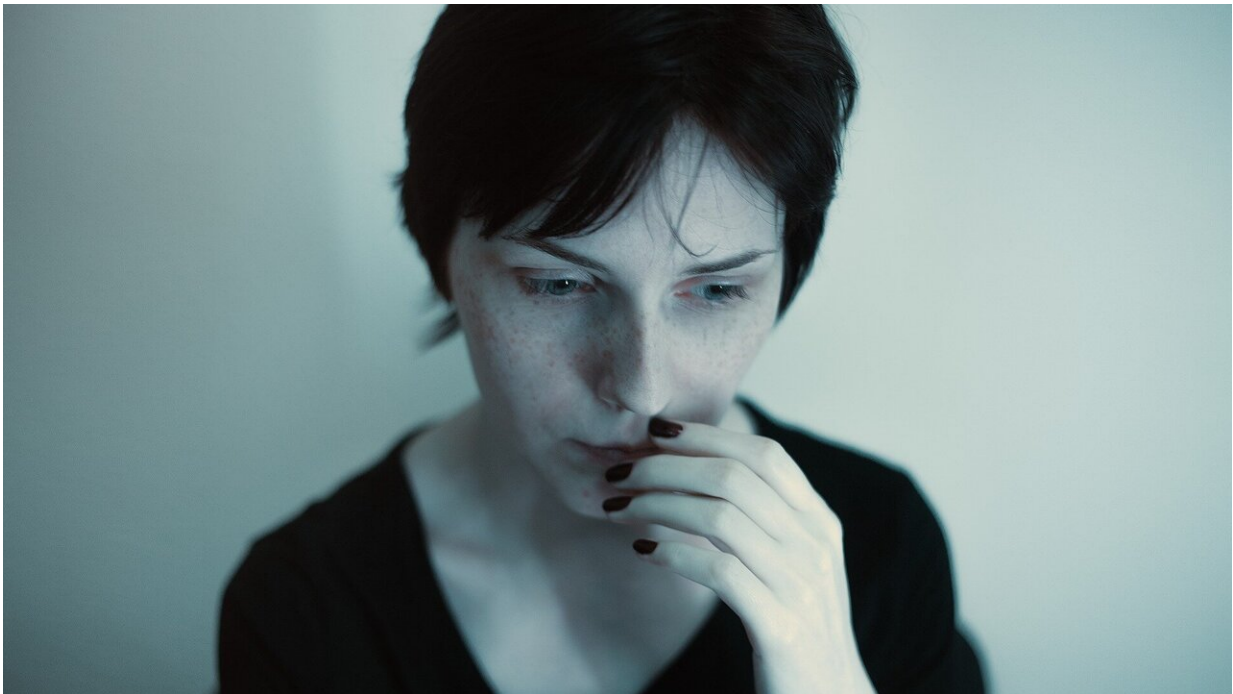


# Here's how to combat the fear caused by a barrage of COVID-19 news

April 2 2020, by Molly Callahan

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By now, much of the world is under some form of isolation in an attempt to slow the spread of COVID-19—a worthwhile effort, but one that can create some emotional distress, as well.

The constant inundation of emotionally fraught images and information about the disease can drive a dramatic increase in our sense of [fear](#),

giving our minds the impression that we're under constant threat, says David DeSteno, a [psychology professor](#) at Northeastern

"I'm not saying fear and concern aren't warranted right now; they certainly are," says DeSteno, who studies the effect that our [emotional states](#) have on our decision-making abilities.

"But if you're watching TV or on [social media](#) constantly, you're being barraged with it 24/7," he says. And that is "causing you a lot more stress and anxiety than is good for you to feel right now."

DeSteno joined News@Northeastern for a live interview, and offered some tips for breaking out of the constant cycle of fear and anxiety.

Among them? Curate your own emotional experiences by seeking out videos and readings that are pleasurable, calming, and positive, DeSteno suggests.

Practice meditation, and don't be afraid to detach from the news when it's no longer serving you.

## **Your research suggests that emotions can be contagious. Why?**

When we feel emotions, the reason we're feeling them is to help us solve an immediate problem or go toward an immediate reward, so it makes sense that not only do we have our own emotional states that the environment invokes in us, but also that we catch them from others.

So, if you and I were talking right now and I were to [show surprise], that would signal to you that I saw something behind you, that there was a threat there, and you already would be afraid without having to turn

around to know what it is.

But the problem is when those threats get out of hand, or that fear gets out of hand. By reading some posts on social media, it can lead to levels of fear that are a bit more intense than is warranted. I'm not saying fear and concern is not warranted right now; they certainly are. But if you're watching TV, or on social media constantly, you're being barraged with it 24/7, and what it's making it feel like to you is that even in your immediate environment the threat is maybe much greater than it is—causing you a lot more stress and anxiety than is good for you to feel right now.

## **How might feelings spread from person to person when we interact virtually versus when we're physically together?**

There are so many ways we interact virtually: [On a video call], you and I would be almost the same as if we were in person: You can read my emotional expressions, you can hear the tone of my voice, and tone conveys emotional states. That can happen on the phone as well. In addition, people are posting articles that are high in emotional content and fear right now, so there's lots of ways for emotion to spread online.

There's great research done by folks like Jay Van Bavel, an associate professor of psychology at New York University, showing that information that is of high [emotional content](#) tends to spread more rapidly on Twitter and other social media than do other types of content, and so right now I think that's a problem.

For us, the issue is that when you feel fear—which again, at some level is really warranted—it makes you feel like every threat is more likely to happen.

So, if you sneeze right now, and you're feeling frightened, the fear you're feeling is going to make you predict that that sneeze is much more likely due to the fact that you might have COVID-19 than your seasonal allergies.

Or when you wash your hands for 20 or 30 seconds, it'll make you think, "maybe I didn't do that right, maybe I should do it more." If you're a financial investor, it'll make you feel like the market's never going to come back or be where it was.

So fear, when you don't have the right information—and most of us can't think like virologists—is going to fill in the blanks of what you don't know and exacerbate every threat that you feel to chronic levels that are going to be difficult for you to maintain and not feel overwhelmed by.

## **Emotions can be helpful and useful to us, so when do they cross the line into harmful, and what can we do to stop that from happening?**

The problem arises when the intensity of an emotion is mis-calibrated. If you're in New York, you're surrounded by a very high number of cases, but for most of us in other parts of the country and world, the people we're surrounded by aren't incredibly likely to have COVID-19. But a lot of what we're seeing on TV and social media is the constant worst-case scenario, so it makes us feel inherently under a greater threat than we are at the moment.

Now, by that, I don't mean you're safe and you shouldn't do the public health requirements—please do follow all the advice from public health individuals. What I am saying is if you're constantly exposing yourself to the worst case scenarios, what your brain is interpreting is that you, where you're sitting right now, are under threat. That's going to take a

toll on your body, on your anxiety and stress, which is going to harm your own immunity.

## **Do you have recommendations for balancing work and personal life, when the lines have blurred?**

Your emotional experiences don't just happen to you; you can curate them.

One way to begin to do that is to find time within your daily life to try to focus on emotions that are more positive, more calming, and more relaxing: things like gratitude and compassion.

Engage in reflecting on gratitude. Engage in meditation. Meditation was created to help reduce suffering in the world, and not only will meditation help reduce the anxiety that you feel, it will actually make you more willing to accept sacrifices to help others—whether that's asking your neighbor who's elderly if they need help ordering food online, whether it's being willing to self-sacrifice so that you can help people around you.

Another thing I recommend is doing what's called a "virtual reciprocity ring." Get a bunch of people that you know, and have them each bring one other person to an online group. Then, everybody posts one thing that they need help with, and then everybody volunteers to meet one person's needs.

What that does is it begins to create a norm where it's O.K. to ask for help, it's O.K. to get help, it's O.K. to have gratitude and empathy for people. What our research shows is that when you feel that you have a way to make a difference, it gives you a sense of control, and that feels good. The gratification and compassion you feel by getting help and

giving help will also increase your likelihood of paying that forward, and creating a circle that continues to spiral upward in giving assistance.

When we're under stress, we as humans do one of two things: We either stand alone or we come together. That second strategy is the one that makes us more resilient.

The problem with COVID-19 is that the ways we normally come together, by spending time comforting each other, are being scrambled. We can't go and be together in the ways we normally would, and so we have to find ways to connect virtually.

What you're seeing now when you see Italians on their balconies singing together—those acts of synchronous action together—that's an ancient marker to the mind that we're all in this together, we all have joint purpose. It's a way of feeling connected to each other, and I think that's why you're seeing it break out all over.

## **How do you stop your brain from spiraling?**

The feelings of fear and anxiety that we're all feeling are valid, and they serve a role. The problem is: fear is designed to meet an immediate short-term challenge. And the way we have to deal with COVID-19 is going to be ongoing. Being in a constant state of fear is problematic. So, you have to recognize that you're going to have that fear, but also have to be able to detach from it.

So, really, go watch Netflix, go detach from social media. Engage in the habits that you normally do in your daily life. If you normally go to the gym, exercise at home. Curate the information coming into you. Your brain can't help responding to what it's seeing on TV or on social media, but you have some control in that.

I really do recommend meditation, it is a way to begin to detach and calm from negative feelings. In addition, any type of social-connecting exercise that you can do—whether it's calling people you haven't, writing people you haven't, even just taking time quietly to walk in your yard or walk outside if you have the ability to do that—will kind of reset what's coming into your brain. If you're focused only on the news right now, you want to be informed, but it's going to make you feel like you're constantly under threat.

Provided by Northeastern University

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