

Fear Having COVID Whenever You Sneeze? You're Infected.

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A virus is the most basic and promiscuous of parasites. This modicum of infectious material can't live without a host cell, and once there all it does is replicate until it kills the cell and gets transmitted to another one.

A new insidious virus struck the country this year, a psychological one. This virus also can't live on its own. Its targeted cell is the human mind. It needs the mind's cytoplasm for replication, one enriched by mass and social media. Each mind is a component of our collective consciousness. FEAR20 spares no one. It's a transmitted social disease. Average people, athletes, journalists, politicians, doctors, nurses, statisticians, scientific experts, none are immune. Our collective mindset is now engulfed by its relentless replication. Cell by cell, that collective consciousness and its derivative social fabric decays. One may reject this as a grotesque, dismissive analogy. Yes, fear promotes obeying indispensable societal directives. Yet, as I wrote this, 80 patients were being evacuated from a Riverside nursing home, as staff refused to work for fear of infection.

Where are all the heart attack and stroke victims going, doctors ask around the country? We have seen double digit percentage reductions in stroke and MI admissions to the ER as people fear coming. Many hospital floors are shuttered, major segments of the economy are shut down. People are losing their livelihoods. Home sheltering robs freedom of movement. Children are home from school. Domestic violence is rising. Suicide hotlines are swamped. Masking hides friendly smiles, we can't hug each other. We have multi-system failure setting in.

Two viruses are to blame. COVID is a biological virus. It is novel, yet NOT unprecedented. The Spanish flu of 1918 was much more widespread and horrific, but we had few medical schools, limited infrastructure, and inchoate medical technology. The new Swine flu pandemic of 2009 was dwarfed by the novel flu of 2017-18. Per the CDC, up to 50 million Americans were infected and 80,000 lost their lives that winter. Its peak saw 4000 deaths a week and also overwhelmed hospitals. The fear virus was dormant then, the cytoplasm did not support replication like today's unprecedented media fed fear frenzy. This virus is a psychological one.

At the collective level, COVID is terrifying. The cumulative deaths and proven positive cases are staggering. Yet in the context of other causes of death, the numbers scale differently. In March, US deaths from COVID total less than 2% of all deaths. The quoted COVID mortality uses the positively tested population as the denominator, omitting the untested asymptomatic "carriers": If included, the true mortality rate may be the same or slightly higher than the flu. Also, the CDC issued guidance to include untested but clinically "likely" deaths in the COVID numerator. Congestive heart failure that brought one to the hospital can count as a COVID death in a suspected patient. Yes, the collective numbers are tragic, as were those in the flu season of 2017-18. But the latter did not rock our world.

At the individual's risk level, COVID's fright lessens. 85% of individuals infected need no medical attention due to no (50%) or mild to moderate symptoms. The individual risk of dying from COVID is well under 1% if the non-tested carriers are included (as suggested by a study from Iceland and other studies of all comers tested cohorts). The individual risk is close to the actuarial risk of dying from an accident. We live a life of mortal danger. Every second. How can we function? F. Scott Fitzgerald said: "The mark of a superior intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in the mind, and still retain the ability to function". But when minds are infected by the fear virus, that ability may be lost. Individually, and as a society.

I embrace all intelligent approaches to stopping spread of any biological virus: Self-isolation when contagious, wearing a mask when sick and needing to venture out - even with a cold; strict discipline of

frequent hand washing, social distancing and even populational sheltering at home, especially in hot zones. We should also combat the psychological virus of fear. Understanding the personal risk in context of the human experience may be difficult when the brain is kidnapped by media and fear has gone “viral.” Unlike COVID today, we do have tools to combat the fear virus. Mindfulness, yoga, exercise, avoidance of triggers (like the skewed self-replicating media narrative): Helping others. Creative activity. Talking to counselors. Comparing the true facts of COVID against our experience with previous epidemics, is another tactic. Realizing that even the experts can be infected is also a normalizing strategy. The initial models of over a million deaths in the US receded to 240,000, to 100,000, and now look to fall well short of the 2017 flu pandemic. Social distancing and “lock down” is lowering those numbers, but it appears the models were well off.

No doubt, the fear virus is well rooted, and will take time to eradicate. A recalibration of media reporting could help. Data on scientific innovation, stories of recovery, the context of individual risk, and planning the future state is therapeutic. Ultimately, each individual can influence the fear virus. As with handwashing to fight COVID, frequent mind washing with the tactics available can lower the fear infection. Remember Roosevelt’s most famous words about fear. And fear not when you sneeze... into your elbow.

The author is a senior physician executive in a regional health system; the opinions expressed are his own, and do not reflect those of his employer