



From Chaos to Calm – COVID-19

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What to do when your life is thrown upside down.

We all experience times of overwhelm in our life. Times when things just get too much. The coronavirus, however, has sent us all into a spin. It is a time of overwhelm and unpredictability for the whole world. Seldom is everything turned upside down like it is now.

With uncertainty comes anxiety, stress, fear, and that may be followed by depression. It is quite normal to feel scared. Our brains are wired to like certainty. If you are feeling stressed, anxious, worried, panicky, recognise that this is normal. Sometimes even just reminding ourselves that what we are feeling is a normal reaction to what is going on around us, can help calm some of the fears. The self-isolation imposed, while it is going to save lives, has a downside. It can lead to feelings of loneliness and depression. If you are already lonely and depressed it can just make it a whole lot worse.

Although anxiety and fear are normal human responses, they are not always helpful. There are a number of things which happen in the brain when you are scared, and they tend to be counterproductive a lot of the time, unless you are facing an immediate threat to your life.

- When we are anxious and fearful we are less able to engage in higher thinking functions such as problem solving, creativity, decision making, and reasoning. The part of the brain that we use for problem solving, being creative and decision making – the prefrontal cortex, has less energy available for functioning due to it being siphoned off to our emotional areas such as the limbic system to deal with our fears. What this means is that if you are frightened, your brain will be so focused on you being frightened, you will not be able to make good decisions, or think creatively to solve problems. The “fight or flight response” – the stress response – narrows our focus to think about the threat only. When you are faced with a situation like the

coronavirus you need to think broadly in order to come up with solutions. Narrow thinking helps if you need to run away from the lion that is about to make you dinner in the next minute. You just need to run or get away from the situation. Narrow thinking does not help you deal with how you will maintain your sanity in social isolation, how you will do business differently to not lose business, or what useful, fun activities you can do to cope with this situation.

- Anxiety and stress release hormones in the body that damage the immune system. Right now, with the coronavirus in full swing, you want a good immune system. The more you can manage anxiety and stress the less compromised your immune system will be and the more you will be able to fight off the virus.
- Anxiety and stress make people behave with less emotional intelligence and they often regress to acting like 2-year olds, throwing a temper tantrum (such as fighting over toilet paper). When you emotionally regress like that you become a difficult person to be with. And so people will avoid any interaction with you, which is not good for your relationships in all their various forms. You can also do things that embarrass yourself in the long term or could even get you into trouble.



So what are some fairly simple and straightforward things you can do to manage your stress, anxiety, fears, panic, and depression:

1. Show compassion to others and yourself. Not everyone has the same experience in dealing with challenging times. Also, some people have more resilience than others. So while some people may irritate or annoy you, be compassionate to others and yourself.
2. Look after yourself by sticking to the basics: Good hygiene, adequate sleep, exercise, get into nature, maintain social contact and relationships even if it has to be via technology such as Skype or Zoom or WhatsApp.
3. Avoid the tendency to panic. You have not lost everything. You still have many things in your life despite the chaos. And remember you are not alone in this.
4. The combination of social isolation and a disrupted routine can exacerbate feelings of sadness and loneliness. Create a daily routine. Don't stay in pyjamas all day. Get up at a consistent time each day, get dressed and plan activities for the day. Use social media, messaging, and email to remain in contact with people.
5. Setting and working towards goals can help people with depression. Set yourself some new goals if you don't have any. I have a few clients who were training for the Ironman Triathlon and now that is postponed together with many other races. They

need to set new goals for themselves in the short term and long term, to remain positive and motivated.

6. Be careful of too much news and be selective about the sources of news you listen to. News can trigger terrifying thoughts and images of the future. If you do find yourself imagining catastrophic outcomes remind yourself this is your imagination and take your focus back to what is real. Touch items around you. Feel the sun on your skin. Notice the ground beneath your feet.
7. Recognise if you have tension in your body and do some relaxation exercises.
8. Learn to be in the present. This can be very hard. It is easy for our thoughts to wander off into what might happen in the future. However, you have no idea what the future is like. So, while you cannot be ignorant of the future, practice bringing yourself back to the present and focusing on the here and now. Put your energy into what you are doing right now and tune out constant worries about the future.
9. We are not in control of everything in life. Lots of us would like to be, but we are not. If you are feeling very out of control focus on what you can control and do something about that. And let the rest go.
10. Talk out your fears, worries, and sadness with family, friends or a professional.
11. Select a visual anchor to help you when you get anxious. This could be staring at a flower or the clouds or a picture of nature. Find a visual anchor that will calm you down during times of heightened anxiety.
12. Laugh. Watch some comedy.
13. Create. It is difficult to be creative when you are holding onto anxiety, but if you can find a way to be creative it helps you de-stress and gives hope.
14. Trust that we will see this through. Humans are resilient and creative. Most people will live through this. Vaccines are likely to be developed. People will build immunity to the virus.

Remind yourself of the mantra, which is true and helpful: "This too shall pass". Even storms eventually run out of rain.