

A Cough, and Our Hearts Stop: Coping With Coronavirus Anxiety and Fear

March 16, 2020

We are you. We are mothers, daughters, students and teachers. Yet we are also clinical psychologists who spend our days researching and treating pathological anxiety and fear. With the near constant news of the spreading coronavirus and fatalities, our personal and professional identities have dramatically collided, forcing us to consciously live consistent with the scientific principles we know well.

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In Seattle's elevated threat environment, anxiety processes are playing out in our daily lives. A colleague coughing during a faculty meeting captures our attention within seconds and sends our thoughts racing: "Don't you know there are vulnerable people here?" to "Is this meeting really that important?" This is classic attentional bias to threat, where our brain's danger system directs attention to any potential threats. Rational and irrational threats are now everywhere, from our well-used office doorknob, a crowded ramen noodle house, to a kindly neighbor shaking an older parent's hand. Our news media runs constant BREAKING NEWS alerts, promising to provide "facts not fear" or help to "plan not panic." As experts, we know this coverage amps up anxiety; yet, we watch, too.

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Anxiety and fear have survival value: to prepare and protect. So, what else can we do to not let COVID-19 fears go from helpful to harmful? Or lead us to carelessness or complacency? Tools from evidence-based psychotherapy highlight key principles. Notice unhelpful thoughts and behaviors. Stewing about your co-worker's cough may lead to positive office changes; however, if it continues, ask yourself, "Is this useful?" Worry that leads to active problem-solving or adaptive coping is helpful. Worry that leads to more worry is not. Build in ways to curb your time engaging in unhelpful worry. Make your news-media consumption intentional; restrict your time and sources each day. Increase activities that bring relaxation and happiness. Use the time you spent commuting to read, exercise, or do some other pleasant activity.