

Living with Uncertainty: Reflecting on COVID-19
Russell Delman March 13, 2020

We are part of an intricate, complex, fantastically interconnected web of Life.

We are designed to be in harmony with Life.

The creative wisdom of our bodies has learned, and continues to learn, to deal with the dangers presented in our environment. This is our collective, adaptive brilliance.

While we can celebrate this truly amazing and wise capacity, sometimes the changes in the outer world occur more quickly than our ability to adapt.

At times like these, we must individually and collectively do all that we can to bolster the healthy responses of our individual and collective immune systems.

Chronic fear and mass hysteria are damaging to our health.
Denial of authentic local and international dangers is not wise.
What to do?

In this writing, I want to offer a picture about why it is so difficult to deal effectively with long-term uncertainty and how self-reflective awareness, along with embodied practices, can be a key. There are actually two, interacting viruses – COVID-19 and CHRONIC FEAR VIRUS-XX!

Why long-term Uncertainty is so Difficult

As this virus demonstrates, we are a global community. Like the Internet, this inter-connectivity can yield great benefit and immense dangers. How we approach the gifts and challenges of this fact will determine our collective future. Recognizing our interdependence might help us to deal with planetary issues that are likely to arise over the next years.

- Fear is designed as an intelligent response to immediate danger. In our evolutionary history, our brains and nervous systems developed fear responses, with the necessary neurotransmitters and hormones, to force us to pay attention and to take action. When a dangerous animal is racing toward us or someone is attacking, the adrenalin, cortisol, focused attention, and

blood rushing to our limbs are very helpful. The same reaction pattern is disastrous when applied to long-term threats that do not have a clear end point or a precise means of action. Awareness is required to effectively quiet the older parts of the brain as we use our reflective, frontal lobes to garner more life-giving thoughts and behaviors.

- Under stress, our dualistic minds divide complex issues into simple “yes/no”, “good/bad”, “all or none” equations. Either you are denying the threat OR you are terrified. This habit pattern is intelligent when fast response is required because it simplifies the options; it is very ineffective for most of the current challenges facing humanity.

- In times of perceived danger, the more primitive parts of our brains perceive “other”, in almost any form, as dangerous. With all the current cultural messaging, many of us will begin seeing all other people as life-threatening. This is not helpful. While it is essential for our collective hygiene to maintain space between people, particularly in groups, social distancing easily becomes a closing off of our hearts and rigidifying of our boundaries in unhelpful ways.

COVID-19 is causing disease and death globally. No one knows the extent, duration or ultimate effects. We are all living in uncertainty. This is a very potent, global pandemic that all of us need to take very seriously. Living in fear creates terrible conditions for our health. Our immune systems become dangerously weakened by chronic stress hormones. How can we receive all the important, up to date information and not live in a state of chronic fear? How can we combat CHRONIC FEAR VIRUS -XX? This is our challenge.

I will not review in detail the common, healthy knowledge that you likely know: wash hands often and completely, get good sleep, avoid handshaking and hugging (but don't distance yourself emotionally from those around you), eat lots of fruits and vegetables, laugh as much as possible, etc. Rather, I will focus on the less obvious **but equally important behaviors**.

HELPFUL ANTIDOTES and RELIABLE PRACTICES

Pausing

The more recently evolved functions in our brains need a bit of time to come online and counter the faster, older mechanisms. Pausing from fearful thoughts and anxious images is essential. Pausing is the key to

returning to the present moment. Only in presence can we question our reaction patterns.

The good news is that we do not need to fight the fearful thoughts or eliminate them. Simply interrupting them changes the inner environment. To repeat - pausing gives the needed seconds for the reflective parts of the brain to do their magic. Key ways to pause:

Self-Reflective Awareness

One of the great gifts of human awareness is our capacity to see unhelpful thoughts and choose not to allow them to hijack our brains, our bodies and our minds. This is a big part of human freedom. Practicing this capacity by watering the seeds of life-giving thoughts and questioning the others is a powerful step.

- Naming our thoughts is very helpful.
- Sensing their effect in our bodies and breathing gently.
- Questioning - we don't need to believe our thoughts .

Saying “Hello in There”

Awareness creates a gap between the panic pattern and the “aware Self”. In this gap you can say to the fearful place inside, “hello in there, I am with you”. As odd as this may sound, it is remarkably effective. It is like the parental part of your brain caring for the frightened child. Often it helps to place a hand on the place in your body, often the chest or abdomen, where you feel the fear most strongly. Try it!

Grounding

In The Embodied Life teachings, this is the starting point. To step out of thought/feeling patterns, our brains need a tangible alternative. Few things are more solid in our experience than the weight of our physical body and its contact with the environment. Bringing attention to the contact with your chair in sitting and the ground in standing, as well as your sense of weightedness, will “ground” you in the present moment.

Breathing

All fear patterns effect our breathing, either through breath holding or accelerated breathing. Both of these patterns support and maintain anxiety. Amongst our various breathing practices, two of the most effective and reliable are: three complete breaths and four phase breathing.

With three complete breaths, you pause and give your whole attention to three breaths, sensing from beginning to end. Simple and powerful! Even if your mind wanders, let the thoughts be in the background. You might count each exhale to keep you focused. Try this now.

With four-phase breathing, you simply create a clear, though brief, pause between breaths. In addition to inhaling and exhaling, you now stay present for a brief gap between them. Again, counting each phase softly can allow your mind to stay focused. Perhaps take a moment to experiment with this option.

Pausing from screens

Through the visual cortex, our eyes have a strong influence on our inner state. Consistently refreshing ourselves by placing the palms over the eyes and gazing softly, with closed eyes, into the darkest parts of the visual field is very helpful. Doing this for one minute each hour is a good amount of time to allow your nervous system to enter a restful state. Calming the visual cortex has far reaching effects.

Nature

Even brief moments of connecting to the natural world are surprisingly beneficial for changing the set point of the nervous system. Looking out a window, gazing at a tree, standing on grass, spending undistracted time with a plant or animal and any other way you have of reviving your connection to the natural world can be restorative. This can literally change your neurochemistry in life-giving ways. Even in cities, there are opportunities for moments of refreshment with nature. We do not need a vacation, a full day off or even an hour to receive these gifts.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR STATE

Amazingly, through the power of our attention, we have influence over the state of our nervous systems. We cannot eliminate danger, but we can learn to live with it more effectively. Don't worry if the difficult states return, continue to use the antidotes and keep bringing your care to the frightened inner places and the unhelpful thoughts.

To me the most important thing is to use our capacity for awareness to notice when our thinking, feeling and bodily patterns have been hijacked by

fearful states. Shifting these is within our power and our birthright. This will bolster your immune system, effect both the systems of those around you and the collective field that we share. Undeniably, as individuals and as nations, we are interconnected.

For those of us who have been practicing awareness, we have been preparing for moments like THIS. We can be source of light, clarity and helpful ideas for others, as well as ourselves. For those new to these ideas and practices, it is in your capacity to quickly grow realistic, intelligent, life-giving responses to the uncertainty of life. We are all in this together!

May we all be healthy, happy and free from unnecessary difficulty.

AN INSPIRING POEM

Pandemic

What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—
the most sacred of times?
Cease from travel.
Cease from buying and selling.
Give up, just for now,
on trying to make the world
different than it is.
Sing. Pray. Touch only those
to whom you commit your life.
Center down.

And when your body has become still,
reach out with your heart.
Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)
Know that our lives
are in one another's hands.
(Surely, that has come clear.)
Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.

Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love--
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.

--Lynn Ungar 3/11/20