

Mental and social health during the corona pandemic

Dealing with troubling thoughts

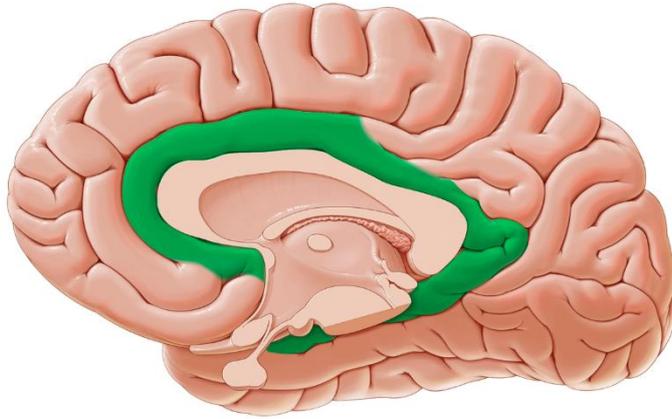
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Disturbing times

In these days with the coronavirus, society shut-down and overload of crisis information, many people experience anxiety and worry. Perhaps not so strange, after all, there is a real cause for concern. Not only a concern related to the virus itself, but also a concern related to the consequences of the virus and the measures taken. You should know that the Public Health Institute, the Directorate of Health and our governing authorities in many ways want to create a certain level of concern, simply because they want us to understand the seriousness and thus understand the need for the measures that have been initiated. In the literature, we use the English term "sense of urgency" to explain the dynamics between experiencing change and the need to do something about it NOW, and not wait until tomorrow.

This means that we should all be somewhat concerned now, but the degree of concern, what I am worried about and how often I worry can be influenced by ourselves. You should know that worry is first and foremost a perception and that this perception is a thought that tells you that something is threatening; that there is danger. We know that when we have such thoughts, we also get a fear response in the body. This fear response can vary in size, from a slight body turmoil to a more extensive response, with palpitations, chest pressure, increased breathing, thicker saliva, headaches, dizziness and tremors.

We have a small area in the middle of the brain that we call the limbic system. This system controls the fear response in our body. This is, in many ways, a very good system because it helps us to understand that there is danger nearby, and by sending discomfort in our body it will help us to understand that we need to act; to avoid the danger. The body is put into, what many have probably heard of, a *fight or flight mode*, or a stress response. The limbic system is basically so functional that it works almost automatically, almost like we have a brain in the brain. This means that when you become truly frightened, it is not something you choose through a rational and conscious process, the limbic system has already made that choice for you, automatically. Conscious thoughts still play a role in activating the limbic system, which I will return to. For me as a clinical psychologist, the limbic system, which you see is highlighted in green in the picture below, is particularly fascinating and by learning about how this works you can both explore it yourself and challenge the automatics. Because that's exactly what you need to do to deal with worrying thoughts, especially if you have many such thoughts and if those thoughts cause frequent or persistent stress response in your body.



Our brain is a very interesting organ and we think that the structure of the brain reflects the evolution of us humans. I'm not going to go into detail about the brain, that's not the point, but we can say that the brain has three basic parts. The first part is the brain stem, then we have the limbic system and finally Neocortex, the wavy substance that is outside the green field in the image, which you see when you look at the brain from the outside. It is in Neocortex that we reason, decide and think consciously. This part of the brain has evolved lately in our evolution. The limbic system, located in the middle of our brain, can in many ways be said to be our ancient brain and has many similarities to other animals and primates.

Since we humans have gradually developed Neocortex with conscious and rational thoughts, the limbic system has not completely caught on. The limbic system does not understand the difference between whether you are facing a real danger, let's say a lion, or if you think of the danger, that you are thinking of a lion. This means that humans do not have to face physical danger to become scared, we can actually *think/make ourselves scared*. And the limbic system does not understand the difference between an objective danger and a thought of danger, it activates the same fear response in both cases.

In addition, when the limbic system is activated, it helps us to "scan" the surroundings for signs of danger. This is quite functional because it helps us focus on the most important thing for survival; search for anything that might threaten us. Therefore, searching for things that *cannot* threaten us is not relevant to this system. This is perfect if we live in a jungle with many dangerous animals, but few of us do. And since the limbic system does not understand the difference between a real danger and the idea of a danger, then a thought of danger, that is, a troubling thought, will quickly lead me to look for signs that confirm this danger. So, for example, if I'm worried about getting the Coronavirus, then almost automatically, because the worry activates the limbic system, I will be looking for signs that I have the virus in my body. Then the fear response itself can be similar to the symptoms of the virus. I am not saying this to trivialize the virus, but to explain how concerns, the limbic system and fear responses are interconnected and that it can trick us into believing something that is not actually real.

What are *my* concerns and concerns within my family?

In these times, there can be many different worries. Friday afternoon a man told me; *"This has been the worst week of my life, me working at home and two kids at home school. This virus will reduce the population growth, not because of the virus itself, but the measures introduced by the Government. More children in our family is not even an option"*. Even though this was expressed in a humorous way, he expressed that the whole situation caused a great deal of stress and that his concern was related to the duration of the measures put in place and not the virus itself. Other people's concerns may be related to finances, whether acute or in the foreseeable future. Many have been temporarily laid off from work, which certainly can be worrying. And it's not just to say to myself that "I don't worry", because a layoff creates real financial uncertainty in the future.

Many of you do not only have your own worries to think about, but also other worries in the family, such as children and adolescents, or your own parents or grandparents. Maybe you have someone around you who is at risk of getting very ill from the virus? And through all the information that comes about the virus these days, in all channels, online and through social media, it is reasonable to understand that many are worried about getting seriously ill by the Coronavirus.

I do not intend to trivialize real concerns, as I mentioned earlier, but it is still possible to make such concerns less burdensome and to reduce the health consequences of these worries.

Yellow, red and green thoughts

Some of you who have children or adolescents may have heard that they have learned about red and green thoughts at school, by the school nurse. Red thoughts are negative thoughts and green ones are positive thoughts. I usually divide thoughts into *three* colors:

- Yellow thoughts: Thoughts that make me insecure and worried
- Red thoughts: Thoughts that conclude that something is negative or that the future is hopeless, especially something that is directed at myself, my own health or my own self-image
- Green thoughts: Thoughts that make me happy and excited, thoughts that are rational and that directly challenge the yellow and red thoughts, thoughts about past positive events or past challenges I / we have come through and managed.

The reason behind this subdivision is a way to explain that when worries arise, because they do, then these yellow thoughts can either turn red or green. And as you learned about the limbic system, troubling thoughts will quickly lead us to look for signs that the concerns are correct and thus yellow thoughts can almost automatically turn into red thoughts. For example, if I'm worried about getting infected (yellow thought) and reading all the worst stories in the media, I can quickly conclude that I'm probably going to die soon (red thought). Then the worry no longer creates just a turmoil in my body, but it can give me a strong fear response, maybe a panic feeling.

Here are some advice dealing with troubling thoughts

1. Explore the concerns of yourself and those around you

Talk about your worries! Have any of the troubling thoughts gone from being yellow thoughts to being red thoughts? Pay attention to children and adolescents, both regarding thoughts they have about themselves, but also what concerns they have about you as parents. For many young people it is worse to think that something is going to happen to their mother or father. Many young people can hold such thoughts inside because they are afraid that the thought is correct. For example, if they ask the question "are we going to die", they are afraid to have this worry confirmed. And remember that this also applies to older people and people in risk groups. Adolescents may also be concerned about family finances. As a youth stated; "I don't know if I can complete the drivers license, because both my mom and dad are laid off." Explore the concerns, ask questions, and address them as you sit around the kitchen table.

2. Normalize the concerns

You should know that it is perfectly normal to be worried at times like these and that all the overwhelming information and initiatives that are initiated naturally will cause concerns for many people. To normalize your

concerns is important; accept that it's natural to be worried. Accepting a concern does not mean that you confirm that the concern is true or real but creates space to talk further about the concerns so that they can be dealt with. Rejecting a concern that others have, without dealing with it, can increase that concern. Remember that when the limbic system is activated, the brain is searching for confirmations of the worrying thoughts. If others dismiss my concern, I will quickly think that they will not talk about it because they are afraid themselves.

3. Have a dialogue about yellow, red and green thoughts and the limbic system

Since you have read this article you can now explain to others the difference between yellow, red and green thoughts and how the limbic system works. Create a dialogue with others about this. You can draw and explain. If you have children and adolescents at home, you can have them draw or write down yellow worrying thoughts and challenge them to come up with green alternative thoughts. Maybe you can help each other come up with green thoughts that everyone can say to each other? Conversations about yellow, red and green thoughts can provide a lot of learning for yourself and your family, which can make you all more resilient also to later life challenges.

4. Identify what concerns you can handle by gathering facts/information

You have seen that there is a huge amount of information on television, on the internet and in social media. Many doctors and experts comment on horror scenarios. It is not easy to know what the facts are when the scope of information is so huge and varied. I recommend that you are very aware of where you are getting the information.

I mainly recommend four websites: www.fhi.no, www.helsedirektoratet.no, www.helsenorge.no, www.regjeringen.no.

On these pages you will find a great deal of information that can reduce concerns about the virus, about who is at risk, about what measures are being taken and what the government is doing to help the finances of businesses and individuals.

5. Identify concerns for the future that you can't really do anything about

Living in uncertainty is not so easy. Many times, we wish we could predict the future. But few of us can! Concerns about the future that is difficult to predict are concerns that cause increased activation and stress over time. We handle such concerns differently; Some say, "don't worry, I can't do anything about it, so I don't bother spending time worrying right now." Others worry a lot about what might happen in the future, and some like to think of the worst-case scenario; "This will end in disaster". It is important that you identify such thoughts and that you can have a dialogue with others and those at home about this. Making each other aware that such thoughts about the future does not solve the challenges you face today, on the contrary, it only makes you more anxious and stressed. Try to tell yourself and others that you cannot control everything that happens in the future and that what you cannot control, you do not need to spend time and energy on. It is not always easy to think this way in uncertain times, but it is important that you try. And remember; practice makes perfect!

Good luck! Remember that many concerns can be managed better by changing your thinking. There's a lot of power in your mind!