

Ebola anxiety: A bigger threat now than the virus itself

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Mental health experts offer antidotes to what they see as unnecessary worry on some Americans' part.

(HealthDay)—Headlines remain riveted on the three Ebola cases in Dallas. But, mental health specialists say overblown fear is a much bigger health threat to Americans.

President Barack Obama on Friday appointed an Ebola "czar" to oversee the U.S. response to the virus, which has infected two Dallas nurses who cared for a Liberian man who died of Ebola this month at Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital.

But the U.S. cases are miniscule in the context of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa that's concentrated in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone and has so far killed more than 4,500 people, according to the World Health

Organization.

Still, U.S. [mental health](#) experts say the combination of a deadly infection, uncertainty about how the Dallas nurses contracted it and constant media coverage could set the stage for widespread public anxiety.

Americans aren't in panic mode yet, said James Halpern, director of the Institute for Disaster Mental Health at the State University of New York at New Paltz.

However, flu season is starting up, and its common symptoms—fever, headache and muscle pain—could be misinterpreted if people have Ebola on their minds.

"If we have a bad flu season, that could create a considerable emotional contagion," Halpern said.

"It's not only the virus that's contagious," he added.

In general, Halpern said, people have a hard time accurately assessing personal risk, and emotional reaction can override rational calculations. "We're more afraid of snakes than cigarettes," he noted.

And since most people, understandably, have limited knowledge of infectious diseases, they could be particularly susceptible to believing misinformation about disease outbreaks, said George Kapalka, a professor of psychological counseling at Monmouth University in West Long Beach, N.J.

Halpern agreed. With any worrisome event, he pointed out, "there's going to be a lot of misinformation and rumors going around." But faced with something as scary and unfamiliar as Ebola, people could have a

particularly tough time separating reality from rumor, he said.

And then there's the media coverage. "I think there's been a gross overreaction on the part of the media," said Gerard Jacobs, director of the University of South Dakota's Disaster Mental Health Institute.

"The flu is a much greater threat to the American public than Ebola is," Jacobs said.

He suggested that if you are feeling anxious about Ebola, go to a reliable source for information, such as the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Their focus is the health of the American public," Jacobs said. "They're scientists, not politicians."

Added Halpern: "Accurate information can be a good antidote to anxiety."

But once you find out some Ebola facts, find something else to do. It's not wise, Halpern said, to watch 24-hour news coverage of the outbreak, or devote hours of online time to it—including social media sites, where rumors can run rampant.

That could be especially important advice for people already prone to anxiety, according to Kapalka. "Those individuals can have a more intense fear response to what they're hearing," he said. "It would be sensible for them to self-impose some limits on their media exposure."

According to the CDC, Ebola is spread through direct contact with the virus. "Direct contact" means that an infected person's bodily fluids—such as blood, saliva or vomit—have touched someone else's eyes, nose, mouth or broken skin.

Coughing and sneezing aren't common symptoms of Ebola, but the CDC

says it's possible the virus could be transmitted if an infected person's saliva or mucus got into someone else's eyes, mouth or nose.

The bottom line, the CDC and other experts stress, is that you would need to be very close to someone with Ebola symptoms to become infected.

Kapalka suggested that, armed with that knowledge, people do a "reality check." That is, what are the chances you are going to be in close contact with someone likely to have Ebola?

Then, Kapalka said, "You might be able to tell yourself, my personal risk is so low, living in fear is not worth it."

More information: For more on coping with worry and stress, visit [Anxiety and Depression Association of America](#).

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