



CORONAVIRUS: PSYCHOLOGICAL VADEMECUM FOR CITIZENS

How fears can turn into panic and how to protect yourself with proper behavior, correct beliefs and well-founded emotions.

This short vademecum is not meant to be exhaustive or to substitute professional help. Rather, it is a contribution which aims to better orient our thoughts, emotions and behavior - both individual and collective - in the face of the Covid-19 issue. We hope this short reading will be useful to you. David Lazzari - CNOP Chairman - 26th February 2020



Fear is a powerful and useful emotion. It has been selected from the evolution of the human species to prevent dangers, and it is therefore instrumental to avoid them. Fear works well if it is proportionate to dangers. This was the case as long as people had first-hand experience of the dangers, and they voluntarily decided whether to face them or not. Today, many dangers do not depend on our experiences. We learn about dangers because the media cover them, and messages which circulate on the web exaggerate dangers as well.

As a result, fear becomes exaggerated if compared to the objective risks arising from the frequency of the dangers. In these cases, fear turns into panic and ends up causing damages. For instance, after 9/11 many Americans panicked about catching flights, and many of them decided to travel by car.

In the period thereafter, the number of people who died on the roads soon doubled the number of people traveling on 9/11 flights hijacked by terrorists. The panic had resulted in counterproductive individual choices that, when aggregated, became collective damage.

Fear takes the shape of unknown, rare and new phenomena, and the diffusion of the Coronavirus has precisely these characteristics. To date, deaths from non-Coronavirus flu are much more frequent. Why aren't we afraid of these deaths? Because we are accustomed to known forms of flu, up to the fact that many Italians even ignore the preventive benefits of vaccines.

The mechanism is the same of the plane/car case: on the one hand we have the fear of flying by plane, and on the other hand the choice of driving a car under our control. To avoid the diffusion of disproportionate fears, which might create forms of individual anxiety and collective panic, we propose an "anti-panic decalogue". Some "key takeaways" that can help avoiding two possible mistakes: overestimation or underestimation of the problem.

Anti-panic decalogue

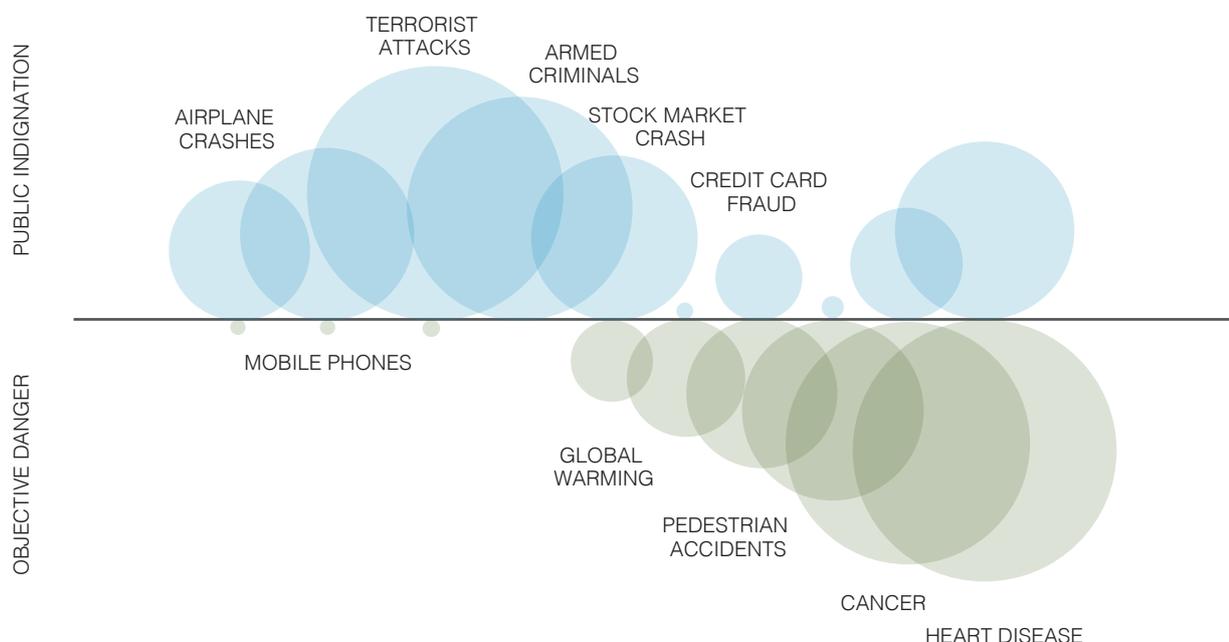
1 Stick to the facts, i.e. the objective danger.

The Coronavirus is a contagious virus, however as pointed out by a WHO source, out of 100 people who get sick, 80 recover spontaneously, 15 present problems manageable by healthcare system. Only 5 out of 100 have more serious problems, and among these the number of deaths is about 2.5, generally involving patients with pre-existing relevant diseases

2 Do not confuse a single cause with a collateral damage

Many deaths are not directly and straightforwardly caused by the action of the coronavirus, as it happened and it is happening in flu forms that involve much more deaths. So far in the world, coronavirus-related deaths are estimated to be a hundred times fewer than those caused by the common flu every year. And yet, this 1% is perceived differently from "normal deaths". Until now, nobody was concerned about a strong annual variability because all deaths were attributed to "normal" flu: in the last flu season, 34,200 Americans passed away, and the year before 61,099.

- ③ *If panic becomes collective, many individuals feel anxious and they want to act to lower their anxiety. This can generate stress and irrational and unproductive behavior.*
- ④ *The more people panic, the less they pay attention to objective data. Accordingly, judgement capacity may weaken.*
- ⑤ *In order to do something, we often end up doing the wrong thing. This means we ignore simple, apparently trivial, very effective protective actions (see list below).*
- ⑥ *Generally speaking, too many emotions prevent correct reasoning and hinder the ability to see things in a right and wider perspective, i.e. we tend to widen the space-time approach with which we examine phenomena.*
- ⑦ *It is difficult to counter emotions with rationale reasoning, but we should try to rely on objective data. The fundamental rule is to balance fear and objective risk.*
- ⑧ *This simple figure allows to locate the fear of the coronavirus in perspective.*



At the top, the figure shows the dangers people are more afraid of than they normally should be. In these cases, public outrage can cause panic and, consequently, disproportionate and harmful anxieties. In the lower part, on the contrary, we can find the dangers we are accustomed to, and which do not cause fear. The disproportion between the areas of the two circles shows how much difference there is between subjective fears and objective dangers.

(Source: Paolo Legrenzi, A tu per tu con le nostre paure. Convivere con la vulnerabilità, Il Mulino, 2019).

- ⑨ *The figure offers an aggregate description of fears: public indignation enhanced by the media accentuates some fears, such as those related to terrorist attacks and armed criminals. This fact leads us to underestimate other objective dangers to which we are accustomed. The characteristics of coronavirus panic bring this phenomenon closer to the sudden and impressive phenomena that induce panic by raising public indignation.*
- ⑩ *We are concerned about our own and our loved ones vulnerability. That's why we try to make people we care invulnerable. However, the obsessive search for invulnerability is counter-productive, because it makes us excessively fearful. In addition, we become unable to face future challenges because we over concentrate on ourselves.*

Three good practices for dealing with the coronavirus

1 **Avoiding compulsive search for information**

We have seen that it is normal and functional to be afraid of a new risk, such as the coronavirus disease. Being anxious, looking for reassurance, continuously checking information: all of these are understandable and common behaviors on these days. Yet, fear can be reduced if people reflect carefully on their relationship with objective dangers in order to clearly know what happens and what to do.

2 **Using and disseminating reliable information sources**

It's good to stick to what's known and documented. Therefore: rely **ONLY** on official, updated and accredited information sources.

- Ministry of Health: <http://www.salute.gov.it/nuovocoronavirus>
- Higher Institute of Health: <https://www.epicentro.iss.it/coronavirus/>

The Ministry of Health, the Civil Protection, and the National and Regional Healthcare System have experienced and skilled specialists who work together to deal with the current situation and its developments with great rigor, attention and available resources.

3 **This is a collective, not a personal phenomenon**

Coronavirus is not a phenomenon that affects single individuals. As with vaccines, we must protect ourselves as a responsible community. The media produce information that can create distorting effects. Media focus on news in rapid and disturbing sequence on individual cases, rather than on the overall and objective data of the phenomenon. It is important to take this effect into account.

After thoughts and emotions, we need behaviors

The Higher Institute of Health indicates simple individual preventive actions (<https://www.epicentro.iss.it/coronavirus/>). Here they are enlisted:

- Avoid close contact with people suffering from acute respiratory infections.
- Washing hands and disinfection are the key to prevent infection.
- Wash your hands often and thoroughly with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, down to the wrists. If soap and water are not available, you can also use an alcohol-based hand disinfectant with at least 60% alcohol.
- The virus enters the body through the eyes, nose and mouth, so avoid touching them with unwashed hands.
- Cover your mouth and nose if you sneeze or cough; use disposable handkerchiefs.
- Use the mask only if you suspect that you are ill or if you look after sick people.
- Do not take antiviral drugs or antibiotics unless prescribed by your GP.
- Contact the 1500 free of charge number if you have been back from China for less than 14 days and you have fever or cough.
- If you are sick and you present symptoms compatible with the Coronavirus, contact your GP or 118, without going directly to the clinic or emergency room (to reduce any risk of infection to third parties or healthcare staff).
- Strictly respect only the official measures and indications of the Public Health Authorities: they represent a precious protection for everyone.

A regular use of these elementary actions significantly reduces the risk of contagion for yourself, for those close to you and for the community as a whole.

Which news to care for in the "information fog"

It has been called "infodemia" the contagion and the diffusion of the news: watching the TV, opening newspapers or going online you are flooded with all kinds of information about the Coronavirus. Real experts and fake experts, improvised specialists, people who report the "heard" say or the "heard" read. In this field, reasoning with "popular sense" leads often to wrong conclusions.

A state of "permanent psychological alarm" that results in "public indignation" should be blocked or ignored. This tends to increase the perception of risks, and people are desperate looking for more reassuring information. The media's aim, however, is to attract attention and expose users mostly to alarming reports, then increasing the disproportion between objective dangers and personal fears.

Conclusion: reduce overexposure to media information. The simple information above is sufficient. Once you have the basic information about what is happening and what to do, you can simply check the updates on the reliable sources mentioned above.

This gives you all the information you need to protect yourself, without being overwhelmed by an uninterrupted stream of "anxiety alarms". It is good to protect children as well. If they interrogate us, we will always be available to talk calmly about what they may have heard. It's better not to expose them to alarming information.

Act collectively for a collective phenomenon

Even if you have a correct idea of the phenomenon and you do not feel any unfounded fear, it is good helping others by telling them in simple words our decalogue and the recommendations listed here.

That is, despite the public outrage and panic caused by many traditional and social media, you have the opportunity to serve as force for good. How? By providing the simple information mentioned above and by thinking calmly and patiently instead of ignoring or, worse, despising those who do not know and refuse to think.

One must remember Alessandro Manzoni famous words in relation to the plague of Milan in the XVII century: "The good sense still existed; but it was kept concealed, for fear of the popular sense". We are going to undermine popular sense: unlike Manzoni, with science and rationality rather than good sense. Psychology allows us to understand in a rational way even what is not presented as such: something needs to be understood and respected.

Actions pursued in an informed and responsible way increase the likelihood to protect our community and each one of us.

Do not be ashamed to ask for help

If you think your fear and anxiety are excessive and they create discomfort, don't be afraid to talk about it and ask a professional for help. Psychologists know these problems and can help you.

We all may need, in certain moments or situations, advice and support. That could help to get clearer ideas about what we feel and, and to better manage our emotions. This should not make us feel "weak".

Those who ask for help are not weak: they try to increase their own resources and those of their loved ones.

(We thank Prof. Paolo Legrenzi, professor emeritus of psychology at Ca' Foscari University in Venice and expert in psychology of emotions and decisions for the collaboration).