Feeling overwhelmed? Approach coronavirus as a challenge to be met, not a threat to be feared

March 31 2020, by Bethany Teachman

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Do you treat this time as an insurmountable threat that pits you against everyone else? This option entails making decisions based solely on protecting yourself and your loved ones: stockpiling supplies regardless of what that leaves for others; continuing to host small gatherings because you're personally at lower risk; or taking no precautions because the effort seems futile.

Or do you treat the coronavirus as a collective [challenge](#) that will require shared sacrifices to achieve a difficult but not impossible goal? That option would mean taking recommended precautions: practicing social distancing, hand-washing and restricting travel. These actions might not be your most desired or convenient path as an individual, but they contribute to the broader social good, reducing the spread of COVID-19.

[As a professor of psychology](#) and licensed [clinical psychologist](#) who studies [how people think differently when they're anxious](#), I recognize this global pandemic has all the ingredients to fuel a [threat](#)-oriented mindset. The trajectory of the coronavirus is [uncertain and unpredictable](#), the very features that fuel anxiety and threat-processing in the brain.

The way people process threatening events matters a lot for how well they'll manage this period of uncertainty. Some identification of threat is useful and will mobilize you to action, but a rigid [overestimation of threat makes you panic](#) or immobilizes you.

Letting the threat dictate your response

When you perceive a situation as a dire threat, it changes how you process information.

No longer do you consider the pros and cons of your choices evenhandedly, looking at the situation from multiple perspectives. Instead, your attention narrows, selectively focusing on cues that reinforce your sense of danger and vulnerability.

Your interpretations become biased, so that you assume the worst when a situation is ambiguous—as almost all situations are.

And you preferentially remember information that confirms a prior belief that the world is a dangerous place and you don't measure up.

Why is this a problem? After all, the world really is in the grip of an objectively dangerous pandemic. Paying attention to this threat seems vital for staying safe.

The issue occurs when you believe that your personal resources are insufficient to meet the demands of the situation. If you feel the threat is insurmountable, then you give up. Why try if you're doomed to fail? And if you feel that your resources—be it food, money, time, energy—are inadequate or threatened, then you have nothing to share with others, and hoard what you can for yourself.

Feeling threatened can make you hyperfocused on monitoring for signs of danger, which can in turn mean consuming terrifying stories about COVID-19 almost nonstop. It's important to stay informed, but prior research makes clear that people are more prone to mental health problems, like anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder, if they don't limit media exposure. In turn, reading about COVID-19 all the time increases the perception of threat, further fueling the need to monitor for danger signs in a vicious cycle that makes the world seem ever scarier.

Better to conceive a threat as a challenge

It's better for your mental health to see this time as a collective challenge—one that is extremely difficult but which can be met if everyone works together.

When you size something up as a challenge, it's easier to rise to the occasion. Instead of withdrawing from the problem, you shift to problem-solving. People with this mindset draw on others to help, and they offer their own support to those in need. Research has shown that working collaboratively and helping others has great mental health benefits for the helper.

Research on cognitive behavior therapy shows that shifting one's outlook to perceive something as a motivating challenge rather than an insurmountable threat can be a successful way to treat anxiety disorders.

Cognitive therapy promotes questioning your thoughts instead of assuming the first one that pops into your mind is the most helpful. An individual becomes a scientist, weighing the evidence for and against ideas to reach more balanced conclusions. You become an explorer, thinking flexibly to consider new approaches to solving problems. If you sniffle once, you don't immediately assume you have COVID-19—you maintain precautions, but also consider whether this month is when your allergies usually act up and see if allergy medicine works.

It would be ludicrous not to acknowledge the real threats the world faces right now, and the disproportionate impact this difficult time has on already marginalized communities. But you need not define this threat as insurmountable and get stuck there. Choose instead to work together—albeit remotely—and accept the coronavirus challenge. The shift from threat to challenge might just make it a little easier to stay home, to close the browser and stop reading about COVID-19 24/7, to

wash your hands for a full 20 seconds and to buy just what you need at the store so others can do the same.

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