How Fear Distorts Our Thinking About the Coronavirus

February 14, 2020

When it comes to making decisions that involve risks, we humans can be irrational in quite systematic ways — a fact that the psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman famously demonstrated with the help of a hypothetical situation, eerily apropos of today’s coronavirus epidemic, that has come to be known as the Asian disease problem.

Professors Tversky and Kahneman asked people to imagine that the United States was preparing for an outbreak of an unusual Asian disease that was expected to kill 600 citizens. To combat the disease, people could choose between two options: a treatment that would ensure 200 people would be saved or one that had a 33 percent chance of saving all 600 but a 67 percent chance of saving none. Here, a clear favorite emerged: Seventy-two percent chose the former.

But when Professors Tversky and Kahneman framed the question differently, such that the first option would ensure that only 400 people would die and the second option offered a 33 percent chance that nobody would perish and a 67 percent chance that all 600 would die, people’s preferences reversed. Seventy-eight percent now favored the second option.

…

Fear works in a similar way. Using a nationally representative sample in the months following Sept. 11, 2001, the decision scientist Jennifer Lerner showed that feeling fear led people to believe that certain anxiety-provoking possibilities (for example, a terrorist strike) were more likely to occur.

Such findings show that our emotions can bias our decisions in ways that don’t accurately reflect the dangers around us. As of Monday, only 12 people in the United States have been confirmed to have the coronavirus, and all have had or are undergoing medical monitoring. Yet fear of contracting the virus is rampant. Throughout the United States, there’s been a rush on face masks (most of which won’t help against the virus), a hesitance to go into crowded places and even a growing suspicion that any Asian might be a host for the virus.