

# How to Manage Fear and Panic in Times of Uncertainty

**Susan David:** Hi everyone. Susan David here, and this is Checking In, a show that offers strategies for coping with our emotions during this global pandemic. I'm a psychologist at Harvard Medical School whose work focuses on emotional agility, the critical emotional skills that help us to bring the best of ourselves forward in how we live, love, parent, and lead. This show is an experiment, an urgent response to an urgent moment. It'll go on for as long as we need. This is an unprecedented time, one where we need support and tools to get us through. It's my hope that you'll find those here. Okay, let's dive in.

What I'm hearing right now is that so many of you are feeling a group sense of fear and panic. But underneath that, there's a whole lot of other things going on too. There's anger, confusion, sadness, and even grief. I'm with you in this reality. It feels like just yesterday that my husband and I were leaving Post-it notes for each other about who was going to buy groceries and who was going to be cooking dinner, and now what we're exchanging is emergency contact information and what would happen if one of us was on a ventilator. He is a physician, and I know that the reality is that he will likely be exposed to the coronavirus in his day-to-day work. And so now we're having conversations about if he comes home with this, where's he going to stay? Is he not going to see the kids? Is he going to quarantine himself, be in a hotel, and would he get to see them again?

This is difficult. It's difficult for all of us. And it's so easy to become consumed by fear and news and all of the chaos that seems around us. We all know that the coronavirus is spreading at an alarming rate, but fear and panic can spread even faster. Fortunately, there are steps that we can take today to boost our social immunity to these contagions. We, humans, are social animals. Our behavior and emotions don't just emerge from within ourselves. They're deeply influenced by other people. Those that are rushing to Walmart to buy a thousand rolls of toilet paper didn't make the choice in isolation. The news likely showed them images of their neighbors emptying the shelves, and this compelled them to stock up for themselves. Research shows that this tendency of social contagion and copying other people's behaviors and even emotions is present even in times of relative calm. We've all experienced this. We go into a meeting and one person's on their cell phone, so we take out ours. And perhaps you remember several years stretch where it seemed like everyone you knew was getting married, all those couples didn't reach that decision in a vacuum. Wedding fever spread through your shared social network. And suddenly, your summer weekends were all booked up. It's important to be aware of social contagion even in the best of times. But in times of crisis, the phenomenon can have a life or death stake. Just look at your Facebook feed, or turn on cable news, and you'll see how the social contagions can put our own health at risk. When

people see their friends and neighbors wearing surgical masks as they walk their dog or make a trip to the grocery store, many will feel compelled to hoard and stock up on masks themselves. And this hoarding has contributed to a shortage of masks for the healthcare workers on the frontlines actually fighting the pandemic. How do we better understand this human instinct that we seem to be seeing with people hoarding masks and toilet paper?

One of the most interesting psychological theories that can help us to understand what's actually going on for people is terror management theory. Terror management theory basically posits that we spend a huge amount of time every day avoiding things that make us fearful. For instance, death, the fact that all of us at some point will die—then what happens? This thing that we fear the most that we are spending resources not thinking about is put right before our eyes. There is a virus, you might be infected, and you may, or your loved ones may even die. What this does is it brings what is usually at the periphery of our consciousness, right into almost a front and center experience. And what terror management shows is that when this happens, people have fairly predictable responses. They become much more “us and them,” much more stereotyping, much more tribal, and so much of what we're seeing in supermarkets unfolding day by day, is this scarcity mentality. I'm going to get what I can to protect myself. Fear and panic are really powerful emotions, despite all of the narratives that we hear in society of becoming fearless. They are not emotions that we want to do away with. Emotions like fear and panic evolved to help us as a species to survive, to protect ourselves. But what can sometimes happen when we experience fear and panic is we have a particular cognitive reaction to that fear and panic, and that can hold us back and imprison us in a way that starts owning us rather than us owning it. So how do we protect ourselves from social contagion?

What are strategies that are healthy and that are available to each and every one of you listening right now? The first is to just be compassionate with yourself. This fear that you are feeling is your body, your psychology, your emotion, your evolutionary power as a human being doing its job, which is to feel fear. But our emotions, our feelings—they are not fact. Just because we feel fear and because we feel driven to run to the supermarket and hoard, for instance, doesn't mean we have to do it. What we can be instead is we can be compassionate with ourselves. We can notice the feeling: I'm noticing that I'm feeling fear. And what we do when we notice that feeling for what it is, is we create space inside of ourselves, where we are no longer defined by the fear, but instead, we are seeing the fear for what it is. It's one of many emotions or many experiences, many intentions that we can bring to the situation. Another thing that we can start doing is we can start really trying to ground ourselves in this idea that courage is not the absence of fear; courage is about noticing your fear with compassion and curiosity, and then doing what matters in your life. Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is fear walking. See if you can notice your fear with compassion, but then see if you can ground yourself in your values. I use the word values. But what exactly are values? This word is flung around a lot, and they can take on a nebulous or almost abstract idea. But the way that I think of values is that they're not abstract. They are qualities of action. They are guidance systems of how we want to live our lives, what's important to us, the direction that we want our lives to take. Every day, even in normal calm times, we get thousands of choice points, and these choice points allow us to bring ourselves either towards our values or

away from our values. It's the same with our values in times of a pandemic. A value might be, "I care about my parents," and that care may be the thing that drives you to actually stay away from them in these times, rather than to go meet up with them. These are choice points, and if we step back and we say, what are the values that drive these different decisions, it really helps us not to wing it, but to have clarity as to how we want to move forward. When we define our values and get clarity on what those are, we open ourselves beyond the specific emotion of fear that we are feeling right now into other parts of ourselves because we are more than our fear. We are also our intentions, our wisdom, our compassion, and these are all honed and driven and become capable through our sense of what our values are.

If you're feeling consumed by fear or panic, worry, or any other difficult emotion, here's an exercise that can help you. Name it, and then ask yourself, what is the function of that emotion. We often don't think of our emotions in these terms—that they have a function. But every single emotion is a flashing arrow of something that you care about. When you feel grief, that grief might be because you feel a loss of connection with someone that you value and care about, and the signpost there is that you love and that love is important to you.

If you feeling guilty as a parent right now, that guilt might be a signpost to you, that you value presence and connectedness with your children, and that in all the chaos, there's not enough of that meaningful connection. That's the signpost to you. If your fear is the fear that you are going to lose people who you really care about that signpost is that you care. See if you can reach out to those people today. What we're doing here is we're not ignoring the emotion. Instead, we're asking ourselves, "what the func?" In other words, what's the function of the emotion? What's it trying to signal to me? What's it telling me about who I am and what I care about? It's that function that provides a guiding light for you as you move forward with your day.

If you're feeling like things are chaotic, and you need to just ground yourself into the reality of the here and now, and almost rekindle a sense of who you are, to find yourself amidst the chaos, here's a really simple exercise that you can do. Sit down just for a couple of minutes with a piece of paper in front of you, and ask yourself this question, "even in the midst of this chaos, who do I want to be? What is important to me, and how do I want to bring myself forward?" And then just write. You might write for a minute, you might write for two minutes, a page, or three pages. What we know is that this values affirmation exercise is an incredibly powerful protector of social and emotional contagion. What it does, is it moves us from the space of thinking that values are abstract ideas into ways that our values can become front and center into being more agile, more focused, and more connected. And we all need more of all of those things in our lives right now. As you move through the week, there is going to be news and media and social media that's going to be conspiring for your attention. Your partners, your friends, your children, your loved ones are going to be conspiring for your attention too. It's going to be so easy to be caught up in social contagion, fear, and panic. But see if you can keep this idea front and center: Who's in charge, the thinker or the thought? That's all for today. Be well, stay safe, and let's check in next week.