

COVID-19: DEALING WITH THE ANXIETY EPIDEMIC

IT'S OK TO FEEL ANXIOUS ABOUT THE NOVEL CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) ... BUT LET'S NOT FEED OUR ANXIETY.

There are two epidemics happening now – the spread of the novel Coronavirus, now known as COVID-19, and the even wider spread of anxiety about catching it. The latter epidemic is more contagious and more harmful because it can unintentionally feed itself.

It's OK to be anxious about catching COVID-19 because it's new. We still don't know everything about it and there is no vaccine yet, although it's in development. Invariably, there is lots of uncertainty.

Humans naturally dislike uncertainty because we like to know what's going on, we like to be prepared and to take precautions. Without this, we feel unsafe and this is what helps us be a successful species. It's also what lies at the heart of the epidemic of anxiety right now. In our wish to be more certain, we seek information and reassurance. But, if we're not mindful of what we're doing and also not mindful of what's happening in our thought process as we seek information, we run the very real risk of making our uncertainty (and therefore our anxiety) worse.

IT'S GOOD TO HAVE INFORMATION ... BUT ONLY THE RIGHT KIND OF INFORMATION

New and helpful information about COVID-19 is emerging on a daily basis. The WHO has produced some excellent videos advising people about the risks and how to stay safe and take relevant precautions. At the same time, there is a lot of unhelpful new information emerging on a daily basis.

In our digital age, we can now be bombarded by real-time news of the latest death count. We can receive on our social media feeds, video images from across the world of people catching the virus and apparently dropping dead in the street. We can hear rumours of toilet paper factories in China being asked to halt production of toilet rolls in order to focus on producing surgical masks. Under all this information, we can lose sight of what's factual and helpful.

We seem to lose our common sense when we have too much information. We try to be helpful and forward these videos to our friends so they're aware of how bad things really are. We innocently ask our friends if they've seen that video of the man who dropped dead in the street and then act either on our own assumptions of what this video suggests about risks. Alternatively we act on hearsay about food and household item droughts, we speculate about conspiracy theories and cover-ups and let our own prejudices surface and influence our actions. Before we know it, we are now lost in a web of potentially inaccurate information, misjudging and scaremongering rumours but we're acting on it as if it was fact.

This does not allay uncertainty, but feeds it. Because acting on something that may not be a fact, means we have gone into a type of thinking pattern called 'catastrophising', also called "what if" thinking. We start imagining, "What if that were me ... what if I or someone I love catches the virus ... what if I die ... what if there's no food left on the shelves ...?"

CATASTROPHIC THINKING IS THE ROAD TO ANXIETY

When we're anxious or worried about a threat, some things happen in our brains and bodies that can worsen the anxiety we feel.

INSTEAD OF "WHAT IF?" THINKING, TRY TO RETURN TO THE HERE AND NOW WITH "WHAT IS HAPPENING?" AND "WHAT DO I KNOW NOW?"

Whether it's real or imagined, our brain reacts as if it is a deadly threat right there in front of us and about to kill us. We go into 'fight-or-flight' mode which is basically a brain and body state that is equipped to survive. Adrenaline release will make us feel nervous and vigilant, our muscles tense

up, our minds race and our hearts beat fast. In this state, we don't really think clearly and we filter out any information that is not threat-related. Catastrophic thinking doesn't help either because 'what if' thoughts are also accompanied by, 'it will be absolutely awful' and, 'there's nothing I can do about it'. It is worst-case scenario thinking and that's absolutely the problem. We are thinking and acting as if we are already in the worst case scenario, but we're not. This is how anxiety feeds itself.

IT'S OK TO FEEL ANXIOUS

You are right to be anxious about COVID-19, but you need to have an appropriate level of anxiety driven by the facts. This will help you take the right kind of action to not only prevent catching and spreading the virus, but also prevent spread of anxiety. The right level of anxiety helps us take the appropriate action for the level of threat that is actually there, not what we imagine in the worst case.

HOW TO AVOID FEEDING INTO ANXIETY



ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR ANXIETY – It's OK – but think about how you would talk to a young child who was feeling scared and talk to yourself in the same way. Would you tell them 'Hey, go look at all the social media videos of people dropping down dead, go to every last shop you can to buy all the food we need, panic and tell everyone this is really, really bad'? No. You would probably (and hopefully) tell that child that this is going to be OK, you'll get through it, keep yourself safe by washing your hands with soap and water and staying away from work or others if you feel unwell.



ACT ON REAL, RELIABLE, UNSHAKEABLE FACTS. Don't make your own assumptions or rely on vague headlines. Don't take tabloid news as facts – they are not experts in epidemiology, they are experts in sensationalism. They know how to sell newspapers or increase the number of clicks.



STOP SEARCHING FOR INFORMATION AND REASSURANCE ON THE INTERNET. Turn off unhelpful feeds. The phenomenon of 'Googling' may be feeding your anxiety and causing more uncertainty through conflicting facts and fiction.

HOW TO AVOID FEEDING INTO ANXIETY



TRY TO ENCOURAGE FRIENDS NOT TO SPREAD THE CONTAGION OF PANIC AND RUMOURS. If you hear someone quoting something that is unlikely to be true, probe further about their source and evidence and remind them that they are doing the psychological equivalent of sneezing in someone's unmasked face.



PUT THINGS IN PERSPECTIVE. Whilst COVID-19 is known to be more infectious than SARS, it is NOT more deadly. Although the number of infected people is rising this actually means the 'deadliness' of the disease is lessening. Counter-intuitive but true. An example: If an illness infects 100 people and 1 person dies, the death rate is 1%. If 10,000 people get infected and there are 10 deaths, the death rate now drops to 0.1% meaning the disease is not actually as serious as it first seemed. The deaths around the world so far are largely among older males with pre-existing health conditions. There have been 10,000 deaths in the USA so far this winter from influenza. This is the same every winter but we don't usually worry about it.



TRY A LITTLE COMPASSION TO SOOTHE ANXIETY. Consider how your anxiety-driven actions (spreading social media stories, stock-piling items) may impact others. People who give are healthier than people who take. A positive attitude is like psychological immunity. Unite, don't isolate. Keep supporting your local shops and restaurants who looked after you in better times.



GIRA PATEL

Gira started working as a Mental Health Counsellor at OT&P in October 2014. She graduated in 1999 from Leeds University Medical School, UK, and is a qualified, registered psychiatrist in the UK but not registered in Hong Kong. During 10 years of training in psychiatry, she gained experience in Adult Psychiatry, Old Age Psychiatry, Perinatal Psychiatry, Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, Liaison Psychiatry and Psychotherapies. She acquired her MRCPsych in 2005. Some of Gira's special interests are anxiety, stress, depression and perinatal mental health.

COMING SOON

Listen in as Gira speaks to Talking Mental host Aaron about facing anxiety with the help of CBT.

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