

Fear No Evil: COVID-19 Driven Anxiety

by Tony Pacione

The New Normal

Not too many things in our lives motivate us to change our behavior like fear. I was in a grocery store early on a Sunday morning after the Illinois Governor issued a “Shelter in Place Order.” The store was not as crowded as it was only a week or two earlier. Some people wore PPEs as they quietly, orderly and deliberately shopped while keeping their social distance. Just a week or so earlier the same store was a mass of confusion, anxiety and worse, as common items like toilet paper, soap and hand sanitizer flew off the shelves at speeds approaching that of light (the fastest known quantity in the universe).

Fear and anxiety, driven by the uncertainty of a new pandemic, seemingly changed my world and my own behavior in the course of a few days. I no longer saw my neighbors, acquaintances, or colleagues as supportive and friendly souls who share my daily world, but as potential carriers of a deadly disease; and I’m certain they viewed me in the same light.

What drives me and others I know as stable, rational denizens of my sphere to act in this manner? The straightforward answer is a well-researched and predictable concept named the “loss aversion effect” (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). The effect has shown people respond to potential losses twice as much emotionally as we do to potential gains. The fear that your daily lives, health and happiness can be swept away in a matter of days or a couple of weeks is strong enough to change how we think and behave. In other words, feelings about losing something (money, health, freedom of movement, etc.) are stronger than feelings about gaining the same thing. It’s a powerful bias that is summed up as “potential losses loom larger than potential gains.”

Certainly, the loss aversion effect does produce helpful and positive change in this current pandemic: We wash our hands more often, we are careful about where we go, or what we touch, and we have increased our mindfulness monitoring of potential for flu like symptoms. I was amazed at my 30 year old millennial son when he turned down an invitation for a home cooked meal by his mother, stating he was at a crowded bar on St Patty’s day celebrating, and he should not see his ‘elder’ parents for at least two weeks. How thoughtful I mused!

Many years ago, when I was an undergraduate student, a wise person once said to “act on your hopes and not on your fears.” The loss aversion effect tricks us into acting “on our worst fears.” My belief is this: Fear and anxiety are often driven by two things a) uncertainty and b) using availability as a heuristic, or short cut in our thinking, and in making predictions of future events.

The Role of Uncertainty in Anxiety

Consider many of the situations in your life that are associated with anxiety. There often exist elements of uncertainty in these circumstances, as with the current pandemic. Questions abound like “will I or my family get stricken with the disease and how severely? What will happen to my law practice, my income, or my investments in an unstable stock market? Will my life and lively hood return to ‘normalcy?’” I believe there is a simple correlation between uncertainty and anxiety. We tend to conflate high salient emotions (like fear) with reality. Once the fear of uncertainty starts, we unwittingly practice becoming more anxious with each passing day. Fear and anxiety are contagious and self-supporting, and the more we and others practice it, the better we become at producing it.

We can employ strategies to manage and decrease uncertainty in reasonable ways. The Governor and public health officials remind us frequently during this pandemic of actions to be taken that reduce the risk of becoming infected, but also in reducing uncertainty: washing your hands frequently, social distancing, and other practices that have been demonstrated to lower risk and uncertainty.

The Role of Mental Heuristics in Anxiety

Often media reports are presented over and over by different sources until they become very “available” to us in our thinking on a daily basis. This in large part generates the heuristic effect of using highly charged emotional states as mental shortcuts in making quick decisions (e.g., “I need 400 rolls of toilet paper stat!”). If we see others panicking and making quick decisions, we too will be less likely to take the time to consider the long-term consequences of quick and emotionally driven decisions.

Another way our mind and thinking generates quick emotional decision is through the formation of mental images or “pictures” we develop in our thoughts, which are associated with strong emotions like fear or anger. It has been demonstrated our thoughts are constructed from mental images, which are associated with positive or negative emotions that then influence future perceptions of events (Damasio, 1996). When I think of myself or a loved one becoming stricken by COVID-19, I have a mental image of myself or one of my sons lying in a crowded hospital ward attached to a ventilator and unable to have visitors. This image generates immediate and strong fear.

Having fearful images constantly available to us (media images of overcrowded hospitals with the very sick and dying) tend to confuse the “possibility” of a bad outcome that may occur, with the “probability” that it will occur. It’s also important to remember we often can survive bad outcomes. All we need is a healthy, flexible mindset and good support, and we can overcome a deleterious outcome.

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Strategies to Mitigate Our Thoughts and Emotions in Uncertain Times

Individuals may develop a habit of practicing anxiety laden thoughts or fear until they get very accomplished at generating them. To counter this effect, they need to spend an equal amount of time practicing non-anxious or relaxing thoughts. The following link is to LAP’s website where you can download a clinical tool to help develop the “relaxation response:” <https://illinoislap.org/mental-health-resources/mental-health-videos/>.

This type of “mindful meditation” can help stimulate the longest nerve in the human body: the Vagus Nerve Complex (vagus meaning “wanderer” in Latin because it wanders throughout your upper torso). This nerve signal pathway only travels in one direction—from the diaphragm up to the brain. This deep and relaxed breathing meditation can stimulate the vagus nerve, sending a calming signal to the brain. Research has demonstrated a positive feedback loop between vagal stimulation, positive emotions, and good physical health (Bajbouj et al, 2010). Try it!

The other method for helping to remove high salient emotion and quick decision making is by challenging your automatic and quick emotional thoughts. I have developed this method and used it successfully with many attorneys over the last decade. I refer to it as ICE.

I = Identify the Thought

C = Challenge the Thought

E = Evaluate the Thought

The first step is to identify a thought that keeps reoccurring and is associated with strong emotions. For example:

I-“My practice will suffer irreparable harm from the pandemic.”

The next step is to rate how strongly you believe this thought to be true: 75%.

C-Now challenge the thought, like any good attorney would do: list the evidence for the thought being “mostly true” and the evidence “against the thought being mostly true.”

Evidence - thought being mostly true	Evidence - thought mostly not true
this pandemic is creating a recession	I did survive the 2008 recession
it will affect millions of Americans	the State is taking steps to limit the spread
many court functions are now closed	The courts will re-open at some point
I can get sick	I can take precautions to limit my exposure
my clients will get sick or can't afford me	many clients will still need me, and I will still get new clients

E- Now re-evaluate the original thought

a) Now re-rate how strongly you believe this thought to be mostly true: 45%.

b) How would you re-word the original thought to make it more truthful/evidenced based? "Like most businesses and people, I will suffer some economic hardship, but with support and hard work I will most likely survive as I've done before."

During this time of great fear and uncertainty you can help to more effectively manage your thinking and emotions by understanding how uncertainty, fear, and emotional decisions can create a quickly descending spiral of anxiety and despair.

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