

10 Ways to Ease Your Coronavirus Anxiety

By Simran Seth March 27, 2020

These simple tips will help you relax and put things in perspective — in between washing your hands, of course.

“Life is one thing after another,” Dr. Harriet Lerner, a psychologist and author, said. “And just because the universe has already sent us one big stress, it doesn’t mean we won’t be hit with others.”

Dr. Lerner has spent much of her career researching the effects of anxiety and fear on individuals, families and larger systems. She has also managed anxiety in her own life (documented in her best seller “The Dance of Fear”). That makes her the perfect person to help us tackle the rise in panic accompanying Covid-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

The Covid-19 pandemic has infected more than 500,000 people globally, rattling financial markets, upending local economies and resulting in thousands of deaths worldwide, with numbers expected to climb.

It is easy to succumb to fear in the face of uncertainty and unpredictability, yet experts insist there is still room for a bit of optimism. A new study shows that often-milder cases, while prolific, are about half as infectious as confirmed ones. And a team of researchers from McMaster University and the University of Toronto have isolated the agent within the novel coronavirus that will help the world develop better diagnostic tools and, eventually, a vaccine.

There *is* time to change the course of Covid-19, but it is hard to remember this when we’re hand washing, stockpiling and practicing social distancing. Here are 10 ways Dr. Lerner suggests we can stay centered, refrain from succumbing to our worst fears and be better prepared for whatever our collective future holds. (Her responses have been edited for length and clarity.)

Know the facts.

“My advice for coping,” she says, “is the same for all the scary events and possibilities that life brings: Go for the facts — even difficult ones — because anxiety escalates and



fantasies flourish in the absence of information.” But don’t overdo it, as too much information can aggravate stress.

Because the world is rife with *misinformation*, Dr. Lerner suggests avoiding unregulated online news sources and relying on depoliticized ones. “Under stress, people are unlikely to rethink the filters through which they see reality. It’s our responsibility to pay attention to our own most valued sources of information and to follow up-to-date instructions to the letter.”

Put the pandemic in perspective.

“The current crisis is not the only stressor most of us are dealing with,” Dr. Lerner reminds us. “If your dog just died, you lack economic resources and necessary social services or your partner is leaving you — Well, the current world crisis will obviously hit you harder than if everything in your life was otherwise moving along swimmingly.” It is normal to feel overwhelmed but what we can avoid, she says, is labeling ourselves as “weak” or comparing ourselves to others. Everyone is confronting challenges we may not fully recognize or understand.

Another important component of putting the pandemic in perspective is balancing what we should and should not do. As a general rule, Dr. Lerner suggests we be vigilant rather than underreacting. “Erring on the side of being overly cautious is challenging because it goes against our deep human need for physical connection. It’s tempting to rationalize our wish to have that one friend over or to see that one client in our office, especially when our economic interests are at stake.”

Uncertainty and second-guessing are part of the human condition. While the anxiety they engender “feels dreadful,” she stresses, “unlike denial and underreacting, you will not die from it.”

Identify the source(s) of your anxiety.

We are hard-wired for a fight-or-flight response. “The greater the simmering anxiety,” Dr. Lerner explains, “the more you will see individuals stuck in fighting and blaming on one hand, or distancing and cutting off on the other.” This is normal, she says, but if we can identify our anxiety-driven reactivity, “we can get some distance from it, rather than being propelled into action before we have calmed down enough to do our best thinking.”

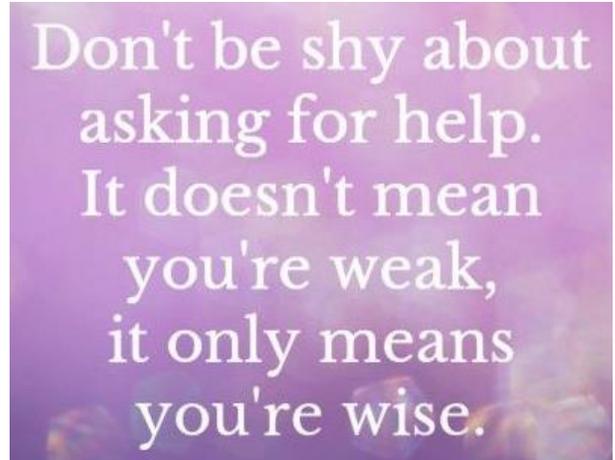
Refrain from shaming and blaming.

When survival anxiety is high and goods feel scarce, it’s easy to blame or scapegoat others, forgetting that we are all in this together. “Our target may be a particular group or an individual, like the woman who sneezes in line in front of us,” Dr. Lerner says, “which leads to a lack of recognition that humans are more alike than different.”

While we can't fully eradicate our fears, "we can work to understand how anxiety operates and how it affects us — for better and for worse." Anxiety, she explains, can be useful when it signals a problem and motivates us to unite to solve it. "If we make a deliberate effort to hold on to our humanity, it can bring us together."

Don't be afraid to ask for help.

Now is the time to turn toward each other. "We are here to help each other out," Dr. Lerner reminds us, "so avoid being a do-it-yourselfer when you're not qualified. Grab some other clear-thinking person to ask what *she* thinks or what *he* would do about stockpiling food, or taking that plane trip, or talking to little Billy about what's going on with grandma in the hospital and his school being closed. You may choose not to follow the advice you seek, but it's essential to have other perspectives."



Don't procrastinate about preparing for the worst.

Anxiety, Dr. Lerner says, can push us to under- or overreact: "So we either engage in compulsive hand washing or we do the opposite and act like the germ theory doesn't apply to us." And this anxiety, she says, will mount if we postpone or ignore expert counsel: "Passivity and inaction will make fear grow." So, instead of giving up and saying, "I can't keep my hands off my face," Dr. Lerner suggests we trust our capacity to make necessary changes, recognize where we have agency and take common sense, precautionary measures now. "If you haven't done your best to get a couple of extra weeks' supply of food or medication, do it today. If you feel frozen, ask a buddy to push you to act and help you make wise decisions about how much you need of what."

Connect, connect, connect.

Social distancing and mandates to shelter in place may require us to stay in our homes, but that doesn't mean we have to isolate. "It's essential to stay in communication with family, friends, neighbors and other resources," Dr. Lerner says, "and find ways to keep calm. Use the phone, text, email — all means possible — to stay connected to friends, neighbors, your adult children, anyone who matters to you. Especially those who induce a sense of calm rather than chaos. People need to hear your voice — and vice versa."

Practice self-compassion.

This moment calls on us to not only care for others but to also be gentle with ourselves. "Anxiety and fear," Dr. Lerner reminds us, "are physiological processes that cavort and careen through our bodies and make us miserable. They will subside, only to return

again; they will arrive uninvited for as long as we live. So don't be hard on yourself when you can't shut yourself off from fear and pain — your own and the world's. Fear isn't fun, but it signals that we are fully human.”

Don't skip the self-care.

“Everything that goes under the umbrella of ‘self-care’ is essential right now,” Dr. Lerner says. Slow down, engage in healthy practices and try to sustain regular routines that bring comfort and stability. Therapy, conversation, exercise, yoga, meditation and religious and spiritual practices are good starting points, but she suggests also considering the healing impacts of making art, singing, journaling and being useful to others.

“While we can't drive fear off with a big stick, we can learn ways to calm ourselves down and find a little peace of mind. Action is powerful, even if we start with just one thing.”



Don't let fear and anxiety become pandemics, too.

In these stressful times, it's important to try to manage our own anxiety and do our best not to pass it on to others. But most important, Dr. Lerner says, “we should not let fear lead us into isolation or stop us from acting with clarity, compassion and courage. Terrible things happen, but it is still possible to move forward with love and hope.”

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/smarter-living/coronavirus-anxiety-tips.html>