

Coping With The Uncertainty Of COVID-19

Dr Tony Bates, Adjunct Professor of Psychology, UCD

Waking up to the Corona pandemic is a bit like having the rug pulled out from underneath us. The world that normally feels reasonably safe and predictable suddenly doesn't feel either safe or predictable anymore.

When we first heard about the Coronavirus, we didn't know how serious it was. We reassured each other that we'd be ok; we live too far north; we're a hardy people; our population is highly dispersed (unlike Italy); no virus could survive the cold here.

Slowly the reality of the threat we faced hit home. Even the most resilient among us felt anxious, depressed, angry. This didn't mean that we were weak; it meant we were vulnerable. A crisis like Corona makes all of us aware of just how vulnerable we really are.

Our natural response to danger is Fight or Flight. We want to hit back; we look for someone to blame: the Chinese, the Government or at the very least the HSE. Why can't they move faster, do more, 'Get Corona Done', and stop waiting for something bad to happen before making hard decisions. We find it painful to live with uncertainty, with not knowing what's going to happen next.

"Your survival brain is constantly updating your world, making judgments about what's safe and what isn't. Due to its disdain for uncertainty, it makes up all sorts of untested stories hundreds of times a day because to the mind, uncertainty equals danger. If your brain doesn't know what's around the corner, it can't keep you out of harm's way. It always assumes the worst, over-personalizes threats and jumps to conclusions. And you're hardwired to overestimate threats and underestimate your ability to handle them—all in the name of survival." (Bryan Robinson, Forbes, March 2020)

As the Corona crisis turned into a pandemic, our level of fear rose with rising numbers of casualties being reported daily. This escalation of people with coronavirus continues today. Media have an important role in presenting updates in a way that doesn't accelerate our anxiety. We need hard facts, but we also need to feel that they are being given with sensitivity and humanity.

Psychologists have given a lot of thought to anxiety and stress. Here are some of the key suggestions that they make about coping with very stressful situations, which may be helpful to us in coping with the Covid-19 pandemic:

- Don't beat yourself up over how you feel, whatever you feel. Be kind to yourself, cut yourself some slack. What you're facing is really hard. It's bound to upset you in the very particular ways that you are vulnerable.
- Buddy up with one or more people you can trust to give you emotional support or practical help, because you're going to need both. In a time when social distancing is the recommended option for health reasons, we can find alternative ways to stay in close contact.

- Set one or two goals each day, especially if you're housebound. Focusing on simple goals puts some shape on the day and helps you feel you still have some control over your life.
- Don't neglect yourself, stick with your normal daily routines Stay active, eat well, connect with nature. Engage with people in simple practical ways that can be fun and life-giving.
- Don't believe all you hear.

Uncertainty can leave us feeling out of control. We don't like feeling this way. In response to not knowing what may happen next, our minds may lock on to some very specific concern, for example, shopping. It's easier to fixate, for example, on making sure we have enough toilet rolls than it is to sit with the uncertainty of Corona. When we find and purchase our 'must-have' items we feel relief, but only for a short time. Very quickly, our fears lock on to another item that we must have as a matter of life or death– "Do I have enough porridge?"

Our Fight/flight response gives us the energy we need to react to threats and challenges, and we will need that energy to respond creatively to what unfolds in the weeks and months ahead of us. But it is important that we relate thoughtfully to the challenges we are facing rather than reacting impulsively out of fear. We may want to do this or that, we may have all kinds of urges and impulses, but we don't have to act on them. Most of the time when we act out of fear, we make poor decisions. If we can press 'pause' and talk things over with someone we trust, we can often find a wiser way to respond.

Psychology helps by encouraging people to turn their fears into conversations. When we can express what we feel, we connect with ourselves, we feel relieved and we can laugh at ourselves. We also see more clearly what we can do and need to do next. Giving each other the time and space to turn our distress into words, to share with each other whatever this crisis means to us personally, is perhaps the most important way we can manage the uncertainty we are living with.

Personally, when I ask myself what scares me most about Corona, I'm worried about losing friends who are still quite young, but whose health is compromised and who are more at risk than most if they contracted the virus. They could die. I also have my own health issues that make it more likely I would have a hard time with Corona virus, even if I eventually pulled through.

For someone I spoke to yesterday, her worst fear was very different: she was worried about losing a granddaughter. I pointed out that children were perhaps the least at risk in the population but that didn't help at all. She just said: "I never said this was rational, but it is where I go in my head when I think about Corona".

Knowing where we feel most vulnerable puts us in a far better place to take care of ourselves. When we can bring our personal worries and fears into conversation with others whom we trust, who don't judge us or shame us, we can find creative ways to respond to the challenge we're facing, together, rather than sit alone with our terror.

Psychologists who've looked at what happens when we are faced with radical existential threats to our lives (Terror Management Theory) and sociologists who've explored how we survive mass disasters (Disaster Sociology) have some particular insights to offer us. When faced with potential disasters where we become acutely aware of our mortality, we move closer to each other and draw our strength from feeling we are part of a community which values us. When we feel connected to others, we experience positive self-esteem, and this reduces our anxiety. Sociologists in particular have observed that the most painful disasters can lead to a much stronger sense of community.

For example, the founder of Disaster Sociology, Enrico Quarantelli, investigated many social disasters including Hiroshima, 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. His overall conclusion was that communities weren't destroyed by these calamities, but rather they pulled together in remarkable ways. Here's what he wrote about Hiroshima:

Within MINUTES of the Hiroshima nuclear blast, survivors engaged in search and rescue, helped one another in whatever ways they could. Within ONE DAY the electric company restored power to most areas, a steel company with only 20% of its staff began operations again, 12 banks opened and started making payments to customers, tram lines leading into the city were completely cleared and roads were made passable. (Handbook of Disaster Research 2007).

In this country we had our very own 'disaster sociologist' - Peig Sayers. She had the patent on suffering, as she experienced more bereavement than most of us. And she lived in a community who lived at the edge of the world and experienced constant disasters. Peig instilled resilience in her people by telling them stories. Not to entertain them, but to help them see that their suffering was a shared experience, and to help them make sense of their lives. When asked how she survived she wrote,

Ach tá an méid seo agam le rá, go raibh comharsain mhaite agam. Chuidiomar féin le chéile agus ar scáth a chéile a mhaireamar. Gach rud a bhíodh ag teacht dorcha orainn nochtaímis dá chéile é agus chuireadh sin sólas aigne orainn. Ba í an charthanacht an phréamh ba dhaighne a bhí inár gcroí."

"But I have this much to say, that I had good neighbours. We helped each other and lived in the shelter of each other. Everything that was coming dark upon us, we would disclose it to each other, and that would give us consolation of mind. Friendship was the fastest root in our hearts."

A lot of people are going to be hurt by this Covid19 pandemic. People who are self-employed, people whose income stream is entirely dependent on the services they provide. Some may have a financial safety net. Many won't. They live on the little they make. Perhaps those of us who are protected financially need to consider the needs of those without that resource. There are also those people whose needs may be primarily emotional. Living alone, worrying about everything they are hearing, feeling very helpless. We do well to remember them and ask ourselves "Is there is something I can do".

The best antidote for fear is care. Each of us can be the person who steps up to help others. Our anxiety can be channelled into helping to build a sense of community; rather than sitting alone with our worst fears. Action is better than inaction.

To survive this pandemic, we are being asked to make an act of faith in the broader community to which we belong. To trust in what we are doing collectively to navigate our way through this very difficult challenge, rather than being pulled this way and that by our own personal fears. To believe that for the next six weeks or more people are trying, on our behalf, to navigate this crisis and make informed, measured and careful decisions. To the degree that we can trust they have our best interests in mind, we feel calmer in ourselves. And when we can steady ourselves, problems that seemed insurmountable become workable.

But here's the problem: the work of government in this time of great uncertainty can seem boring and tedious. It has none of the pizzazz of someone fighting a fire or stepping up bare-fisted to take on a bully. Our inner anxiety may wish for the drama of guns at high noon, but what we get are suits on the 6pm news, speaking to us in careful, measured tones. What we are being asked to do is to trust in science, reason and democracy which inform the pains-taking care that is being taken daily in dealing with this crisis.

When we trust in this democracy to which we all belong, we will begin to experience a new appreciation for all that is being done on our behalf. We can feel gratitude for people who keep our communities ticking over; people who turn up every day to test lab samples; who nurse infected patients; who care for people round the clock that depend on them; people who help keep the lights on, stock our shelves and respond in unseen ways to the needs of others.

Conclusion:

My behaviour impacts on your life. And your behaviour impacts on mine. Normally, when we hear about some problem we may think "This is nothing to do with me; I'm all right Jack". We feel we're disconnected and free to live our lives as we choose. Covid-19 is making us aware of how inter-connected we are. Each of us is essential to solving this problem. Any of us could be carrying the virus, or pass it on, without even knowing it. We need to be responsible for ourselves but also for each other. Covid-19 has made us aware that we are "our neighbour's keeper". So cleaning our hands and respecting new social guidelines is vitally important. We can save each other's lives – without ever being aware that we are.

Let's hope that we emerge from this crisis as people who are much more aware of the suffering of others and our dependence on each other.