

The Two Kinds of Coronavirus Anxiety

How to tell where realistic fear ends and unrealistic terror begins.

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Our anxieties about the COVID epidemic break down into two kinds - one very reasonable, the other irrational, and potentially harmful. It's important to be able to tell the difference, so we know what will help us feel better.

Reasonable Fears vs Unrealistic Terror

Reasonable fears ask real questions and therefore have rational solutions. Discovering those answers makes us feel better. Unrealistic or irrational fears are often based on childhood memories or traumas that still live within us, sometimes unconsciously. Identifying those past experiences and understanding we are no longer helpless can be an effective way to put those fears to rest.

Realistic fears are easy to spot. Will I run out of money since I'm not working? How can I find help if I get ill?

The other kind of fear is not so easily defined, which is partially what makes it more powerful. In the present moment, we can talk about fears of civilization falling apart or contagion being everywhere, like radiation after a nuclear attack. These kinds of fears are generally unrealistic, they almost sound supernatural. Being unrealistic, however, doesn't make them less powerful. Left unrecognized, they can lead to panic.

Memories Influence Our Fears

When people explore their deeper, unrealistic fears, they often remember fears from long ago, of monsters under the bed or in the closet. Or sometimes the paradoxical counterparts to such fears, like our five-year-old selves' delight with Band-Aids as magical, healing talismans.

In other words, our adult, irrational fears remind us of when we were truly helpless. As children, we don't have adult coping mechanisms. Superstitions and fantastic explanations exist alongside our discovery of how the world works, because a child's mind and brain are still forming. This is why a child needs parents to help them develop ways to deal with reality. Part of that reality, which is difficult for kids to deal with, is their own feelings. They need grown-ups to help them process what can feel like tidal waves of emotion.

The fantasy world lives on in us as a memory.

In fact, it's important to have a connection with your unconscious mind. That is where mysterious and powerful things like love, passion, and creativity come from. Who decides, logically, with whom to fall in love? It's not logical, it emerges from deep within ourselves.

However, this fantastic level of experience can backfire sometimes. Humanity has not experienced a pandemic in a long time, and the way viruses work still seems mysterious on some level (although science offers explanations). So it feels like a mysterious threat, reminiscent of the scary dark room of our childhood. One's fear of the dark wasn't really understood, only made irrelevant by one's growing, logical mind. Also, those fears can re-emerge when we are tired, under stress, or faced with uncertainty. Sound familiar?

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Keep up with the news, but not too much

We may even be attracted to horrific experiences, like when we watch a horror movie, or go to a haunted house. We can know details about the horror makeup and special effects and still be scared, as if the experience is true. News sources take advantage of this fascination by constantly focusing on the worst of the news. Rarely does the media show hopeful stories, like how many people have recovered, or when the infectious transmission curve will end. One should only check the news periodically to keep up with events. Watching it all the time doesn't help.

Here are some additional tips for staying realistic:

- Identify your real problems in the present and near future, and develop a game plan for their solutions
- Connect with people. It is our reliance on one another that keeps us in the realm of the realistic
- Stay informed. Find news sources that are reliable and not alarmist
- Seek out help from a trusted mental health professional if anxiety or fears start to feel overwhelming

For more information about the types of fear watch:

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