

## COVID-19 Panic: The Virus of the Mind

Shereeza Boodhoo, B.A.Psych., M.S.W., R.S.W.

I know you're struggling. You are not alone. Some of us are struggling more than others, and some are barely struggling at all.... I'm going to come back to those people in a moment.

Over the past weeks, I've seen a lot of infographics, memes and videos from doctors, nurses, conspiracy theorists, (and even random people with unknown credentials) being passed around, unchecked, on social media and messaging apps. All of this feeds into the panic and fear. And which threat are we fearing these days? Illness, death and prolonged isolation.

On the other hand, how many forwards have you received of the recovery stories, or of the mild symptoms? Or of those who are on the path to recovery at home? How many inspirational stories or videos have you sent to others? We have a role to play.

Let's talk about these people that are managing relatively well in light of this COVID-19 pandemic. What do they know that we don't?

### 1. They're Taking Control By:

- . Limiting exposure to COVID-19 information. It's okay to read from CREDIBLE sources maybe once a day, but don't punish yourself with unnecessary and unfounded information throughout the day. When you receive forwards, you're not obligated to view it.
- . Limiting exposure to COVID-19 itself. Stay indoors. You're not *stuck at home*. You're *staying safe*. Further, think of how many lives you are saving. Remember, people can unknowingly be carriers of the virus, all the while spreading it to people whose body will **not** be able to hide the virus. If you do go out, stay within government regulations and take all the precautions you can (hand-sanitizers, hand-washing with soap, touching few surfaces as possible, wearing gloves and a mask, avoiding touching your face and eyes etc.). Remember, the Prophet (saw) said "Tie your camel first, then trust in Allah", which means, do your best, cover your bases, then leave the rest to whatever Allah chooses to reveal.

### 2. They're Staying Focused on Today:

In times like this, we tend to use TWO very specific Unhealthy Thinking Styles, which I'm sure you can relate to:

- a) Catastrophizing, which is imagining and believing in the worst case scenario. (e.g. "We're going to run out of food or barely survive on scraps. We will starve! There will be riots! Society will collapse!")
- b) Fortune-Telling, which is acting as if we know what will happen in the future. (e.g. "This virus will die out by mid-Summer, but probably return by fall. Life won't go back to normal until 2021")

We don't know what will happen in three weeks, or four months. Perhaps the curve will flatten or perhaps effective treatment will be developed sooner than expected. Our minds tend towards the worst in uncertain times. However, I'm encouraging you to focus on what is happening for **you today**. Today is all we can grasp. We can't even grasp last night. We only have this moment. We can't waste our valuable time and mental energy on imaginary apocalyptic, dystopian near-futures. No. Don't say, "Coronapocalypse". Instead, say "a setback that one day we will all look back on as a faint memory."

### **3. They're Shaping Their Reality**

How many times have you been at school and work, and thought to yourself, "Gosh, I wish I could just be at home, snuggling up on the couch and watching a good show, or get around to my To-Do list." The grass is always greener on the other side. Well, in a way, you're standing on the other side. And if you feel your grass isn't green, water it! Now is your chance. Take advantage of your free-time before your occupation.

Do those chores you've been meaning to get to. Organize your space and clean it up. It will increase your sense of comfort and peace at home. Learn that skill and read up on that info you've been meaning to look up for months and years. Research that trip you've been wanting to look into, because there WILL be a tomorrow and a next month and next year. Learn how to cook that dish you love from that restaurant. Implement that 10 minute workout routine you've been meaning to get started. Spend that quality time with your family. Call and email those people you've lost touch with. Detox your belongings by gathering items to donate (think of clothes you haven't worn in two or more years, or old toys and books). After this is over, someone who needs your items can use them.

As the Prophet reminded us, "Take advantage of five before five: your youth before your old age, your health before your illness, your riches before your poverty, your free time before your work, and your life before your death."

The last thing you want is to look back on the beautiful time and energy that was lost which you can't get back because now you're once again wrapped up in the daily grind. Seize your 'Now'! Whether you like it or not, now is your moment to relax and invest in yourself and those around you. Use your anxiety to motivate you, but you don't have time and energy to waste on fears and worries.

Come out of this stronger, enriched and accomplished!

#### **Bio:**

Shereeza is a clinical counsellor with GTA Wellness Consultation. She also published a therapeutic muslim children's book, and has been a regular contributor to the Islamic Institute of Toronto community for a number of years. Look for additional wellness articles in upcoming newsletters.