COVID-19: How to deal with our cognitive biases
29 June 2020, by Fun Man Fung, Chng Wei Heng

Despite assurances of a sufficient and stable supply, citizens start to hoard toilet paper and other food items. Credit: www.shutterstock.com

Humanity is in a battle against SARS CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. In combating this invisible enemy, we should recognize our inherent cognitive biases. Cognitive biases are systematic errors in thinking which affect how we make decisions and judgements.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed these biases.

Cognitive biases often lead us to irrational behaviors such as hoarding toilet paper.

Others may even make illogical decisions like ingesting fish tank cleaner containing chloroquine to prevent coronavirus infection.

People who act irrationally have been labeled as "COVIDiots".

But did you know most of us are prone to some form of cognitive bias?

There are three key cognitive biases we have witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. **Action bias**

People often believe actions tend to solve (COVID-19) problems. When various world leaders gave national addresses to allay people's fear of "food shortages," some people started to panic buy.

Despite assurances of a sufficient and stable supply, citizens started to hoard toilet paper and other food items.

We often think by doing something such as stockpiling our home supplies, we may mitigate unknown risks related to COVID-19. However, by crowding in the supermarkets, we may instead be placing ourselves at higher risk of infection.

2. **Fear of missing out (FOMO) and the bandwagon effect**

Additionally, images of long snaking queues and emptied shelves could have caused unnecessary FOMO anxiety. This can lead to the bandwagon effect—the tendency to blindly follow the actions of others.

If we perceive others are increasingly engaging in a behavior, we become more likely to do so, especially more so during a crisis.

3. **Confirmation bias**

Confirmation bias is the tendency to search and acknowledge information that supports our beliefs.

We make preconceived beliefs on various aspects of the coronavirus and search for relevant information that validates them. As trained scientists, we have to ensure we interpret data accurately. Our interpretation of data should not be affected by what we choose to believe.

Strategies to think clearly during the COVID-19
pandemic

1. Apply slow thinking

Our **slow thinking** is deliberate and require more mental energy. The slow thinking system is activated when we are faced with big decisions such as buying a home and choosing our life partner.

We can tap into our slow thinking if we pause and write down reasons against, and in support, of our impending decisions. This cautious thinking allows us to consider the problem carefully, as well as its long-term implications.

On the other hand, we apply our fast thinking when we decide which gendered washroom to enter when we visit the toilet. The fast thinking is synonymous with our second nature. We stop and wait when we observe the red traffic light. We proceed on seeing the green light. We extend our **right hand** (not our left) during handshakes.

Although we might be tempted to use our fast thinking (**heuristics**) to make many decisions, this might make us more likely to fall prey to our cognitive biases.

We should not rely on our opinions to make decisions, but **base them on data**.

2. Evaluate the source of information

When deducing the credibility of a sensational piece of news, ascertain its currency, relevance, authority, accuracy and purpose (**CRAAP**).

These criteria provide guiding questions that we could use to evaluate if the articles about COVID-19 are trustworthy.

Think about: the moment you have chosen to read an article (currency), the date of publication (relevance) and the intention of the writer (authority). You should also look for **secondary sources** to verify the claims made in the article (accuracy and purpose).

Additionally, you can note the vocational training of the writer. Is the writer trained in the topic of interest? Does the writer sit in a position of power?

When evaluating **scientific papers**, analyze the raw data and evaluate the methodology. Infographics are easy to read, but some might be misleading.

We advise deriving your conclusions based on your own interpretation.

But, make sure to take note of **negative evidence**. When faced with information that conflicts with your belief, **DO NOT** ignore it. Instead, write down the reasons why this evidence may be true. That way, your hypothesis will be clear of confirmation bias.

**We are in this together**

These unprecedented times have revealed our natural weakness against various cognitive biases. We make many decisions daily and succumb to these biases unconsciously. As we slowly phase into the new normal, it is a good time for us to reflect on our earlier decisions.

Is there anything we would have done differently? Being aware of our cognitive blind spots is the first step towards mitigating their effects. Our slow thinking can allow us to make better decisions, especially in times of the pandemic. Together, we can fight against COVID-19 and our **cognitive biases**.

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