The Psychology of Coronavirus Fear—and How to Manage It

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Let’s start with the obvious: Covid-19, the disease caused by a new strain of coronavirus, is scary. It’s spreading fast, there is currently no vaccine or preventative treatment for it, and we don’t know how deadly it actually is. Under these circumstances, it’s understandable that people would be frightened.

But some of the public anxiety exhibited in the past weeks has been disproportionate to the risk posed by Covid-19 as we understand it today. Globally, about 3,500 people have died of the disease since the outbreak began in the fall of 2019. In the US alone, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 20,000 to 52,000 people have died from the common flu since October. And while older people and those with pre-existing respiratory conditions have cause for concern, a large majority of people who get coronavirus develop mild symptoms they can treat at home. Some will have no symptoms at all.

And yet the world economy is crashing; Chinatowns are empty; discrimination against Asian people is rampant; and people are hoarding face masks.

So, why are we so afraid of coronavirus?

The psychology of fear…

The answer is a “mix of miscalibrated emotion and limited knowledge,” argues psychologist David DeSteno in an editorial for The New York Times. “As news about the virus’s toll in China stokes our fears, it makes us not only more worried than we need be about contracting it, but also more susceptible to embracing fake claims and potentially problematic, hostile or fearful attitudes toward those around us—claims and attitudes that in turn reinforce our fear and amp up the cycle.”