



# Facing the Pandemic With Emotional Agility

## How We Can Protect Against Fear Contagion

As many of us find ourselves in a different world and way of life, we may be feeling a spectrum of new emotions and attempting to adapt and evolve to constant change. In times like these, using emotion to adapt instead of being ruled by emotion is crucial. Susan David, PhD, is an expert in this topic, which is known as “emotional agility,” and serves as the title of her widely read book. As emotional agility is more useful than ever, Susan is partnering with TED in a new podcast called *Checking in with Susan David*.

Below is a summary of the first episode.

## The Contagion of Fear and Panic

The podcast addresses perhaps the most commonly felt emotion of the moment: fear. We all know that the COVID-19 virus is spreading at an alarming rate, but fear and panic can spread even faster. Fortunately, there are steps we can take right now to boost our emotional immunity to the contagion of fear and panic.

We humans are social animals. Our behavior and emotions don't just emerge within ourselves, rather, they are deeply influenced by other people. Research shows that this tendency toward emotional contagion and copying other peoples' behaviors is present even in times of relative calm. Behaviors spread through social networks. This can result in things as innocuous as maintaining your lawn because your neighbors do so.

In times of crisis, social contagion is substantially less innocuous and can have life or death stakes. When people see friends and neighbors wearing surgical masks at grocery stores or on walks, many will feel compelled to hoard and stock up on masks themselves. This hoarding behavior has contributed to a shortage of masks for healthcare workers on the frontlines actually fighting the pandemic.

## Terror Management in Times of Pandemic

How do we better understand this human instinct we are seeing of people hoarding masks and toilet paper? One of the most interesting psychological theories that may help us understand what is going on is called **Terror Management Theory**. Terror Management Theory basically posits that we spend a large amount of time everyday avoiding things that make us fearful.

A prime example of fear in Terror Management Theory is death. Most people spend extensive resources avoiding thinking about death as it causes significant negative emotion. What happens when the thing we fear the most is put right before our eyes? The fact that there is a

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virus, that you might be infected, and you — or your loved ones — may even die brings what is usually at the periphery of our consciousness front and center.

What Terror Management shows is that when this happens, people have fairly predictable responses: they become much more “us versus them” as well as more self-centered. A lot of behavior we are seeing now coincides with the thinking, “I am going to get what I can to protect myself.”

Fear and panic are powerful emotions. Despite all the narratives we hear in society of becoming fearless, they are not emotions we want to get rid of. Emotions like fear and panic evolve to help us survive as a species. But sometimes when we experience fear and panic, we have a particular cognitive reaction to that fear and panic and that reaction can imprison us so it starts owning us rather than us owning it.

### **Key Strategies That Can Help Us Adapt**

So how do we protect ourselves from social contagion? What are strategies that are healthy and available to everyone?

1. **The first is to just be compassionate with yourself.** This fear you are feeling is your body, your psychology, and your evolutionary power as a human being doing its job, which is to feel fear. It is crucial to remember that our emotions are feelings but not facts. Just because we feel fear and we have the inclination to run to the supermarket and hoard does not mean we have to do it. Instead, we can be compassionate with ourselves. We can notice the feeling of fear. We can notice the space between the fear and ourselves and not define ourselves by that fear.
2. **We can start to ground ourselves in the idea that courage is not the absence of fear,** but courage is about noticing your fear, compassion, and curiosity and then doing what matters in your life. We can notice our fear with compassion but ground ourselves in our values. Values, which can sometimes seem like abstract concepts, are guidance systems of how we want to live our lives and what is truly important to us. Every day we have thousands of choice points at which we can either bring ourselves toward our values or away from them. When we define our values, we open ourselves up beyond the specific emotion of fear to all the parts of ourselves, because we are more than our fear.

### **Exercises to Promote Grounding and Calm**

If you are feeling consumed by panic, fear, worry, or any other difficult emotion, the following exercise may help you. Name the difficult emotion and then ask yourself, “What is the function of this emotion?” We often don’t think of our emotions in terms of what function they have. Yet every single emotion is a flashing arrow indicating something you care about.

For example, when you feel grief, that grief might be a loss of connection with someone who you value and care about. That grief is an indication that you love, and that love is important to you. If you are feeling guilty as a parent right now, that may be an indication that you value



presence and connectedness with your children, and that in all the chaos there is not enough of that meaningful connection. If your fear is that you are going to lose people you really care about, this indicates that you care. You may want to reach out to those people today.

The exercise here is not to ignore the emotion, but to ask, “What is the function of the emotion? What is it trying to signal to me? What is it telling me about how I am, and what I care about?” It is that function that provides a guiding light for you as you move forward with your day.

If you are feeling like things are chaotic, and you need to just ground yourself in the reality of the here and now, here is another simple exercise you can do: Sit down just for a couple of minutes with a piece of paper in front of you. 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?” Then just write. You might write for one minute or one hour. What we know is this value-affirmation exercise is an incredibly powerful force against social and emotional contagion. It moves us from the space of thinking our values are abstract ideas into seeing our values as front and center — into being more agile, more focused, and more connected.

As you move through the week, there will be news and social media content that conspires for your attention. Your partner, friends, loved ones, and children will be conspiring for your attention as well. It will be easy to get caught up in social contagion, fear, and panic. But try to keep this idea in your mind: Who is in charge, the thinker or the thought?

### Quick Takeaways to Share

Feeling strong emotions such as fear and panic during uncertain times is normal. This is your mind and body trying to protect you. Yet, we do need to be careful with the contagious nature of emotion and work together to not spread fear needlessly.

Some strategies to mitigate fear and lean into a more values-focused reaction are:

- **Compassion** is crucial in any difficult situation. Have compassion for your fear and for how well you are coping.
- **Name** your emotions and create a space between the emotion and yourself. You are not your fear.
- **Courage** is not the absence of fear but the facing of fear, panic, and uncertainty – notice these emotions with curiosity.
- **Values** are critical to navigating stressful situations, take the time to write down, “Who do I want to be, what is important to me?” This will help guide you toward the life you want to build and put things into perspective.