

COPING WITH THE UNCERTAINTY OF COVID19

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The Covid19 pandemic has pulled the rug out from underneath us, as a society, as an economy, and as people who look after our health as best we can. The world that normally feels reasonably safe and predictable suddenly doesn't feel either safe or predictable anymore.

When we first heard about the Coronavirus, we didn't appreciate how serious it was. We reassured each other that we'd be ok; we live too far north; we're a hardy people; our population is highly dispersed (unlike Italy); no virus could survive the cold here.

Slowly the reality of the threat we faced hit home. Even the most resilient among us felt anxious, depressed, or angry. Not because we were weak; but because we were vulnerable. A crisis like Covid19 makes all of us aware of just how vulnerable we really are.

We are now beginning to grasp just how devastating this virus can be. We are faced with major uncertainties about our personal welfare and the welfare of our loved ones. This pandemic has brought massive financial anxiety and the prospect of extended social isolation to many people. This is hard for the best of us, but particularly frightening for those who are already physically or emotionally vulnerable.

Not knowing what will happen next is hard for us because:

“... uncertainty equals danger. If your brain doesn't know what's around the corner, it can't keep you out of harm's way. It always assumes the worst, over-personalizes threats and jumps to conclusions. And you're hardwired to overestimate threats and underestimate your ability to handle them—all in the name of survival.” (Bryan Robinson, Forbes, March 2020)

Being threatened with Covid19 make us want to look for someone to blame: the Chinese, the Government or at the very least the HSE. “Why can't they move faster?”, “Do more”, “Get Corona Done”, and stop waiting for something bad to happen before making hard decisions.

It's hard to take in all the information coming at us. Our anxiety rises with news of the rising numbers of casualties daily. Media have an important role in presenting updates in a way

that doesn't accelerate our anxiety. We need hard facts, but we also need to feel that they are being given with sensitivity and humanity.

Because we can't bear uncertainty, we will do anything not to feel this way. To take our minds off what might or might not happen, we may fixate on some concrete issue that we can actually do something about. We go shopping, because there are things we 'must have'. Driving around for hours to make sure we have enough toilet rolls is a lot easier than sitting at home with the uncertainty of Corona. Finding and purchasing 'must-have' items brings relief, but it's short-term. Inevitably, our anxiety re-surfaces and we lock on to some new mission – "Do I have enough porridge?"

There are ways to cope when we are stressed that don't involve blaming others or acting compulsively to take our minds off reality. Here are some key coping strategies that may be helpful in surviving this Covid19 pandemic:

- Don't beat yourself up over how you feel, whatever you feel. Be kind to yourself, cut yourself some slack. What we are facing is really hard. It's bound to upset us and hit each of us where we are most vulnerable.
- Buddy up with one or more people you can trust to give you emotional support or practical help, because you're going to need both. In a time when social distancing is the recommended option for health reasons, we can find alternative ways to stay in close contact. Already we are seeing beautiful examples of people (safely) looking out for each other in their local communities. My daughter just texted to say her local restaurant is giving out free starter kits and a recipe for making bread.
- Set one or two goals each day, especially if you're housebound. Focusing on simple goals brings structure to your day. This helps you feel you have some control over your life.
- Don't neglect yourself, stick with your normal daily routines. Stay active, eat well, connect with nature. Think about what life-giving for you, physically, emotionally and spiritually, and make time for these activities.
- Don't believe all you hear. The anxious mind naturally thinks about the most terrifying possibilities and some folk love to exploit this.

Anxiety produces a Fight/Flight reaction that gives us the energy we need to deal with danger. This will not feel comfortable in our bodies (sweaty palms, churning tummy, heavy limbs, raised blood pressure) until we do something; until we recognise and confront the challenges facing us, and channel our energy creatively. It is important to think before we act rather than behaving impulsively. When we act out of fear, we generally make poor decisions. If we can press 'pause' and talk things over with someone we trust, we can find a wise way to respond. It may be something we can do for ourselves; it may be that we can be

the person who steps up and reaches out to someone in need. Action is better than inaction: Action calms us down; inaction locks the symptoms of stress inside our bodies and keeps us stuck.

Talking to someone we trust, someone who can hear us and not judge us can also help enormously. When we can put our distress into words, we see what this crisis is touching in 'me'. Naming our deepest fears brings relief (even if at first we get upset); it also allows us to look at our worries from a different perspective. It may even allow us to laugh at ourselves. Not that we're foolish, but that our fears can easily carry us away and make us want to act irrationally.

Making time and space to share with each other what this crisis means to us personally, is a gift we can immediately give each other.

When I ask myself, "What scares me about Corona?" I realise that I'm worried about losing friends who are still quite young, but whose health is compromised and who are more at risk than most if they contracted the virus. They could die. I also have my own health issues that make it very likely I would suffer with the Coronavirus, and have to isolate myself. In my early childhood, I spent several months behind glass in the Cork Fever Hospital. I think what distresses me most about corona is that I would emotionally relive that trauma.

For someone I spoke to yesterday, her worst fear was that she would lose her granddaughter. I tried pointing out (very gently) that children were perhaps the least at risk in the population - but that didn't help at all. She just said: "I never said this was rational, but it where I go in my head when I think about Corona".

What is it that upsets you the most about this Covid19 pandemic?

When we can bring our personal worries and fears into conversation with others whom we trust, who don't judge us or shame us, we can drop beneath the noise level of our anxious minds and come back to reality. Knowing where we are most vulnerable puts us in a far better place to take care of ourselves.

Psychology has looked at what happens when we are faced with radical existential threats to our lives, such as the crisis we are now immersed in. This aspect of Psychology is called Terror Management Theory. Sociology has explored how we survive mass disasters, and this line of study is known as Disaster Sociology. Both of these disciplines have something to say to us as we face the covid19 pandemic.

Disasters and traumatic events that represent a threat to our lives naturally cause us to move closer to each other. We draw strength from feeling we are part of a community,

especially when we feel we are a valued member of that community. Feeling connected raises our self-esteem, and reduces our anxiety.

Sociologists observed that some of the most catastrophic disasters of the past century lead to a much stronger sense of community. The founder of Disaster Sociology, Enrico Quarantelli, investigated many social disasters including Hiroshima, 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. His overall conclusion was that communities weren't destroyed by these calamities, but rather they pulled together in remarkable ways. Here's what he wrote about Hiroshima:

Within MINUTES of the Hiroshima nuclear blast, survivors engaged in search and rescue, helped one another in whatever ways they could. Within ONE DAY the electric company restored power to most areas, a steel company with only 20% of its staff began operations again, 12 banks opened and started making payments to customers, trolley lines leading into the city were completely cleared and roads were made passable. (Handbook of Disaster Research 2007).

In this country we had our very own 'disaster sociologist' - Peig Sayers. She had the patent on suffering, as she experienced more bereavement than most of us. And she lived in a community who lived at the edge of the world and experienced constant disasters. Peig instilled resilience in her community by telling them stories. Not to entertain them, but to help them see that their suffering was a shared experience, and to help them make sense of their lives. When asked how she survived she wrote,

Ach tá an méid seo agam le rá, go raibh comharsain mhaite agam. Chuidiomar féin le chéile agus ar scáth a chéile a mhaireamar. Gach rud a bhíodh ag teacht dorcha orainn nochtáimis dá chéile é agus chuireadh sin sólas aigne orainn. Ba í an charthanacht an phréamh ba dhaighne a bhí inár gcroí."

"But I have this much to say, that I had good neighbours. We helped each other and lived in the shelter of each other. Everything that was coming dark upon us, we would disclose it to each other, and that would give us consolation of mind. Friendship was the fastest root in our hearts."

A lot of people are going to be hurt by this Covid19 pandemic. People who are self-employed, people whose income stream is entirely dependent on the services they provide. Some may have a financial safety net. Many won't. They live on the little they make. Perhaps those of us who are protected financially need to consider the needs of those without that resource. There are also those people whose needs may be primarily emotional. Living alone, worrying about everything they are hearing, feeling very helpless. We do well to remember them and ask ourselves "Is there is something I can do".

The best antidote for fear is care. We can channel our anxiety into helping to keep alive a sense of community; rather than sitting alone with our worst fears.

Terror Management Theory describes how people behave when circumstances in their lives make them aware of death. It has also found that we draw closer to each other. We put our faith in the community with which we most identify. We behave in a way that makes us feel valued members of that community. This gives us self-esteem.

To survive this pandemic, we are being asked to put our trust in this democracy to which we belong. To believe in what we are doing together, rather than allow ourselves to be consumed by our own personal fears. To open our eyes and see that there are people who are committed to making the informed and careful decisions on our behalf.

But here's the problem: the work of government in a time of great uncertainty can seem boring and tedious. It has none of the pizzazz of someone fighting a fire or stepping up barefisted to take on a bully. Our anxiety may wish for drama at high noon, but what we get at suits on the 6pm news, speaking to us in serious, measured tones. To cope with the terror we are experiencing, we are being asked to trust in science, reason and democracy.

This will allow us to become more aware of the painstaking care that is being taken daily to deal with this crisis on our behalf. We can be thankful for people who keep our communities ticking over; people who turn up every day to test lab samples; who nurse infected patients; who care for people round the clock that depend on them; people who help keep the lights on, stock our shelves and respond in unseen ways to the needs of others.

Conclusion

Covid19 has woken us up to how our behaviour impacts on each other. My behaviour impacts on your life. Your behaviour impacts on mine. Normally, when we hear about some illness we think "This is nothing to do with me; I'm all right Jack". We imagine we're entirely independent people who are free to live our lives as we choose. Covid19 has punctured this particular illusion. Contrary to the mantra "I do my thing, you do yours" our lives are in fact deeply interconnected.

Each of us is indispensable when it comes to resolving this pandemic. Any one of us could be carrying the coronavirus, and pass it on, without even knowing it. We need to be responsible for ourselves but also for each other. It turns out: "I am my brother's keeper". Cleaning our hands and respecting emergency social guidelines is vitally important. We can save each other's lives.

Let's hope that we emerge from this crisis with a heightened awareness of how interdependent we are, how many of us suffer, physically and emotionally, every day, and how much we need each other.

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