try to accept what you cannot control. This one is easier said than done. However, recognizing that there are limits to what you can do to protect yourself and your loved ones against the virus (however painful this reality may be), can help you redirect your energy towards aspects of life that are still within your control.*
- *Release bodily tension. Knowing that fear can be experienced in the body, exercise, relaxation techniques, yoga, meditation, and diaphragmatic breathing can all release tension and help counteract our body's stress response.*
- *Finally, take advantage of community resources. In the face of adversity, it has been inspiring to see how the community has bound together to offer support. There are many examples of generosity, compassion, and resilience from community members and organizations. Consider reaching out to the growing number of hotlines, groups, and other mental health resources available, remembering that you are not alone.*

In summary, it is only natural to feel fear right now with so much uncertainty about the course of the virus and its current and future impact on our lives. That fear is important and can prompt us to be conscientious and promote our collective health. However, our fears can also negatively impact our functioning if we are not careful. By understanding the concept of Emotional Contagion and how our minds respond to threats, we can keep our fears in check. That way we can take action in an attempt to live more emotionally balanced and full lives.