

Coping With Anxiety About Coronavirus

Up the Down Staircase

Dr. Linda Miles

Do you tend to feel overwhelmed by all the scary messages you are bombarded with daily about the coronavirus?

Is it difficult to remember what is going well in your life when you are preoccupied with all the outside noise?

Years ago there was a movie entitled *Up the Down Staircase* about a young teacher who was confused on first day about which staircase to use. As you think about how to cope with anxiety about coronavirus, picture a staircase in your brain. Neuroscientists have found that the first part of our brain to evolve is the reptilian brain. As we moved up the evolutionary ladder the last part of our brain to evolve is the frontal cortex. This is the part of our brain that we use for higher reasoning, compassion, and effective problem solving.

What does that mean and how does that relate to anxiety? Let's refer to the bottom of our brain as the basement, which is also described as the reptilian brain. It is called the reptilian brain because the only choices that reptiles have to cope with danger are fight, freeze, or flee. Whenever you feel that those are your only choices chances are that you are in the basement of your brain. The basement of your brain is murky, moldy, and overgrown, like a swamp. That is what it feels like when we get stuck in the basement brain. It is the perfect environment for a snake, which is in fact how we feel when our anxiety kicks in. When you feel like your only options are to fight, freeze in place or run away with the help of alcohol or drugs, you're most likely stuck in the basement.

On the other hand the top part of our brain, the frontal cortex, is a big penthouse with a wide veranda. It is filled with love, light, creativity and effective problem-solving. When you feel that you are trapped in the basement by all the noise about the coronavirus, you want to find ways to move to the peaceful and beautiful vistas on the top floor. This part of our brain can get above the situation and assess the danger and take the most effective action to help you help yourself and others.

You do need to use logic and common sense, and listen to what experts say about preventive measures such as handwashing, using sanitizers, and social distancing. But you do not want to allow your emotions to run away with you or rob you of the gifts of the present moment.

When you feel overwhelmed by the negative emotions about coronavirus you can practice Mindfulness techniques that will help bring calmness in healing. Imagine that you can inhale sparks of goodness and healing, and that you can breathe out some of that light and healing to others. When you notice tensions building up in your body, breathe deeply, imagining that there is a healing light that can penetrate the muscles and bring some relaxation.

MINDFULNESS PRACTICES

Mindfulness practice has been shown to help the brain utilize the veranda more often and to reduce the time that we spend with the brain stuck in the basement.

Susan Lazar of Harvard University has demonstrated physical changes in the brain that helped to reduce anxiety after a six weeks practice of mindfulness.

By mindfully living in the present, you can make the conscious decision to focus your resources on positive emotions of joy, appreciation, and healing. This does not mean that you deny the reality of inconveniences or suffering of you, your family or community; it means that you find moments during the day to share kindness, appreciation, and joy.

How do you learn to move from the basement to the veranda to quell your anxiety about coronavirus?

Practice these phrases to help keep you from getting lost in the swampy basement of your mind:

- The challenge of coronavirus is also an opportunity to become better and to help others.
- Do not torment yourself out of fear that you will be tormented by the coronavirus.
- Joy does not imply never-ending happiness. It is the ability and choice to rejoice.
- You cannot avoid suffering but you can intentionally look for joy amidst suffering.
- One day at a time. You do not know the future. Give your best today.
- Breathe in and think the word "Be" and think the word "Calm" as you breathe out.
- Accept reality. It does not help to deny what is happening.
- Realize that gratitude is not just for the good times; it is healing in troublesome times.

- Your feelings, like your fears, are meant to be a guide that you can use to help yourself and others.
- Now is a good time to practice choosing peace of mind instead of fear.
- Joseph Campbell said that one of the most important lessons is to "find joy amidst suffering."
- "Our best protection is a joyful heart." Mother Teresa
- Emotions are contagious, so ignite your own inner light.
- Life can feel very different if your heart is not obstructed by fear.
- Approach this situation as an experiment in staying in the present moment.
- Notice the stories you tell yourself about what might happen, and realize that those are only stories.
- Make your life be a benefit to others.
- "Think of all the beauty still left around you and be happy." Anne Frank

In the movie *Up The Down Staircase* the young teacher was embarrassed because she went the wrong way but the focus of the movie was about how she learned to lead her students in the right direction.

Eric Kandel, who won the Nobel Prize for Medicine, notes that the ability to rejoice is not something that we were born with or that we lack; it's something that should be cultivated constantly. He has observed that we can train our brains to resist harmful gut reactions and to strengthen our ability to focus on positive aspects and feelings that serve us and those around us.

It is helpful to be reminded of people who have managed to find joy amidst suffering. Archbishop Desmond Tutu survived more than 50 years of soul-crushing violence and oppression. During the violence of Apartheid in South Africa, he chose to convey gratitude and lead by example as a role model who "lived in the light."

According to Archbishop Tutu he knew he would not be able to inspire people around him to be joyful if he himself could not authentically and freely rejoice in daily living. He writes, "Despite all the ghastliness in the world, human beings are made for goodness. They have a commitment to make the world a better place."

Desmond Tutu is like other inspirational world leaders who emerged from a personal purgatory and pulled themselves together in hard times; by doing so, they managed to pull other people around them into a sense of community and purpose.

Neurosurgeon James Doty is another example of a leader who overcame a caustic childhood by learning to be in the present moment and to live with intention. He takes a moment before each surgery to focus on a positive outcome. Although that is not a guarantee that the surgery will go well, he talks about the ways this practice helps him become centered and to think as clearly as possible.

The current crisis with coronavirus provides an opportunity to become better instead of bitter. Of course there are going to be times of suffering--businesses closing, job losses, and illness--but there will still be many opportunities for gratitude, compassion, and appreciation of life in the present moment.

If you find yourself unable to let go of fear and anxiety and move towards active problem-solving, you may want to consider consulting a mental health professional who can evaluate your level of anxiety or depression and make recommendations for treatment.

Dr. Linda Miles is a leading expert on relationships and mindfulness. She is a psychotherapist, author, relationship expert and captivating speaker. She has studied and worked in her field of counseling psychology for over 35 years and focuses on mindfulness, stress reduction, mental health and relationships. Dr. Miles is personable and accessible in her books and articles and loves to teach about how mindfulness and loving kindness can positively change your brain, your chemistry and your life. Her first book, written with her husband, Robert Miles, M.D., won a literary prize as a finalist for Forward Non-fiction book of the year. She has published several books on relationships and mindfulness as well as articles in the Wall Street Journal, Boston Globe, Reuters and Miami Herald. She has been a guest expert on numerous national TV shows including CNN, Fox News, ABC, and NBC. Her most recent book is *Change Your Story, Change Your Brain*.

You can find additional resources on Dr. Miles' Facebook page, *Mindfulness Rewrites* or at www.DrLindaMiles.com

There will be a free download of this article as well as an audio copy of *Train Your Brain for Health and Wholeness* meditation audio on her website until April 1, 2020.

During this time a portion of any sales will be donated to Second Harvest of the Big Bend's effort to continue providing free meals to children while they are out of school.