

Coronavirus is freaking my intellectually disabled sister out



I have a 60-year-old sister named Joanne. She lives with an intellectual disability.

It used to annoy me when people asked me what Jo's "mental age" was. It's not as simple as saying she's like a six-year-old or an eight-year-old. She lives in a group home near me, catches public transport, works at a social firm (what used to be called a "sheltered workshop"), uses a cell phone and mucks around on the internet, all things adults do. But she also likes playing with dolls, coloring books, and she has a vivid fantasy life.

I pick her up most Saturdays. We have coffee and she updates me on her "babies", Chloe and Susie. I try to show genuine interest in her dolls' endless progress through babyhood, which includes vaccinations, sleepless nights, and teething.

Sometimes I feel like Lars' brother in that film, *Lars and the Real Girl*. I even go to thrift stores with her to shop for baby clothes for her dolls. You might struggle to imagine me holding up teeny jumpsuits to see if they're stained or fraying, but, well, I do.

Joanne is easily thrown when her schedule or her environment changes. She already feels powerless and can become highly anxious with new challenges. She reports to me on criminal activity she's seen on the news. She points out all the police cars and ambulances we pass. It's an anxiety response.

But this year it's gotten worse.

First, it was Australia's devastating fire season this past summer. Joanne kept asking if the bushland around her place would burn. And if it did, she wondered, could the flames reach her home? Every time she saw a fire truck she'd ask if it was going to her place.

I'd assure her she was safe. For months I'd assure her. Then, a supermarket in her street was broken into one night. The robbers got away with cash and cigarettes. The next day, while Jo and I were in a thrift store she asked me if the crooks would rob the store with us in it. I reassured her we were safe. I made up some story about the robbers hiding out in their house, terrified of the cops.

But now, it's coronavirus. She reports on what she's heard — about how bad it is, how people are dying, how events are being cancelled, how the hospitals will be flooded with sick people. It freaks her out.

But then she self-soothes by telling me she'll be alright.

"I'm not going to get it, am I, Mike?" she asks me, faking defiance.

I know that Jo really wants reassurance, but I'm left speechless, uncertain of whether a good lie will help calm her fears. I tell her to stay off public transportation, and to wash her hands regularly, and to keep a distance from people. But I can't tell her she won't get it. And I can't tell her I won't get it.

Spending time with Joanne is like spending time with anyone, but without a filter. She says the things others think but won't say. Her fears might be somewhat more elevated than others, but only somewhat. We're all freaking out.

After the horrors of Australia's Black Summer, the devastation of the Thai mall massacre, the shocking death of Kobe Bryant, the US assassination of General Soleimani and fears of another world war, now it's a pandemic without a vaccine. And that's *just 2020!!*

People's anxieties are compounding.

I've had several friends tell me they've sought out therapy to try to get their anxiety and sleeplessness under control. So much bad news is causing stress and adrenal fatigue.

In a very helpful [article](#) on the negative effects of the news cycle, Jody Lightfoot writes, ***"Researchers have found that too much negative***

news produces moods of anxiety and sadness. These mood changes intensify our personal worries, even if they aren't related to the news stories being broadcast."

Lightfoot suggests a series of very practical ways to reduce anxiety in times of constantly negative news. They include:

1. **Put limits on your exposure to the news.** He writes, "Select one block of time. Make this block of time more educational by supporting organisations that choose accuracy over hyperbole, reliability over gossip, fair news over fake news, and objectivity over bias."
2. **Be aware of your negativity bias.** Humans have evolved with a capacity to assess threats, so we have an inbuilt bias toward reading news about troubling events. Lightfoot calls it our "negativity bias", and it's strong, so we need to be conscious about our need to resist it.
3. **Decide to pause for at least 90 seconds.** Lightfoot explains: "When you are triggered by a news story like Coronavirus, your body sets off an automatic process where your brain releases chemicals into the body that produces emotions like anxiety and fear. Neuroanatomist, Dr Jill Bolte Taylor says it takes 90 seconds for those chemicals to totally flush out the body from the initial trigger." Consider setting a timer.
4. **Focus your attention on your breath.** Know when you're breathing in, know when you're breathing out.
5. **As negative thoughts arise, notice them but don't follow them.** When you get lost in your thoughts, refocus your attention on your breath. He explains, "We can't do much about the inevitable suffering that comes with being human, but we can remove an enormous amount of unnecessary suffering we create with our thoughts."

My sister's negativity bias is pretty highly tuned. She's aware of the precariousness of her life. She feels powerless. But really she's just like you, but without a filter.

We're all freaking out. A bit. Or a lot.
It's hard to keep perspective.

Read Jody Lightfoot's article. It's really helpful. Also, share the good stories. I recently posted a few good stories from the pandemic and asked others to do the same. I got a thread full of wonderful examples of human nobility and generosity. Here's a few:

- People in Italy are singing to each other across the empty streets and squares.
 - A pub in West Ireland is delivering free meals to the housebound.
 - Supermarket chains are opening stores earlier (6am, instead of 7am) and dedicating the first two hours to senior and differently abled shoppers.
 - A church in Texas is taking shopping orders from the elderly and paying for groceries to be delivered to their homes.
 - People in Venice say that they can see fish in the canals again.
 - Fitness instructors in high rise buildings in the US leading balcony fitness sessions.
 - The churches of the Southern Baptist Convention set a whole Sunday aside to pray for those suffering during this pandemic.
 - A friend of mine in Sydney put a note in all his neighbours' letterboxes letting them know his phone number and asking if they needed anything or wanted to talk.
 - A hotel chain in Britain has said it could turn its properties into temporary hospitals if the NHS needs additional bed space during the outbreak.
 - People in Wuhan say they can hear birds again now that the hubbub of noise has died down, and with the closure of factories the sky is blue again.
 - Louis Vuitton is using the production lines of their perfume and cosmetic brands to produce large quantities of hand disinfectant gel.
- As Donella Matthews once said, "There is too much bad news to justify complacency. There is too much good news to justify despair."

Try to stay positive, folks. And I'll try to get Joanne through the worst of it.

by Michael Frost |