Finding a Moment's Peace Amid COVID Chaos

By Kyle Ferguson

If you're old enough you might recall the1978 film, "Invasion of The Body Snatchers"; which, incidentally, was a remake of the 1956 horror classic by the same name. What made the movie so dang scary was the fact that everyone (other than you of course) – a neighbor, a uni-browed aunt, even one's angelic munchkins with visions of sugar plums dancing in their heads (at least they're angelic while they're sleeping!) – might be an alien who wants more than anything to infect you with their "alieness."

In the movie, if you recall, humans were constantly on high alert – always on the lookout for any behavior that would "out" the aliens – odd mannerisms, a funny gesture, a blank facial expression. It goes without saying, any non-human sign of "alieness" sent the humans into a five-alarm, full-blown panic attack.

The coronavirus (or, technically, SARS-CoV-2, or the disease it causes, COVID-19) has many people acting like the remaining humans in "Body Snatchers." Always on high alert – constantly watching the news and monitoring social media posts for spread of the disease; eyeing those around them with utmost distrust; suspiciously watching for the slightest sniffles, cough, bead of sweat, ruddy eyes, etc. Ready to tuck tail and run in the opposite direction at a moment's notice.

Apart from being completely replaced by an alien life, much of the anxiety and dread people felt in "Body Snatchers" and the fear people are having during this pandemic are due to what psychologists call "the psychology of uncertainty." It's not clearly knowing what's safe from what's harmful that drives this sort of anxiety.

One writer described this kind of uncertainty as "torture by a million tiny cuts." You are probably familiar with this kind of "torture" if your mom ever threatened you as a child with, "You wait till your father gets home!" Of course, your mother didn't mention that you would only lose television privileges for a night or two. Your mind, however, went to the darkest places imaginable while you waited quietly in your room, staring into the abyss, waiting for the front door to open.

The brain tries desperately to rid itself of the emotion wedded to uncertainty by going into overdrive. It assumes the worst, it personalizes threats ("You're trying to make me sick!"), and/or jumps to conclusions with little or no evidence. After all, the sole purpose of assuming the worst, personalizing threats, and/or jumping to conclusions is to make the world seem less uncertain, more orderly (even when it's not). Imposing order on an otherwise disorderly world takes the edge off the unsettling emotion.

Such negative beliefs about uncertainty, however, usually interfere with one's ability to effectively deal with those situations. Negative beliefs about uncertainty can promote the use of worry as a go-to strategy to cope with uncertain situations or challenges. Worry in and of itself is not especially helpful if it does not lead to effective action (no one needs 10,000 rolls of toilet paper in their house!). Worry is often referred to in the psychology biz as "unproductive" when it
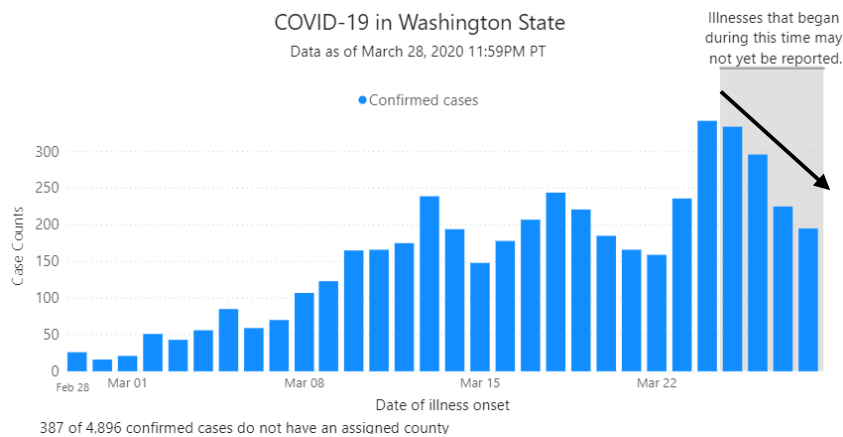
leads nowhere beneficial. Unfortunately, news outlets seem to do more to fan the flames of worry than to quell it. But more on this in a moment.

In what follows are some recommendations to help quell the fires of uncertainty and, perhaps, lower fear and worry related to the unknown. First, one of the best strategies is set limits on news consumption. Like pushing yourself from the table when you feel full, set a timer. When the timer goes off after, say an hour, the news goes off until tomorrow.

The same principle holds to reading articles online. I can almost guarantee there is little to gain if you check in on the news more than once daily. The news cycle when it comes to COVID-19 doesn't move faster than that.

Second, if we all behaved like we were infected with COVID-19 virus, there would be no second guessing. Assuming you already have it, you would be doing exactly what you are supposed to do to stop the virus from spreading to others. In a sense, you yourself would be the alien in "Body Snatchers," assuming everyone else were human. Accordingly, as far as COVID-19 is concerned, you would maintain a safe distance from others as recommended by scientists; you would cover your cough; you would frequently wash your hands for about the time it takes to sing the alphabet; you would frequently wipe down and sanitize surfaces where the virus can live; you would regard other people infected with the virus humanely because you would know how they might feel, etc.

Incidentally, this is precisely what many Washingtonians are doing now during Governor Inslee's social distancing order; which is why our numbers of infected cases are going down while numbers in other states (who aren't taking necessary precautions) are going up.

COVID-19 in Washington State
Data as of March 28, 2020 11:59PM PT

● Confirmed cases

Illnesses that began during this time may not yet be reported.

387 of 4,896 confirmed cases do not have an assigned county

This is precisely the curve scientists are referring to when they use the term "flatten the curve." It means good news for WA.

In Florida, by contrast, their governor is throwing his hands up, putting forth a wishy-washy plan. Some counties are enforcing social distancing while others are not; which is kind of like having no-peeing sections in a public pool! As of March 31st, Florida had 6,338 confirmed cases. I guarantee the number will continue to climb quickly with such a haphazard, unscientific approach to trying to contain the virus. As of April 1st, a day later, for instance, that number sadly is now 6,741. By April 2nd, I guarantee it will be higher, and on and on. Florida and similar states are in trouble.

Third, knowledge is power. Getting the facts reduces uncertainty. Turn to reliable sources of information based on <u>science</u> not opinion or baseless optimism. Sorry social media! Bye-bye memes! Sorry politicians in high places (who muddy the waters with misinformation)! We are breaking up now. It's not you, it's me…

<u>Great COVID-19 sources of scientific, reliable information</u>

(A) The best source of information hands down on the coronavirus is the Center for Disease Control (aka CDC): https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html

The webpage is user friendly. It looks like this…

(B) For COVID-19 information in Washington State please visit: https://www.doh.wa.gov/emergencies/coronavirus

(C) Johns Hopkins's website is another excellent source of information based on science: https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/

(D) Yet another excellent source of information is the COVID-19 website provided by one of the top journals in medicine, *The New England Journal of Medicine*. All content related to the Covid-19 pandemic is freely available to the public. Just to warn you, it is a bit technical: https://www.nejm.org/coronavirus?cid=DM89279_NEJM_COVID-19_Newsletter&bid=175258639

Third, put things into perspective. The graph below that appeared in a recent article looks pretty scary. It displays COVID-19 deaths across various age groups (CDC mortality data as of March 18th). Notice the up and down line. It tops out at 12%, making the cases seem more extreme (The bars look towering!). If the up and down line went to 100% the bars would appear much smaller. Below 85+, if the up and down line went to 100%, the other bars would appear more like slight blips.

COVID-19 in the US
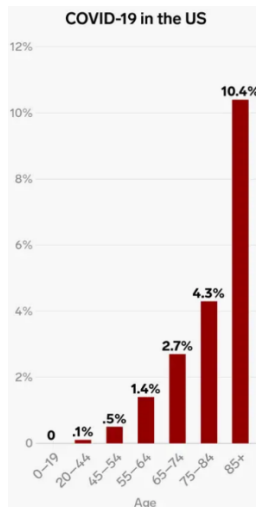
While examining the graph, another way you might interpret this is to turn the numbers around; placing the numbers in a more positive light. If say, you fell in the age 75-84 group, you would have a 95.7% survival rate; which is not all that bad, even if you are older.

I don't mean to minimize the cost of life of those 4.3%, I just want to put things into perspective. It doesn't take away from the fact that COVID-19 is a nasty virus and that the best way of handling this crisis is to avoid its spread.

Lastly, it helps to quell disorder by turning inwards. There are a variety of ways in which you might help quite things down internally. Relaxation exercises (e.g., belly breathing), yoga, and prayer are excellent strategies. Mindfulness, too, might be helpful. Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: On purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally (Jon Kabat-Zinn). There is considerable evidence that suggests that mindfulness meditation can relieve unproductive worry, promoting a sense of inner peace. There are plenty of outstanding self-help books on mindfulness (e.g., *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World*; *Mindfulness for Beginners: Reclaiming the Present Moment and Your Life*; *In This Moment: Five Steps to Transcending Stress Using Mindfulness and Neuroscience*). But you don't have to spend a dime. There are many free online resources. Check out YouTube, for example. I also recommend visiting http://www.sharingmindfulness.com/audio/ for downloadable video or audio exercises that are freely available.

Hopefully, these recommendations help you find a moment's peace amid COVID chaos. I wish you and your family all the best. Stay healthy.