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Expert discusses how to manage fear during the pandemic

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As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect nearly every aspect of life, it can be difficult to avoid being overwhelmed by everything from work and school closures to supply chain issues to near-constant media coverage.

James Dillard, distinguished professor of communication arts and sciences at Penn State, says that while feeling unsure or even fearful in uncertain times is normal, there are also strategies you can use to help regulate your emotions.

Understand how fear affects your and society's health

First, Dillard says it's important to understand that stress affects not only your mental health, but your physiological health, as well. According to previous research, fear can suppress immune function and lead to cardiovascular problems, in addition to contributing to long-term mental health issues like post-traumatic stress disorder.

Additionally, he said when many people get scared at the same time, it can lead to problems at a societal level.

"We don't live alone, we live among one another in communities," Dillard said. "If everyone is scared, people might stay away from hospitals when they should be going, or overwhelm the hospital when they could stay at home. For example, there have been some reports of parents avoiding going to the doctor to get their children vaccinated because they're afraid of being exposed to coronavirus. They may also not social distance properly, or engage in counterproductive fear-management strategies."

Learn what not to do

Dillard's previous work has focused on people's strategies in dealing with fear surrounding other infectious diseases, like the Zika epidemic in 2015. His research has identified several strategies that aren't helpful with managing fear.

For example, he and a team of researchers, including Chun Yang and

Ruobing Li, both now faculty at Louisiana State University, found that women who suppressed their emotions or fear about Zika actually felt more fear later on. In other studies, Dillard found that strategies like avoiding the topic or "reappraising" the threat—such as saying "zika is dangerous, but so are a lot of things"—also did not help manage fear.

Finally, the "contesting" strategy, such as convincing oneself that the media are blowing the threat out of proportion and the situation is not actually dangerous, was also ineffective.

"This minimization strategy sounds like it should be effective, but we didn't see that," Dillard said. "Moreover, even if it was, you can see the danger of that strategy—if you convince yourself that you're not at risk and don't need to take precautions, that could endanger not only yourself but others, as well."

Maintain a healthy media diet

The coronavirus pandemic has dominated the media for the past few months, making the topic difficult to avoid. While this may be ok for some, others may find it makes their anxiety worse. Some of Dillard's previous research found that the more disease-related media people consume, the more frightened they become.

Dillard advises being honest with yourself about how much media you can consume before it becomes overwhelming, and if you start to become fearful or uncomfortable, to scale back how much media you're exposed to. Additionally, being picky about the media sources you do follow can also be helpful.

"Some media outlets see it as their job to increase your fear, but luckily they're not that hard to avoid," Dillard said. "Some people might benefit from slow media, like online articles and information, rather than the talking heads on TV. The CDC, for example, has a lot of information on their website that is updated regularly."

Be a vector of positive emotion

Dillard said that much like coronavirus is contagious, emotions can be passed from one person to another, too. He said people should be aware of both their own emotional space as well as that of the person they're talking to—to avoid both passing on or catching negative emotions.

"Maybe your spouse isn't up for discussing current events, but someone else—a friend or colleague—might be more receptive," Dillard said. "The disease and emotions are both social events that get passed back and forth, so we can be thoughtful about what we want to pass along, whether it's negativity or something more positive."

Learn how to offer support

Finally, once you have your own fear under control, it can be helpful to learn how to best support your loved ones if they're feeling anxious. Previous research from Penn State found that sentiments that validated a person's feelings were more effective and helpful than ones that were critical or diminished emotions.

"Comforting another person is a gift, and it should be given in the spirit in which gifts are meant," Dillard said. "It's ineffective to tell someone they 'just have to get over' something. If you're trying to make someone feel better, instead, you can try to tune into that person and validate what they're going through."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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