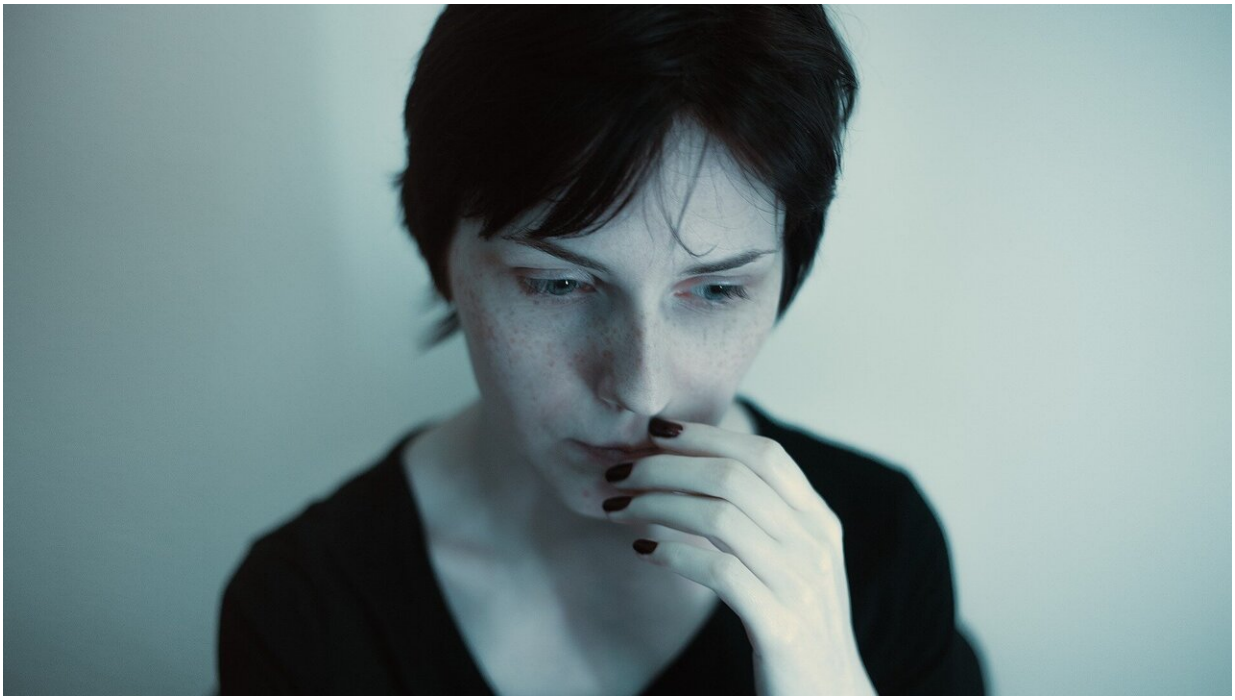
People seek immediate solutions to cope with fear

April 3 2020, by Jared Wadley



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The COVID-19 pandemic has evoked many emotions among people worldwide—none more prevalent than fear. These fears, according to University of Michigan psychology professor Joshua Ackerman, can be managed by finding activities that improve well-being and decision-making.

Ackerman's research focuses on how people respond to and cope with ecological threats, including those related to mortality, infectious disease, resources, and social rejection.

COVID-19 has prompted many people worldwide to become fearful, anxious and depressed. When is fear justified?

Situations such as this one with COVID-19 are a perfect storm for generating fear. They involve a high degree of uncertainty about who is sick and how to prevent infection, an invisible threat, and alarming news reports that can overwhelm consideration of important statistics and recommendations. Couple uncertainty with fear of social interaction and requirements to restrict consumer activities, and you end up with panic-buying of items such as toilet paper, meats, bread and others. Of course, the fear around COVID-19 is actually justified for many people. Those with conditions that limit immune functioning worry about becoming sick. We all worry about the impact that the outbreak is having, and will continue to have, on our way of life. These fears have a basis in reality.

How can people balance legitimate fear compared with rationally coping with reality?

The justifiable fears about COVID-19 are toxic enough for our well-being. Combine these with the concerns that arise from our psychological biases, and you have a mix that can push people to dysfunctional thinking and behavior. So one beneficial goal we can set for ourselves is to learn about those biases and enact ways to reduce them. For instance, people tend to latch on case studies and ignore statistics. The emotionally laden examples we hear about people quarantined on a cruise ship or celebrities testing positive for coronavirus stand out in our minds. We understandably feel empathy for these people. However, making decisions on the basis of the fear we experience from hearing about these examples can create additional

problems for dealing with the virus. This fear leads us to want immediate solutions yet can make us less thoughtful about how effective those solutions are. Panic-buying toilet paper and other items makes those items scarce, which in turn increases fear, which increases panic-buying, and so on. The same process has become true with certain medications that have very little solid evidence for treating COVID-19, yet instead of rationally evaluating whether such medications work, people (even doctors) hoard these medicines, creating severe problems for people who use them for other conditions.

How can we try to prevent such reactions? It's truly difficult. Because it means people need to cope with anxiety and fear, and sometimes prioritize others' needs over their own. I see at least two possible routes to doing this. First, we can try to reduce the fear and anxiety. Psychological techniques such as self-distancing and mindfulness (paying attention to your feelings as though you were an outside observer of yourself) have been shown to help with this. Second, we can try strategies that promote interdependence rather than self-serving behavior. For example, mentally framing this pandemic as though "we're all in it together" and engaging in activities that involve teamwork are likely to have positive outcomes.

Where does the news media and social media fit into fear?

Media outlets play a complicated role in how people respond in situations like this one. On the one hand, they can provide important information so that people feel informed or know what recommendations to follow (in the case of news media), and they can provide a sense of interpersonal connection and support (in the case of social media). On the other hand, there is no doubt they exacerbate the negativity people experience in times of uncertainty. By prioritizing the number of views an article or video gets, there is an incentive for news media to exaggerate fear-based content. And social media posts spread

most rapidly when they inspire fear as well. Unfortunately, consumers of media who are feeling anxious and uncertain are on the lookout for those immediate solutions or pieces of information, which media provides a never-ending stream of. This may lead people to consume more information, but not necessarily recognize how bad or good that information is.

Can fear also negatively impact interactions with others?

Yes, in at least a couple of important ways. First, concerns about disease can increase people's desire to avoid interactions with other people. This is clearly rational in the case of a virus like COVID-19. However, one of the most powerful stress reducers people have is social connection. So disease outbreaks such as this one interfere with our ability to reduce problematic mental states. Second, concerns about disease also trigger a number of downstream effects, including heightened attention to atypical behavior and more prejudice expressed against other groups. We've seen examples of heightened prejudice and discrimination against Asians and Asian Americans, which are not rational, but are consequences of psychological reactions to disease.

What can people do to become less fearful?

There are a few things to keep in mind. One is that we do have some control over our outcomes. The virus isn't chasing after us. We have time to think through information and make decisions. This requires trying to dig a little deeper into things you read in the news or on social media. Another is to think about behavioral changes. How often do you need to be on Twitter or Facebook, or that news site? Limiting exposure to these sources may help reduce the anxiety you feel. This doesn't mean ignoring news altogether, but it does mean taking control over your own psychological biases. Finally, think about other types of activities you could do regularly that are known to aid well-being and decision-making:

exercise, eat healthy, try to get regular sleep, and maybe even try some self-distancing and mindfulness. Together, these can undercut the constant negativity people can experience in these uncertain times.

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