

Finding Focus

The other night I watched a Garth Brooks Special on TV. I noticed immediately how odd it was to see a closely packed audience, the musicians side by side on the stage, and handshakes and hugs between presenters and performers. Not a hint of *social distancing*. We've all noticed the commercials on TV showing people on buses shoulder to shoulder, or playing sports, or crowded into a bar or restaurant. Rick Steves gets to travel through Europe, hopping on and off packed streetcars in Zurich, making his way through a market to sample cheese. How about game shows, or talk shows, with people jumping up and down and embracing? There are re-runs of cop shows, with police chasing the "perp" through herds of people crossing New York streets. These programs, commercials and events...are all normal stuff. But they are also PRE-VIRUS. Our awareness of these dramatic changes in our world cause us anxiety. How do we cope, how do we shift our focus, as our world seems to grow smaller and more threatening?

Family therapist Lori Gottlieb shares her thoughts in *The Atlantic* magazine-

"IF I CAN'T TOUCH MY FACE SOON, I MAY NEED TO GO TO THERAPY!" I tweeted last week when coronavirus panic seemed to reach a new high. And underneath the quip was the hope that others might feel less alone in this very strange and anxiety-provoking time. Yes, we have bigger concerns than suppressing the urge to touch our face all day long (though who knew we touched it so much?). Yes, people are dying, others are critically ill, and more confirmed cases are announced daily.

But also, there's this: Our hands are chapped from sanitizers and soap, our kids are home from school, our workplaces are shutting down, our in-person gatherings have been canceled, and our grocery-store shelves are nearly empty. In other words, our lives are affected in ways big and small, but at least we're in this seemingly surreal situation together.

That was what I was getting at, anyway. Then someone tweeted back at me: "Not funny."

It's true; a global pandemic isn't funny. But as we all take measures to protect our physical health, we also need to protect our emotional health. So what I responded with was this: "Everyone copes with horrible situations differently. For some, humor is a balm. It's BOTH/AND: It's horrible AND we can allow our souls to breathe."

Both/and is a concept I often share with my therapy patients, but it's especially relevant now if we're going to bolster our psychological immune systems along with our physical ones. Both/and is how I can say to my son "I'm so glad I get to spend this extra time with you" when I walk past his remote classroom (i.e., the den). He'll be going to college in the not-too-distant future, and although the reason he's home with me is horrible, I'm still glad to see him. It's both/and.

Of course, it's normal to feel anxiety right now, and while we need to allow ourselves the space to feel these feelings, we also need to give ourselves the space to let them go. Some anxiety is productive—it's what motivates us to wash our hands often and distance ourselves from others when there's an important reason to do so. If we weren't reasonably worried, none of us would be taking these measures, and the virus would spread even more. But unproductive anxiety—unchecked rumination—can make our mind spin in all kinds of frightening directions. Instead of helping us to stay grounded in the present—*I'm safe and making dinner; I'm snuggled up with my family as we watch this movie; I'm writing this column*—our anxiety spins stories about the future that go something like *I or someone I love will get deathly ill from the coronavirus*.

This kind of anxiety causes us to futurize and catastrophize, both of which take up a lot of emotional real estate. It's a vicious cycle: The more we worry, the more we try to control our worry with something tangible, such as information. But clinging to our screens for the latest update has the opposite effect because it serves as fodder for more futurizing and catastrophizing. A daily update makes sense. But bingeing on up-to-the-minute news is like stress eating—it's bloating our minds with unhealthy food that will make us feel sick.

A few years ago, a patient of mine who was going through cancer treatment told me that she'd come to a realization: She could think about her cancer all day, about the uncertainty of what might happen, or she could feel her fear at times but also be present in her life *right now*. She could watch Netflix with her husband and have a dance party with her young children and belt out a song in the shower in between her moments of understandable fear.

Today, she's cancer-free—for now. She's aware that the cancer could come back. *Is that cough just reflux or something else? Is this fatigue at the end of the weekend due to three birthday parties, a soccer match, and a child's piano recital, or a possible recurrence?* It's on her mind daily, the way COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, is on most of our minds daily, but the anxiety no longer consumes her the way she imagined it would, because when she had cancer, she became a master at living in the mindset of both/and.

All of this ordinariness connects us at a time when we need connection the most. We're calling people and talking voice-to-voice, giving them our full attention when we ask, "How are you?" because we're particularly invested in the answer. We're taking quiet walks with a friend or family member. We're experiencing the intimacy of seeing inside our co-workers' bedrooms with their hastily made beds in our Zoom meetings. We're asking about their parents, siblings, spouses, and children in a way we don't normally do at the office. We're publicly reaching out on social media to recommend books, movies, podcasts, soothing playlists, and museums we can visit virtually while we're separate but oh-so-together in our fear. In this world that has had trouble practicing civility lately, we are experiencing a much-needed resurgence of kindness.

And, yes, we're laughing about the fact that we can't touch our face. Or about how we're channeling our anxiety into a massive spring cleaning (both Marie Kondo-style and disinfectant-style). Or about how we can't get the "Happy Birthday" song out of our head at night after singing it while washing our hands all day.

For me, in the past couple of days, COVID-19 has gone from a tragic news story to a real threat to people I know. A friend's close friend was hospitalized with the virus. I'm not minimizing the seriousness of this pandemic, and I don't have my head in the sand, but I'm taking good psychological care, and I recommend that all of us pay as much attention to protecting our emotional health as we do to guarding our physical health. A virus can invade our bodies, but we get to decide whether we let it invade our minds.

So let's all let out a big exhale (10 feet away from other people) and remind ourselves to practice both/and as many times a day as we need to.

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We recognize the need to protect ourselves, and our families, both physically and emotionally. Everyone copes with horrible situations differently. Keep in mind...humor can be a balm, allowing our souls to breathe. Right now, I'll go with some humor and fresh air!

Our Lady of Guadalupe, pray for us.

Ms. Heidi Ehrenberg School Counselor