



Anxiety!

(A Response to COVID-19)

Living with pandemic and the death of a loved one

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"Anxiety was born in the very same moment as mankind. And since we will never be able to master it, we will have to learn to live with it—just as we have learned to live with storms. Paulo Coelho

Paulo Coelho's quote suggests that a certain degree of anxiety has been part of the human condition since we homo sapiens took our first tentative steps out onto the savannah roughly 300,000 years ago. At the time, we shared the same concern of every other species, our focus was on finding something to eat, and staying vigilant so that we and our offspring didn't get eaten. However, the one thing that seems to distinguish us from everything else that walks, slithers, flies, or swims, is that the spark of human consciousness also makes us prone to worry.

Fear is defined as the emotional response to a real or perceived immediate threat, (for example, the subtle outline of a lion in the tall grass) whereas **anxiety** or **worry** is anticipation of an imagined or real future threat. In his book, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*, the neurobiologist, Dr. Robert Sapolsky, explains that the short-term stress response, fear, is a survival mechanism. Fear is not a bad thing, it is a normal, instinctual reflex to living in a dangerous world. Although it may seem counterintuitive, the first response to danger is actually, **freeze**. The brains of our tiny and vulnerable mammalian ancestors must have figured out that if they stayed very, very, still, maybe that

ferocious-looking creature passing by wouldn't notice them. However, up through the present moment, when it becomes clear that the freeze strategy isn't working we are left with two fundamental options, **fight** or **flight**. The difference between us and the zebra is that once she realizes that lion is no longer a threat, she returns to grazing. Humans on the other hand, can get stuck in a self-perpetuating loop of obsessive thoughts and emotions long after any real or perceived immediate danger has faded into the shadows.

Admittedly, these are anxious times, and given the state of our world today, a certain degree of fear and anxiety is appropriate for our individual and collective survival. During this pandemic, we should be concerned about personal safety and public health. We should all be concerned about the causes and consequences of racial injustice and inequality. We should be concerned about climate change, economic insecurity, and global political instability. To our advantage, the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that makes us most human, allows us to think through complex situations as well as regulate the emotional part of our brains. Because we are thinking animals we can

move from the instinctual **freeze-fight-flight** response to **figure out** how to bring about change. While the challenges we face are many, I am certain that some really smart and emotionally intelligent people are working hard to find solutions to address these problems.

In addition to all the other life stressors we are collectively dealing with, it is reasonable to assume that because you are also grieving, you may be particularly susceptible to being overwhelmed right now. Imagine you have a stress-filled glass that is already half-full with grief. Pour in a little Corona-phobia, some apprehension over the start of the school year, unease over your family's financial or living situation, a growing angst about local, national, and world events, and finally a mixture of everything else you happen to be dealing with, and pretty soon your anxiety is spilling over onto the floor. To complicate matters even more, the person who died was often a primary source of support. They may have been great at making rational decisions or was the one person who was able to help you calm down. Many of my clients have said, "Just having him/her in the world made me feel safe." So, if you are struggling with anxiety, it's no wonder you are having trouble coping right now.

Through no fault of your own, several situational or environmental factors can make a person prone to worry. Being born into a family with unreliable or inconstant parenting or growing up in or exposure to traumatic events are just two examples. There is also research in the relatively new field of epigenetics, that suggests the stress reaction to traumatic experiences can possibly be passed down to subsequent generations. The research does not suggest that the genes themselves are damaged, as if the trauma

created a permanent genetic mutation, but instead the markers or triggers that switch certain genes on or off become more sensitive to dangerous or life-threatening events. Dr. Rachel Yehuda, who is the Director of the Traumatic Stress Studies Division of Mount Sinai School of Medicine and works with the adult children of Holocaust survivors, suggests that these trauma-influenced markers should not be seen as damaged or impaired, but actually a healthy, adaptive evolutionary response. Theoretically, the offspring of those who have a heightened awareness of potentially dangerous situations would be more likely to survive if their response is quicker than those who don't have the same rapid-firing switches to respond to life-threatening conditions. Finally, I'd like to also point out that anxiety, as described in the diagnostic manual psychiatrists use to diagnose it, takes on many different forms. Persons living with anxiety ranges from those struggling with generalized anxiety disorder, phobias, (fears of specific animals, objects, or situations) as a symptom of some other mental disorder, and as a side effect caused by certain types of drugs and prescription medications. Although the causes of anxiety are many, psychologists are quick to point out that anxiety is one of the most treatable of all the mental health conditions. Understanding it better is an important first step to learning how to live with it.

The Perfect Storm

On October 30, 1991, the concurrence of a number of rare meteorological factors created a phenomenon in the northern Atlantic that's described as, "The perfect storm." Unusually huge waves battered the East Coast for several days resulting in millions of dollars in damage and at least one fishing boat, the *Andrea Gail*, and her crew being lost at sea.

As if what I have described isn't enough to stir-up tsunami-sized waves of grief, there is another element contributing to the anxiety we are currently facing that usually lays dormant just below the surface of human conscious awareness.

It's been suggested that human beings are the only animals who are aware of their own mortality. While I can't speak for any other creature on the planet, developmentally, human children up through the age of nine years old gradually become aware of the permanence and universality of death. From then on, we spend most of our days distracted by other pursuits and avoiding the topic of death as best we can. We might see fictional characters die in the movies, laugh at a ghoulish zombie costume on Halloween, and see news stories about tragedies half-a-world away; but for the most part, advances in modern medicine, governmental safety regulations, and improvements in public health have all helped to push death away from our everyday consciousness's. Just 100 years ago death was a more common occurrence. In 1920, at the end of the Spanish Flu pandemic, a child born in the United States had an average life expectancy of around 54 years. For a child born in 2020, the average life expectancy is around 79 years, with some variability related to race, gender, and economic insecurity. These days, it's only when you are waiting for results of a medical test, a friend has a car accident, or a loved one dies, that we can no longer look away from the reality that our days on the planet are finite.

What the COVID-19 pandemic has done is raise our anxiety about the fragility of life to the surface. Now, something as mundane as a visit to the supermarket or the slightest hint of a scratchy-throat or sneeze can whip-up a tropical storm of

fear and anxiety that in the space of a synapse wreaks havoc to our emotional wellbeing. Just as governments were initially unprepared to address the virus, many individuals have found themselves psychologically unprepared to confront the "big questions" about meaning and suffering that this virus has carried along in its invisible wake.

Dr. Paul Wong, known for his integration of the fields of existential and positive psychology, suggests there are six big questions, or recurrent themes when we humans find ourselves challenged by threats to our assumptive world and way of life. **1. Death:** "What is the point of striving if life is so short?" **2. Isolation:** "How will I survive, cut-off from the people I love and all alone?" **3. Freedom:** "What personal freedoms am I willing to give up in order to live in community?" **4. Identity:** "Who am I now?" **5. Happiness:** "Where can I find pleasure and joy in life again?" **6. Meaning and Purpose:** "What's the point or what should I do with my life after loss?" While many may be inclined to fall into despair, Wong remains optimistic. It takes no small amount of courage and effort to find satisfying answers to these fundamental questions. However, he believes we have the capacity within us to find our way into a brighter day. I do as well.



Dr. Viktor Frankl, a holocaust survivor, existential thinker, and the author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, came to the conclusion during one of the darkest moments in human history, that although we may not be able to avoid suffering in this life, we can choose how we respond to it, find meaning in it, and move forward with a renewed sense of purpose.

I do not claim that I have any of the answers, but working as a hospice grief counselor for the past fifteen years I have become well acquainted with these questions. And I can assure you that you are not alone if you have lost sleep over any one of them. I can also say from experience that exploring these big questions will go a long way in helping you calm the storms of grief and anxiety. Every philosophical and religious belief system offers a response to these questions, you just have to do your homework and figure out which one seems the most reasonable to you.

Humanity has dealt with difficult times in the past, and at some point in the future, our current situation will become a part of our collective history. In the meantime, on an individual level, we are left to figure out how to live in the present moment and live with the dark clouds looming over the horizon.

The following are some tried and true ways to reduce anxiety:

- *Observe physical distancing guidelines**
- *Limit exposure to traumatizing news**
- *Exercise regularly and eat a healthy diet**
- *Get the right amount of sleep**
- *Learn relaxation and breathing techniques**

***Engage in prayer and meditation**

***Read for pleasure**

***Express yourself through the creative arts**

***Spend time in natural environments**

***Consult with your doctor about anxiety-reducing medication**

***Maintain a sense of perspective and humor**

***Engage with friends and family by telephone, digital formats, or social media**

***Be intentional about exploring existential questions.**

Notes:

Sapolsky, R. (2004). *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers: The Acclaimed Guide to Stress, Stress-related Diseases, and Coping*. (3rd Edition). New York: St Martin's Griffin.

To find out more about epigenetics read, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190326-what-is-epigenetics>, accessed 8/21/2020.

The *Perfect Storm* (2000). The dramatic retelling of the *Andrea Gail* was made into a movie starring George Clooney and Mark Wahlberg. The movie is based on a book by the same name written by Sebastian Junger (1997).

<https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/100-years-ago-today-1920>, accessed August 28, 2020.

Frankl, V. (2006). *Man's Search for Meaning: Forward by Kushner, H.* (1st Edition). New York: Beacon Press. Considered one of the ten most influential books in America by the Library of Congress/Book-of-the-Month Club "Survey of Lifetime Readers."