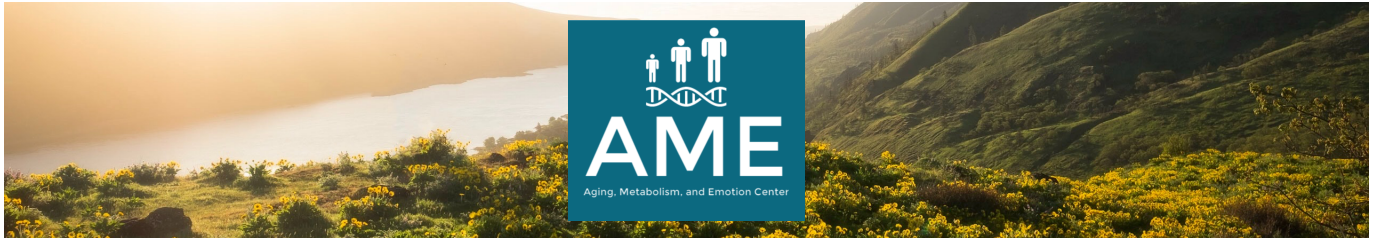


Subject: Managing Coronavirus: Anxiety vs. Panic – through a psychological science lens

Date: Tuesday, March 10, 2020 at 11:17:14 AM Pacific Daylight Time

From: Drs. Elissa Epel, Aric Prather, and the AME Center

To: Danielle Lee



Dear Friends,

Greetings from San Francisco, where the line at the grocery store with partially emptied shelves is long, and the numbers of cars on the road and on passengers using public transportation are low. These observations reveal that the coronavirus anxiety, safety behaviors as well as panic buying that has hit hard in the Bay Area this past week. People are taking wise precautions -- staying home and canceling all nonessential travel. We are bracing for a period of uncertainty and the need to be especially cautious to help contain the virus. We at the AME Center wanted to share with you, through a science lens, a view of human behavior under threat and tips for managing the anxiety and staying safe during this uncertain time. If you find this helpful don't hesitate to share this widely.

COVID-19, being a new virus, creates a very uncertain situation. It has been declared a public health emergency, and there are more cases than we know because we don't have the testing available yet. So the level of anxiety, particularly for those of us in exposed states, is naturally high, as it should be. The good news about the widespread anxiety is that it is fueling big changes fast. **Coronavirus anxiety** fosters prevention and safeguarding



"I'm still trying to catch up on that hour of panic I lost this weekend."

behaviors. Prevention behaviors, in turn, reduce anxiety.

I'm not telling anyone they should be calm! We need at least some anxiety to drive big changes immediately, to do our part. It's not business as usual today. It's also important to ask just how anxious we should be. There is a sweet spot. This level of threat and uncertainty right now is a breeding ground for panic. When threats are uncertain, our anxious minds tend to overestimate threats and underestimate our ability to cope with it. People with pre-existing anxiety conditions are particularly vulnerable –the habits of overestimating threats make this situation especially challenging. Too much anxiety creates emotion contagion and **coronavirus panic**. That's not helpful, that has its own costs, both personal and societal. Focusing on catastrophic thoughts and predictions (amply supplied on social media) is an effective way to fuel panicky feelings. So it's a good time to step back and look at the current facts, as presented by the CDC, not the media.

Coronavirus panic, this extreme form of anxiety, creates new problems. While some anxiety helps us cope, when we are in a panic state we suffer personally, we stress out our children, we are more likely to make mistakes, and engage in irrational decisions and behavior. **Panic buying** and hoarding are due to emotion contagion and herding behavior. **Herding behavior** is especially evident during stressful times—it explains why the stock markets fell yesterday and bumped back up today. Rather than making a rational decision based on data, people follow the crowd. The panic buying behavior often reduces anxiety temporarily but creates supply chain shortages of masks and sanitizers for hospitals and health care professionals who need it more.

This is an example of the '**tragedy of the commons**' when people act with competition or greed acquiring limited resources, which creates problems for the common good. We can notice how threat makes us feel more competitive/selfish, and nudge ourselves more toward a more cooperative and communal perspective. In this case, we must see that living in a zone with the virus means we are interdependent, we all need to prevent spreading it to each other together. People should buy just enough for a stash of several weeks if they are in a high-risk zone so that everyone has enough.

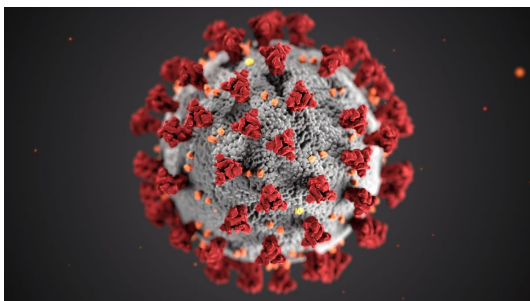
This **lens of interdependence** also applies to travel. Some people feel cavalier

and feel they can brave travel, to fulfill social or work obligations, and others feel panicky, and the majority are in between. People who choose voluntarily to travel do not feel at particularly high risk, and probabilistically they are pretty safe. If they are young and healthy and take precautions, they have a low chance of developing a coronavirus infection, that's a very individualistic lens. But it's all probability, risks we should not take. UCSF suggests our employees do not travel – to contain the virus at this time. That's right, it's not just because we may contract it, but we may transmit it. Take a public health lens, where we all need to do our part to prevent the spread of infection. Given the incubation period of the virus ranges from 1 to 14 days, maybe longer, someone living in a risk zone may not know if they are contagious or not. This means they may unknowingly spread the virus to others who are more vulnerable. The stakes are high for the elderly, interstitial pneumonia is serious. It has become a moral issue, during this time of uncertainty, to stay put and socially distanced. Soon when testing is available, we will have more certainty.

Further, when **we feel threatened, we 'other' people more**, meaning that we tend to see people through stereotypes, which can result in treating them poorly. People are showing **xenophobia** toward certain ethnic groups– fear and discrimination toward those they perceive, irrationally, as contagious.

Here are some tips for keeping us safe and in the sweet spot of anxiety.

UCSF Press Release on Tips to Stay Clearheaded



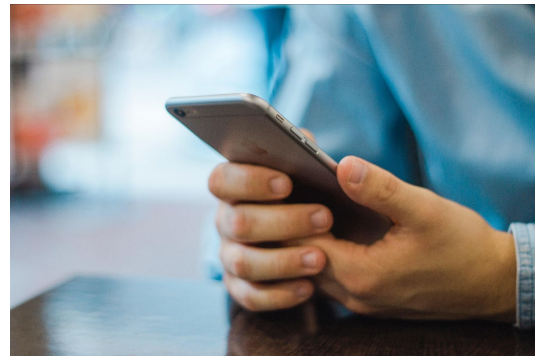
Some anxiety is normal, but don't overestimate the risks

Stick with the facts. [Stick with reliable sources such as the CDC.](#)

No one can tell us how dangerous and fatal the virus is for awhile. Expert opinions are just that – opinions – data modeled based on assumptions. Given this high level of uncertainty, we need to be extra careful in our behaviors, especially for those who are at highest risk, those with health conditions and the elderly, have compassion for the severe anxiety they might feel right now, and not take risks of contracting or transmitting it ourselves. Learn more about the virus by a microvirologist Lopez-Goni on WEF: http://bit.ly/coronavirus_perspective

Try to limit media exposure to once a day max

The media often creates the impression of global panic, an exaggeration of reality, and this creates further panic.



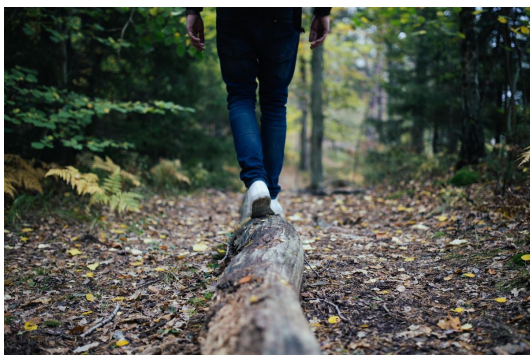
Yes, there is some panic, in some people and places, especially epicenters, but it's important to not transmit exaggerated anxiety. It's tempting to check for news for updates on new cases, but checking several times a day is both unnecessary and keeps us in an escalated state of anxiety. We then easily transmit that unhelpful panicky state to our children and those around us. Instead, try to transmit key safety behavior information (the facts), help others think calmly about it, and take a break from thinking about it. There are constructive ways to discuss it with children that help them manage their own anxiety and feel that things are under control: http://bit.ly/talking_to_kids_about_coronavirus. For kids who are into comics, this is also helpful and addresses the xenophobia: http://bit.ly/coronavirus_comic.



Reduce anxiety by reducing your risk of virus exposure

Don't feel silly or embarrassed about taking extreme precautions – better to be safe during this time of uncertainty. Take all the precautions advised by the CDC, especially the frequent handwashing.

Take “Social Distance” to heart. Stay home if you don't feel well, and work at home if you can. If you are in an area with corona exposure, severely minimize situations of exposure like public transportation and large crowds. We don't know enough about the virus. Some virologists say it can live on surfaces for up to a week, incubation periods could be up to 2+ weeks. So take this unknown virus seriously by not directly touching public doorknobs and surfaces. Wash hands really thoroughly, frequently. **Prepare a plan for the future:** If you have not already been exposed to your community, it still makes sense to make a plan now with family and colleagues for prevention--what are essential activities that expose you to groups, and what can be done from home? Better safe than sorry. Here's a great article on social distance and the virus by my colleague, Dr. Jordan Schlain: http://bit.ly/socialdistance_and_coronavirus



Add something restorative each day

(eg, walk in nature, meditation, exercise, positive social connections, possibly by video) to reduce your own somatic anxiety, the anxiety we store up in our body.

For both mind and body, we need to slow down and take extra care in this uncertain period. We know well the effects of stress on the immune system, a focus of our research at AME. Consider exercising outside or at home than the

gym or exercise studio. Get enough sleep and take extra good care of your immune system. Dr. Aric Prather, AME Co-director, gives tips on sleep and viruses: <https://amecenter.ucsf.edu/news/how-get-better-sleep-fight-illness-dr-aric-prather>.

Remind yourself anxiety right now is normal, natural and helpful, and we should be extra supportive and compassionate to those around us. Panic, on the other hand, stresses the whole system, is costly to both self and society.

My colleague Elizabeth Blackburn can always see positive sides of things, even as dark as this one. She wanted to share this:



“As we stay at home and don't rush around everywhere, we'll all become reflective poets, writers, composers, readers, painters, thinkers and more.”

Be well, be safe,
Warm regards,

Elissa & Aric, and all of us at the AME Center



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