



This document covers:

- Understanding human behaviours
- Consequences of panic responses
- Anchoring ourselves in the midst of the storm
- Tips on managing COVID-19-related anxiety

Making sense of what is happening

MCRI & VCGS recognise what a stressful and unsettling time this is for us all, and encourage everyone to stay connected as much as you can through regular team meetings, catch ups and more informal 'coffee conversations' via text, Facetime or WhatsApp.

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Sources: Websites of the Australian Psychological Society & Singapore Psychological Society.

Understanding human behaviours - 'panic is a normal response to emergency'!

A common question we asked ourselves in the last couple of weeks or even months was "why do people react in the way they do?"

As you are aware, our human brains are always ready to act in times of lurking danger. Unlike our hunter gatherers' ancestors who had to fend off predators in the jungles, modern day life brings about its own set of new threats (e.g., terrorism, natural catastrophes, and pandemic outbreaks).

When we encounter or witness an emergency situation, the emotional system of our brain (the amygdala) gets activated together with regions of the cortex (cognitive system) that analyze and interpret behavior. In times of stress and uncertainty, the thinking part of our brain gets overridden by the emotional system, resulting in panic and groupthink behaviour (also termed "herd mentality"). This translates into a phenomenon known as survival mode or fight-or-flight response, which is driven by the need for self-preservation, protection, and safety.

Such primal instincts are activated in our present-day crises. Thus, in this instance, we are hyper-focusing on the virus.

Consequences of panic responses

While our brains react to keep us safe and protected, the resulting panic inadvertently leads to massive consequences in our society.

We have witnessed discriminatory behaviours amongst populations all over the world, as well as unprecedented fights for resources. Tension,

stress, and anxiety are at an all-time high; we worry about our health, our job security, and the larger economy. Panic buying has also led to stocks running out. Consequently, people who are sick have found themselves deprived of essential items like masks and food supplies.

Panic buying further breeds anxiety rather than alleviates it, creating a downward spiral of panic and anxiety. Some even tried to profit from the current crises by stockpiling and selling them at a higher price. Thankfully, some organizations have now started to block black market sales to protect us from suffering from the cost of inflated prices. Still, there are those who are less resourced or more vulnerable left behind by such behaviours. It is comforting to read of recent news where major supermarkets had taken measures to cater to the needs of the vulnerable populations by holding specific shopping hours for the elderly and differently abled persons. Still, there is much more to be done to bring less fortunate others along with us in times of crisis.

Anchoring ourselves in the midst of the storm...

Interestingly, even though we are hardwired for self-preservation, research has shown that in times of crises, people are also capable of responding in prosocial ways.

Just a week ago, a friend sent me a link sharing accounts on how some people were putting out toilet rolls in some parts of Richmond and Northcote for those who are vulnerable and less resourced - a behavior that seems counter intuitive to self-preservation but has the ability to calm my soul almost instantaneously. Hopefully, our social media will publish more of such acts of kindness and community spirit as more people rise to the occasion to support each other in the community.

For now, it is a good time for us to pause and collectively reflect on how we can find ways to manage our fight-or-flight responses.

I have included below a summary of useful tips shared by various psychological resources.

1. Acknowledge our common vulnerability

To a great extent, Staff at MCRI have greater exposure to experiencing human vulnerability than the general population out there. Nonetheless, it is still helpful during such difficult times to acknowledge that all humans struggle with fear to varying degrees. Validating and acknowledging our fears or those of others, knowing that we may get triggered by each other is a first step to managing our anxieties.

Name the fear and pause to consider our responses. Resource-sharing could unite rather than divide our community in this time of need.

2. Respect each other

As this would be a hot topic, be assertive with your feelings of discomfort or anxiety should this topic be too difficult for you. Also notice if this topic escalates fear and anxiety in your friends and family. Listen and respect if they prefer not to engage in this.

3. Exercise individual responsibility. Stay in control by taking reasonable precautions and buy as you need.

Be proactive by following basic hygiene principles (protective measures as per WHO) to keep yourself and others around you safe.

It is not necessary to stockpile on food and other essential items as this breeds undue panic. Hoarding necessities also prevents others from attaining them, especially those who may need it more than you do. This creates huge inconvenience to others, and in turn, promotes a climate of hostility. As we are doing our part, let's try to withhold judgement on others as we do not know their family's circumstances and the unique needs of each household.

Focus on doing our part for ourselves and our community. Remember, if we are not "part of the solution, then we are part of the problem"! Let's not underestimate the impact of our individual efforts on the overall community.

5. Limit the time of your research and media exposure. Expand your source of information and entertainment and do something that makes you feel positive or in control.

The virus situation would be on major headlines. Be intentional with your choice of information and entertainment rather than be consumed by inaccurate updates and precautions borne largely by fear and panic.

Limit the time you are exposed to news on Covid-19 to help you contain your anxiety. Engage in activities that make you feel positive. Appropriate dose of humour and gratitude practice can help us focus on what we have now when we have done what we can to prepare for what may come tomorrow. Also refer to point 7 below on maintaining social connections.

7. Physical distancing, not social isolation. Regain a sense of connectedness and control in your daily lives.

Please remember that practicing social/physical distancing is different from socially isolating ourselves.

Social isolation is detrimental to our emotional and psychological wellbeing. In times of stress and anxiety, it is important for us to continue to remain connected and provide support for one another. Use your creativity and modern technology to connect with your loved ones.

If you are home-bound or had to cancel some outings or activities, consider other options that can still provide you and your family with the similar levels of joy and relaxation. Try practicing yoga or engage in HIIT workouts at home.

Some psychologist colleagues have come up with some great suggestions, such as, creating pop up creative studios, paint, draw, colour in, crochet granny squares, make something for those in the hospitals or affected individuals, send snail mails or postcards to people, cook, take photographs of ourselves and write some encouraging text over them and send to friends to uplift them. Start a journal – start a gratitude diary, keep inspiring quotes, write a story, draw a comic strip or write that blog or novel that you always wanted to start but has no time to do so due to your busy socializing schedules! You get the gist! ~ The sky's the limit!

4. The impact of the "blaming" behaviour.

Some of you may be tempted to comment on Facebook or other social media platforms to air your grievances. However, do pause to think about how this generates additional stress and tension both within your social circle and the larger society. We could seek to understand different perspectives and choices, rather than engage in the blame game.

6. Check the facts and watch out for fake news.

Turn to reliable sources of information such as the [Australian Government's health alert](#), MCRI intranet [Coronavirus information and updates](#) or other trusted organizations such as the [World Health Organization](#). Fact-checking could help to ground us, especially when we feel overwhelmed with inconsistencies in the news.

8. Seek professional help if fear and anxiety is hindering your daily functioning.

I hope that by now, you are aware that you can always drop me an email if you like a chat. We can meet face to face, over the phone or through a videoconferencing facility (e.g., Zoom). If you like to speak to someone outside of RCH, there are also external EAP services or external counsellors/psychologists whom you can access through a Mental Health Care Plan via your GP.

In addition, with effect from 13 March 2020, the Federal government has announced the inclusion of funding of a new Medicare service for people in home isolation or quarantine as a result of Covid-19 or vulnerable groups (more details in the web link below) to receive bulk-billed telehealth consultations and services. 'Telehealth attendance' can include either video-conferencing or phone attendance. This applies to services from GPs, Specialist, Consulting physicians and psychiatrists, Nurse practitioners as well as mental health professionals.

More details are available here:
<http://www.mbsonline.gov.au/internet/mbsonline/publishing.nsf/Content/news-2020-03-01-latest-news-March>



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She trained in Australia and has more than 10 years of experience providing psychological assessment and therapies for a broad range of counselling and mental health issues.

Soak Mun Lee currently works with children, adolescents, and adults both individually and in groups.



Professor Vicki Anderson

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More information

Australian Government Department of Health - The Department of Health has developed a collection of resources for the general public, health professionals and industry about coronavirus (COVID-19), including translated resources. <https://bit.ly/3800wHe>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides reliable information about the coronavirus such as its symptoms, steps you can take to protect yourself, and what to do if you are affected. <https://bit.ly/39MEml8>

World Health Organization - The World Health Organization provides information and guidance regarding the current outbreak of coronavirus disease: <https://bit.ly/3cQUwCw>

Tips for coping with Coronavirus Anxiety: <https://www.psychology.org.au/getmedia/38073179-4701-48bd-afd9-988c560ee2f9/20APS-IS-COVID-19-P1.pdf>

Newly announced \$2.4 Billion health plan to fight COVID-19: <http://www.mbsonline.gov.au/internet/mbsonline/publishing.nsf/Content/news-2020-03-01-latest-news-March>

