

Opinion: Fear about the coronavirus is normal, but don't let it control you

By Gideon Meyerowitz-Katz, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.09.20

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Wash your hands more often, and practice not touching your face. Yes, it seems boring, but often the best advice is precisely that. Photo: Ferrantraite/Getty Images

Coronavirus is a large family of viruses. It includes the common cold. A new coronavirus has recently emerged. It first appeared in China. The name of the virus is SARS-CoV-2, and the disease it causes is called COVID-19. It is also called coronavirus.

The virus is spreading across the globe. More than 100,000 people have been infected with the virus. Over 3,000 have died. The coronavirus outbreak has become one of the biggest events of this century. Health experts warn that the disease will probably keep spreading to more and more areas.

This is pretty scary. And the fact that it's scary is causing new problems.

Fearing Things We Don't Understand

The problem with scary things is that humans are not very good at reacting to them. We are terrible at understanding risk. Here's an example. People are much more likely to die in a car crash

than a plane crash. Still, for most of us, a shaking airplane seems much more scary than almost getting into a traffic accident. This is not very practical, but there is a reason for it: We fear things that we don't understand. When we feel afraid, we try to control what we fear.

Sometimes we do things that don't make much sense, just to feel like we are in control. In the case of the coronavirus, there are some big examples of this. For example, panicked people have been buying extra household items. They are stocking up on toilet paper and ibuprofen. Many are doing this even though they live in places where there is no outbreak yet. Local stores are not at risk of running out of those items.

People are also buying lots of face masks. Evidence strongly suggests that masks are a waste of time for most people. For weeks, health experts have said that the main reason to buy a mask is if *you* are sick. In that case, the mask can help. It stops you from spreading the virus when you cough or sneeze. Still, people are buying up masks even though they are not sick.

Some people have also started selling and buying products to "cure" the coronavirus. These include pills and teas. There is not any evidence these products work. They are probably a waste of money.

That brings us to one of the scariest parts of the coronavirus. Most of the recommendations from health experts are things that *other people* have to do. They should wear a mask if they are sick and cover their nose and mouth when they cough or sneeze. They should stay home if they feel sick and see a doctor as soon as they have symptoms. If people who are sick take these steps, it can help slow the spread of the virus.

Everyone Needs To Make Informed Choices

Relying on other people can be scary. It means not having much control over your own fate. Nobody likes this. Yes, you can and should make an effort to wash your hands more and stop touching your face. However, doing these things doesn't make us feel much safer. We need everyone else to be making informed choices, too.

I think that is what the panic is really about. People are trying to deal with their fear by taking action. These actions give them a feeling of control. We all want to do something to keep ourselves from getting sick, even if it's probably not going to work. Buying 15 tubs of hand sanitizer makes us feel protected. It's kind of like a trick we play on ourselves. We feel a little better, even if we'd be just as well off buying a normal bar of soap.

Stories about the coronavirus are scary. We may not have control over everything. Still, remember that there are proven things you can do to help yourself. The World Health Organization studies public health across the globe. This group has published simple tips on its website. Anyone can follow these tips. One is to wash your hands more often. Another is to practice not touching your face. This advice probably seems boring, but often boring advice is the best advice!

In the end, the most important thing is not to panic. People often panic when they hear the word "pandemic." A pandemic is when a disease spreads worldwide. Many people think a pandemic only involves serious, deadly diseases. The next time you hear this word, take a deep breath. Remember that "pandemic" describes how a disease spreads, not how serious it is.

Fear Is OK

Fear is OK. It is normal to feel afraid. Even experts have said there are many things about the coronavirus outbreak that we don't know yet. That is scary for everyone.

Still, try not to let the fear control you. You may have to live with that fear for a while.

Gideon Meyerowitz-Katz is an epidemiologist, a scientist who studies diseases. The opinions in this article belong to the author. They do not necessarily represent the views of Newsela or its editors.