PERSPECTIVE ARTICLE

COVID-19, FEAR AND THE FUTURE: AN ATTACHMENT PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This brief paper summarizes and appraises two prominent psychological accounts of the role fear plays in human life: (1) terror management theory and (2) attachment theory, highlighting research demonstrating that attachment security moderates the experience of fear. Moreover, the suggestion is made that fear of loss of loved ones, and fear of loss of love, is the primary source of fear and anxiety in human life. This paper also highlights the importance and value of showing 'reflective functioning' regarding our anxieties or 'mentalizing' fear so that we are better prepared for inevitable pandemics in the future. Public health infrastructures must be nourished and reinforced, just as heroic economic and technological changes are needed, so that we may more effectively cope with the fears, destruction and death arising on a regular basis on account of the radical adverse events (hotter and bigger wild fires, longer and more damaging storms) brought on by climate changes, directly linked to foolish and greedy human choices and behaviors.

Key words: COVID-19, fear, attachment security, terror management theory, reflective functioning

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So what does COVID-19 information do to you? Does it make you fear for loss of your own life? Or does it make you worry about harm coming to loved ones? And worry perhaps about not being around to protect others? And share in the ongoing narratives that characterizes life with people?

Are you guided by 'terror management theory' or are you guided by 'attachment theory'? And what might be the benefits of 'mentalizing fear'? This brief communication provides an overview of these two heavily researched alternative theories concerning the question 'what is the basic human anxiety or fear'? And offers a viewpoint on the definite organizing influences of 'mentalizing fear', i.e. deeply considering (some of) the many sources of fear at the present moment, reflecting on the causes and consequences of current fears, and taking steps to prepare for the post-Corona future.

The 'shelter in place' mandate in place across the globe essential to war against the 2020 invisible viral enemy new to the human species invites questions about fear. How often do we think about falling ill from the virus, and like the 2-10% who do become infected -- die, what would we fear? Our answer may reflect the position we hold regarding the longstanding psychological question, i.e., what is the fundamental human fear? Philosophers and psychoanalysts have debated this question for centuries. Below, reflections are offered concerning two classic psychoanalytic answers to this question: (1) the fear of annihilation and (2) the fear of loss of loved ones, the fear of the loss of love, and the fear of separation from loved ones; with an additional perspective (3) on the benefits of mentalizing fear.

Fear of annihilation

Some core psychoanalytic ideas build on existential thought, i.e. existence before essence. Or existence is essence. And, accordingly, fear of death, and specifically fear of one's personal death is the fundamental fear. Sigmund Freud (1926) detailed many sources of anxiety and fear, including annihilation anxiety – the fear of being obliterated. COVID-19 no doubt activates this anxiety, to the extent that it is present in people, with the possibly inexorable path toward annihilation of the self and dying alone. This particular fear of one's own death was thoroughly explored in the seminal work of the cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker in his 1973 book, *The Denial of Death*. There is no better account of existential thought rooted in Freud's idea of annihilation anxiety and later embraced (in the 1930s) as the fundamental fear in human life by Otto Rank. For Otto Rank, and Albert Adler this fear is what drives us to seek and maintain power and to leave a lasting hopefully immortal influence on the future, by way of economic, political, or technological achievements. For Becker, these 'heroic' narcissistic pursuits of power almost inevitably lead to evil mistreatment of human beings, other animals and the earth itself – all in the name of protecting our way of life. For Becker the solution is understanding and breaking the tight connection between the denial of death and the dominion of evil, via heroic transpersonal collective action that offers greater protection of the earth, and her inhabitants. While, at the same time, the needed heroic

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action may lead us to fear our own inevitable personal death, just a little bit less.

Becker's ideas percolated through the social sciences and consolidated in the 1980s in social psychology as 'terror management theory', the idea that conscious and unconscious fears of our own personal death require that we control or manage that anxiety. Accordingly events and experiences may be measured in terms of their 'mortality salience' or capacity to activate our fear of death. COVID-19 is loaded with 'mortality salience'. Action under the influence of 'mortality salience' is likely to be impulsive, skewed, irrational and aggressive. But like any theory concerning some general shared emotional influence, what follows are studies of 'individual differences' in that phenomenon. So it was observed by Mikulincer and Florian (2000) that adults with 'secure' couple or romantic relationships, who value relationships and can depend on others while also remaining available to others as a source of support --- such individuals are much *less likely* to be adversely effected by 'mortality salience' primes (e.g. pictures of strained hospital ICUnits, with frightened and collapsed doctors). So the fear of annihilation of the self may not be the fundamental anxiety in human life.

Fear of loss of loved ones, of loss of love, and separation from loved ones

John Bowlby (1907-1990) zoned in on what may indeed be the fundamental human anxiety when he built a theory of human motivation based on Freud's (1926) idea that the fundamental anxiety in human life is fear of loss of love, or fears following from actual loss of loved ones, i.e. Separation Anxiety. A tool box of attachment research methods has built up over 50 years since Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) introduced and elaborated on his ideas that would become attachment theory – arguably the most powerful scientific theory concerning the fundamental influence of early relationships (with mother, father and other caregivers) upon personality development and mental health across the lifespan, and across generations. The core idea is a simple one: There is a biologically based impetus to form and maintain enduring emotional relationships with others deemed stronger, wiser and (hopefully) benevolent in their actions. When babies experience sensitive and responsive care from adults, acting on their own memories of being well-enough loved and cared for in sensitive and responsive ways, then children thrive and develop resilient coping skills. 'Resilient' here is taken to mean the ability to turn to others for help and guidance when in doubt, together with a desire to help, and confidence in providing support, to others in need.

There is more than a half-century of research showing that infants with a secure attachment to their primary caregiver (typically mother) are less prone to the experience of anxiety and fear. Yet, over time as language develops, these securely attached children are significantly *more* likely to have words that permit them to label and discuss their feelings including fear (Steele, Steele & Croft, 2008). And a negative feeling labelled and discussed safely with others is a less threatening feeling.

Mentalizing Fear

Mentalizing is synonymous with Reflective Functioning (Steele & Steele, 2008). Mentalizing refers to the calm and deliberate task of trying to make sense of the mental states, beliefs, desires and fears that animate behavior in the self and others. The central importance of mentalizing to mental health arose out of attachment research with its core assumptions regarding the interpersonal nature of mind (Fonagy et al, 1991), and the belief that meaning in human life arises out of the groups we belong to, intimate pair-bonds that comprise families in all their diverse forms. When material and informational resources are plentiful, mentalizing skills are demonstrated by leaders, whether they be heads of families or political leaders in society --- in both cases, the leaders of the groups concerned, ought to be devoted to looking after their members via sensitive and responsive caregiving. The overwhelming trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic and public health crisis is that our political leaders, across the globe, have often been lacking in coherence, consistency, resources and guidance. With health systems across the globe being strained to breaking points. And wild irrational conspiracy theories taking hold. When people are deprived of consistent, truthful information (however sad and troubling), non-truthful alternative (conspiracy) theories thrive, and fear grows. And all the while the virus disproportionally harms poor, marginalized groups with the least resources (the elderly, the poor, immigrants and refugees).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we need calm discussions of our fears. These conversations ought to emanate from high political offices and resonate from personal discussions with family, friends and co-workers. This will naturally lead to sympathetic and supportive behavior that may be seen as heroic problem-solving strategies. These strategies take the form of everyday actions (like washing one's hands for 20 seconds and restricting self-touch of one's face), as well as large-scale coordinated scientific efforts at developing treatments (ramping up the production and delivery of life-saving ventilators and protective gear for front-line health care workers) and, longer term, vaccine developments -- all this can do much to attenuate the fears currently (and reasonably) felt on a universal scale. But this is only an account of how to deal with the present COVID-19 threat, what of the future?

With respect to the post-Corona world, it will be undeniably a new world compared to the pre-Corona world, and ought to be a new world --- where threats to public health are more closely monitored, tracked and prepared for. A world where the destructive influences of climate change are no longer denied by powerful leaders more interested in exploiting the earth's resources than nurturing (planting trees) and protecting (investing in renewable resources) the earth. This must be more than a hope, else we will inhabit a future that sees us lurch helplessly from one public health crisis to the next, and from one climate-linked trauma (flood, storms, forest fires) to the next. It is time to understand our fears, confront them and take steps to attenuate them via brave (heroic) political, economic and social justice oriented actions. As well as small local actions, that have fortunately been widely reported, of reaching out to family, neighbors and strangers (with humor, song, dance, and deep affection) in respect of required social distances. Hope must be rooted in organized, thoughtful, humane action, and through such efforts, fear will be most successfully managed.

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