Health & Medicine

Staying Sane in a Pandemic-Stricken World

A Columbia psychologist and anxiety expert explains the impulse to “panic buy,” and how to satisfy our need to feel in control.

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Survival shopping, grocery-store scuffles, and a run on toilet paper. In March, consumer behavior took an unusual turn as COVID-19 cases began to surge. Panic-buying is driven by anxiety, and “what makes people anxious is feeling a lack of control over how the pandemic will affect them, their family, and their community,” explains Anne Marie Albano, a clinical psychologist and the director of Columbia’s Clinic for Anxiety and Related Disorders.

While the hunting of Charmin bears might help satisfy that need to control and also a Neanderthal impulse to provide, Albano says it’s important “to recognize the realistic things we should be doing, like paying attention to reliable information.”

We can also keep ourselves grounded by staying connected with family and friends. Although the pandemic is teaching us how to be better long-distance companions and colleagues, Albano cautions that we need to look out for people who are vulnerable to loneliness: “Those who live alone and those who have limiting illnesses or disabilities might spiral into anxiety.”

Albano recommends that parents guard against transferring their fears to their kids. “When children see adults in tense moods, they feel it,” she says. Still, it’s important to be honest with them. To keep kids stimulated, Albano recommends healthy routines. “Children, like adults, need to stay on a schedule, stay physically active, and spend time outside,” she says.

The long-term impacts of COVID-19 on mental health are yet to be seen. “Lives will be permanently changed,” says Albano. Ultimately, she adds, how government officials deal with and talk about the crisis will influence our state of mind. “The public needs trustworthy information if they are to regain a sense of confidence and control.”

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