

Pandemic Anxiety 101

by Imogen Wall March 23rd, 2020

So... my goodness. A couple of days ago, I threw out an off-the-cuff post on aid worker tips for surviving lockdown and quarantine. Today I've woken up to find it's been reshared thousands of times. I'm getting comments from strangers around the world, messages of thanks, even requests to translate it. If you'll forgive the expression, it appears to have... gone viral. The overwhelming reason it seems to have struck a chord is that it talked about how we're all feeling a bit wobbly. It sounds like there are an awful lot of people having reactions they don't really understand. So today I thought I'd write a short follow up with my mental health first aider/therapist hat on. Ladies and gents, this is Pandemic Anxiety 101. (NB for those asked for more lockdown tales, I'll get to those in coming days).

IN CRISES, WE START DOING WEIRD STUFF: Over the last week I have struggled to sleep, stayed up late into the night reading endless news articles, bought pasta I don't even like very much, got angry with my mum for not staying home. My spelling is a disaster and I'm definitely drinking more. I've been a bit teary, and all I really want to eat is cake, cake and more cake. From what I got back from my post yesterday, I'm not alone.

If you're having a wobble, you may also have noticed all sorts of weird stuff going on. Are you arguing more, talking faster, struggling to sleep, restless, desperate for information? Or are you teary and overwhelmed, perhaps feeling a bit sick? Struggling to make decisions? Just want to stay in bed? Tummy upsets? Having palpitations, butterflies, headaches? Ranting, picking fights or getting into arguments? Laughing unexpectedly or saying random, inappropriate things? Developing Very Strong Opinions on epidemiology overnight? Or have you just completely gone to ground?

If you are feeling any of these things: good news! You are not going mad. And you are 100% not alone. You are, in fact completely normal: a fully emotionally functional human being. Congratulations! Why? I'll explain: take a seat and put the kettle on.

WE ARE LIVING IN TURBO-ANXIOUS TIMES: Well, no kidding. We're in the middle of an unprecedented crisis that has showed up unexpectedly (they do that) and which presents a mortal threat to ourselves, our loved ones and our way of life. It's terrifying and it's getting worse and it makes us feel totally out of control. And this is on top of anything else we have going on.

HERE'S THE SCIENCE BIT: When we are exposed to threats and need to deal with them, our brain springs into action. Specifically a tiny, innocent-looking thing buried behind your ear called the amygdala (fun fact: it's the size and shape of an almond). It's the bit in charge when we are frightened and right now, it's in full tin-hat klaxon mode. Unfortunately, it's also very ancient bit of kit. It came into being when threats basically consisted of being eaten by large scary animals like bears. You know that thing about when you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail? Well, to the amygdala, everything looks like a bear. It's also pretty basic, so it really only has two settings. They are no bear :) and BEAR!!!

SETTING: BEAR!!! Because all threats look like a bear to the amygdala, it preps you accordingly. There are really only two reactions to a bear about to eat you: fight it, or run away really fast. So this is what the body gets you ready to do. It's called the Fight or Flight response (there's also freeze, meaning you just get paralysed). It does this by flooding your body with chemicals like cortisol, and adrenaline. Your heart rate goes up, you feel super alert, your breathing goes shallow, your muscles are ready for action. These chemicals are also largely responsible for the huge range of other cognitive/physical/emotional reactions in my intro. In group fear situation like a pandemic, this tends to happen whether you think you're scared or not - anxiety is even more infectious than COVID. Your body reacts even if your conscious mind doesn't.

BEAR V VIRUS: Obviously this is all great if you really are running away from a bear. But we're now in a situation where we're being asked to do the EXACT OPPOSITE of running away. We are being told to sit tight. Literally stay still. Process large amounts of information, make complicated and life changing decisions, and stay calm. All while a bit of your brain is running around yelling BEAR!!! BEAR!!! BEAR!!! This isn't easy. The result is an awful lot of stress and anxiety. And if you're anything like me, you end up feeling really overwhelmed and having all sorts of reactions.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS: Anxiety isn't just mental – it's also physical, cognitive and behavioural. You will notice all kinds of things: stomach upsets, headaches, insomnia, changes to eating, changes to the way you talk. It's also cognitive: it's very difficult to think straight when you've got the BEAR!!! BEAR!!! BEAR!!! thing going on – so we also become very bad at making decisions, absorbing information and generally thinking rationally. Which is EXACTLY what we need to do.

SO WHAT TO DO: well, the good news is it is possible to calm down. We can turn the amygdala from BEAR!!! to NO BEAR 😊, and not just by distracting it with cake and tea. Here are some solid, scientifically proven things you can do.

BREATHE: It's so basic, but breathing exercises are basically magic. They work in minutes and you can do them anywhere. They work because of all the physical reactions the amygdala triggers, rapid breathing is the only one over which we have conscious control. Control your breathing and you are basically telling your body: it's OK. There is no bear. Your body will then start to dial down the adrenaline and cortisol and all the other reactions will slow to a halt. How to control your breathing? It's easy – and if you want help just put "two minute breathe bubble" in into Youtube. The golden rules are these:

- In through the nose, out through the mouth. SLOWLY
- Make the outbreath longer than the inbreath – imagine there's a candle in front of you and it mustn't go out
- Breathe from the tummy not chest – really make your tummy go out when breathing in.
- Do it for two minutes - time yourself - and see how you feel

Seriously, try it – this technique is used by everyone from top athletes to the US military to help stay in control while under stress. There are all sorts of versions – from yogic breathing to box breathing to 4-7-8. Google them, mess around, figure out what works for you.

CALL A FRIEND: Don't suffer alone. Call a mate - someone who'll listen while you have a bit of a rant, or a cry, or a general wobble. Someone you can trust not to judge you and who'll just sympathise. And if you get one of those calls, just be nice to them. You only need to be kind. You can't fix what's going on so just give them a bit of space to rant and tell them they're normal and doing great. And if you're OK, call your friends and check in on them. Especially if they've gone silent.

LAUGH: It doesn't matter what is funny – laughter is a huge releaser of endorphins. Silly memes, silly jokes, stand-up, rolling around with your kids – videos on YouTube. The sillier the better. Also v good for bonding with friends, which will also help you feel less alone.

DO SOMETHING WITH YOUR HANDS: Yes you can meditate if this is your bag, it's amazing. But if it's not, and personally I'm rubbish, then trying to start when you're already anxious is really hard. So do something instead with your hands, that you have to focus on to get right. Cook. Tidy. Knit. Draw. Bake. Garden. Mend things. This is what nice middle class therapists like me call Mindfulness.

TREAT YOUR BODY: We hold stress in our bodies at least as much as our minds. Take a bath or a shower. Put on things that feel good on your skin. Use nice smelling body creams. Stretch. Skip. Do yoga. Dance. Eat healthy but delicious things - fresh if you can get it. All of these will help calm you down.

SUNSHINE: It's SPRINGTIME amid this horror – enjoy it. If you can't go outside, open the windows and feel it on your face and breath it in. If it's safe for you to go outside (maybe you live in the country) do it, while of course observing social distance. Go for a walk. Being outdoors, connecting to nature, is hugely calming.

STEP AWAY FROM SOCIAL MEDIA/THE NEWS: All it will do will scare you more and make things worse. Turn off the telly and for gods sake avoid the psychopathic digital wild west that is Twitter. Stick to sensible sources like the BBC and the NHS, and limit yourself to short need-to-know bits a day. You'll feel better immediately. Talk to friends instead - this is physical, not social distancing.

STEP AWAY FROM TERRIBLE COPING MECHANISMS: They will all translate as BEAR!! to your poor brain. Especially don't get drunk, especially if you're alone (BEAR!!!), take drugs (BEAR!!!), stay up all night reading (BEAR!!!), get sucked into conspiracy theories (BEAR!!!), pay attention to ANYTHING Donald Trump says (BEAR!!!). See? Stress levels going up already. Breathe.

BE KIND: to yourself and others. Now is not the time to go on a diet. Nor is this the time to start on Proust or makeover your life. You'll probably struggle to concentrate, fail and make yourself feel worse (hat tip Laura Gordon for this bit). Don't make this more stressful than it already is. Think comfort books, comfort telly, comfort everything. Personally I re-read children's books. Everyone is wobbly, everyone is going to have a meltdown at some point. Understand that if someone is angry or aggressive, then they are also just scared. And eat more cake. Cake makes everything better. So, there we go. Hopefully a bit less BEAR!! Now, that kettle should have boiled by now. Go make a nice cup of tea, sit by a window and drink it in this lovely morning sunshine. We are British after all. And save me some cake.

Notes

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Imogen Wall



Notes from a front line aid worker, therapist and mental health first aider.

Hello. This is me. Thanks for reading my article, I hope you found it helpful. Here is a bit about my background and how I came to be writing these articles.

I'm a former BBC journalist and UN spokesperson, now an independent communications trainer and advisor. I specialise in crisis response with a particular emphasis on mental health, peer support, critical incident management and safeguarding in humanitarian contexts. Frontline humanitarian work includes field postings in Indonesia (Aceh), Sudan, Haiti, Philippines and HQ work in New York and Geneva. Recent clients include DFID, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, CrisisCast, Care International and RedR. I am also the founder and lead administrator of the Fifty Shades of Aid group, an independent aid worker support community on Facebook.

My specialities include mental health - I am a qualified Mental Health First Aid instructor - safeguarding and staff welfare. I have a lot of experience in crisis management, particularly in an international context and with reference to reputation management and staff care.

As a journalist I have worked for the BBC World Service (producer and editor for five years), and reported for The Times, The Observer, The Guardian, The Economist and The Telegraph among others. In a media context I train journalists in working in crisis situations, training aid workers in handling media. In a technical humanitarian context I work on policy and advocacy concerning communications with affected communities, project development and management, coordination, speech writing and handling media liaison in high profile emergencies.

Keep in touch via [LinkedIn](#) or following me on [Twitter](#). Any questions please email hello.imogen.wall@gmail.com