

Commentary...

Emotional survival tools for a pandemic

By Mitchell Luftig
Columnist

According to Dr. Rick Hanson, our minds are like velcro for negative experiences and teflon for positive experiences. This started with our ancestors' whose survival depended upon paying close attention to the bad things going on around them (was that the snarl of a saber tooth tiger?), which created a "negativity bias" in the information their brains prioritized.

As we hunker down in the face of the current pandemic our bias for negative information may cause us to be consumed with fears about the future: Will my family and friends remain healthy? Will I still have a job when this blows over? Will I be able to pay my bills? How are my children being affected?

An effective tool for diminishing our anxiety about the future is to practice mindfulness. We can find a quiet place to sit and simply focus on our breath, going in and out, using our breath as an anchor to the present moment. When our thoughts turn towards fears about the future, we return our attention to the breath and the present moment. We learn to be present to our immediate experience and as we do our fear diminishes. Now we see the joy that was hidden from us.

We can also take steps to directly alter our negativity bias. Dr. Hansen recommends that when you have a positive experience (you view a beautiful sunset, you witness a child's smile, you complete an important

project, someone treats you considerably) that you stay with the positive experience for 5, 10, or 15 seconds. Set a goal each day to actively look for beauty in your world, or signs of caring for you by others, or good qualities within yourself. Let the experience fill your body with positive sensations and emotions. Fully savor the experience. When we practice this exercise we "rewire our brain" learning to prioritize positive experiences.

Our ancestors divided the world into those who were members of their clan who fell under their protection, those just like them, and "strangers" to be met with suspicion, sometimes with fear and violence. During the coronavirus pandemic we may be tempted to compete for critical supplies with "strangers" as we strip the shelves at Ray's and Bi-Mart of critical supplies.

A more adaptive response to the current pandemic is to use the experience to increase our compassion for those who face similar adversity. We can feel compassion towards others who are also scared, anxious, and uncertain about their future. We can recognize that we are truly in this together, that the coronavirus does not discriminate based upon our national origin, our political affiliation, or our wealth or status in life. Everyone in Sisters Country faces the same risk of exposure, all of us have people we love who may be placed at risk if we don't compassionately practice social distancing, sheltering in place, and use of appropriate hygiene.

Living in a pandemic is stressful. Although we know that stress can contribute to health problems, there is evidence that the way we think about stress makes a significant difference in how it impacts us. When we perceive stress as a threat we are more likely to activate the brain's fight or flight emergency system. Meant to respond to an immediate threat, when our fight or flight system remains turned on over a prolonged period, it may sap our immune system, just when we need it the most to help us fight off the coronavirus.

However, when we view stress as a challenge rather than as a threat, the brain's fight or flight mechanism doesn't remain activated and our immune systems continue to operate effectively. So instead of viewing the coronavirus as a threat, we can view it as a challenge. We can challenge ourselves to seek out objective information about how best to protect ourselves, our families, and vulnerable populations from the coronavirus. We can challenge ourselves to make wise financial decisions. We can challenge ourselves to build a stronger connection to our children, helping them build resilience that will enable them to bounce back from future stressful events and hardships. When we believe that — over time — our behavior makes a difference, we increase our optimism

about the future.

One of the prime drivers of happiness is social connectedness. The coronavirus pandemic provides us with an invitation to reach out to our neighbors in Sisters Country, providing them with support and assistance, whether by offering to shop for someone at higher risk, watching neighbors' children so that they can shop or work from home, or by ordering takeout to support our local businesses. Doing so, we deepen our connections to our neighbors and instead of living amongst strangers, we realize that we live amongst friends.

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Permit release delayed

The Deschutes and the Willamette National Forests are postponing the initial release of the Central Cascades Wilderness permits due to COVID-19 public health and safety measures and to avoid potential issues with reservations.

Permits were originally planned to be released on April 7.

"The uncertainties of COVID-19 are short and long term," said Deschutes Forest Supervisor Holly Jewkes. "We continue to focus on the safety, health and well-being of our employees and the public at this time."

Updates will be provided in early May about the availability of permits and implementation of the Central Cascades Wilderness permit system.

The USFS currently does not know if it will be able to honor early summer reservations.

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Jim Cornelius, Editor in Chief

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