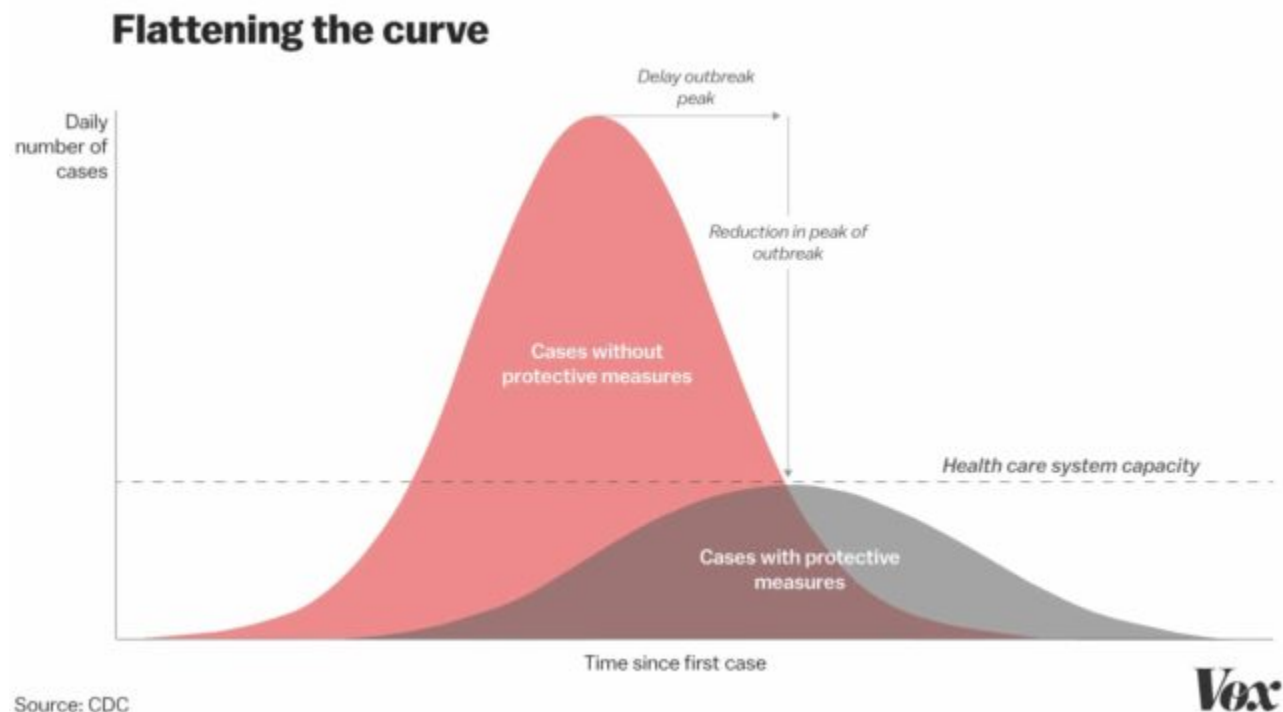




Coronavirus Anxiety: Social Distancing Helps Stop the Spread

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March 12, 2020



A lot of people are understandably anxious and upset about the looming spread of the novel coronavirus — called COVID-19 — in the United States. When faced with the unknown, with a scarcity of data, and disagreement among scientists about the likely infection rates within the US, anxiety appears to be an entirely appropriate emotion to have.

But we can all help to stop the spread of the coronavirus, even if we're not at particularly big risk for getting it or getting sick from it. It's called "social distancing," and it can help a great deal in keeping our national outbreak as low as possible.

Vox created the handy graphic at the top of this article that demonstrates the limitations of any country's healthcare system. A country only builds so many hospitals to serve its population, so it has only so much capacity to deal with a serious pandemic as COVID-19 has become.

This graphic shows how it's best to “flatten the curve” of the number of cases in a pandemic. By keeping the number low, it is hoped that the most serious cases can receive the medical attention they need in the healthcare system.

We can all do our part to help keeping the number low. And in doing so, also help reduce our own anxiety surrounding this outbreak.

Reducing Your Anxiety through Social Distancing

By taking concrete, actionable steps, you can help reduce your coronavirus anxiety. The first is to start engaging in “social distancing” — keeping your distance from large groups of other people. This primarily means staying away from large public gatherings — events, concerts, conferences, parades, town halls, political rallies, etc. This helps to reduce the spread of the disease, while also decreasing your risk of getting it.

Some people need to feel even safer. For those people, social distancing may also mean reducing your overall social contact with all other people as much as possible. They may want to limit going out of their house for any reason, except for work and getting groceries. Many schools are cancelling or considering cancelling classes to limit social contact among children (who seem to be at less risk for catching the coronavirus).

Optional social activities — such as going out to eat or hanging with your friends in a bar or coffeehouse — should also be reconsidered. While small social gatherings don't carry nearly the same risk as larger ones, many just feel safer staying at home as much as possible during this time of uncertainty. And that's perfectly okay.

Additional Tips for Reducing Anxiety

There is no one “right” way of dealing with your anxiety, because different people have different levels of anxiety, as well as the ability to tolerate anxious feelings. Most people will eventually succumb to low-level, constant anxiety, however. You need to find a way to acceptance.

Acceptance means allowing that there is a lot of unknown when it comes to COVID-19, and despite all of our best precautions and efforts, many people (some even say that *most of us*) will still end up getting it. A high fever with a gradual onset, dry cough, shortness of breath, and muscle aches are all symptoms of the novel coronavirus. This differs from the seasonal flu by the absence of a runny nose, and sometimes, a headache or sore throat. Seasonal flu also doesn't usually have an accompanying shortness of breath (unless you have a preexisting asthmatic or lung disorder).

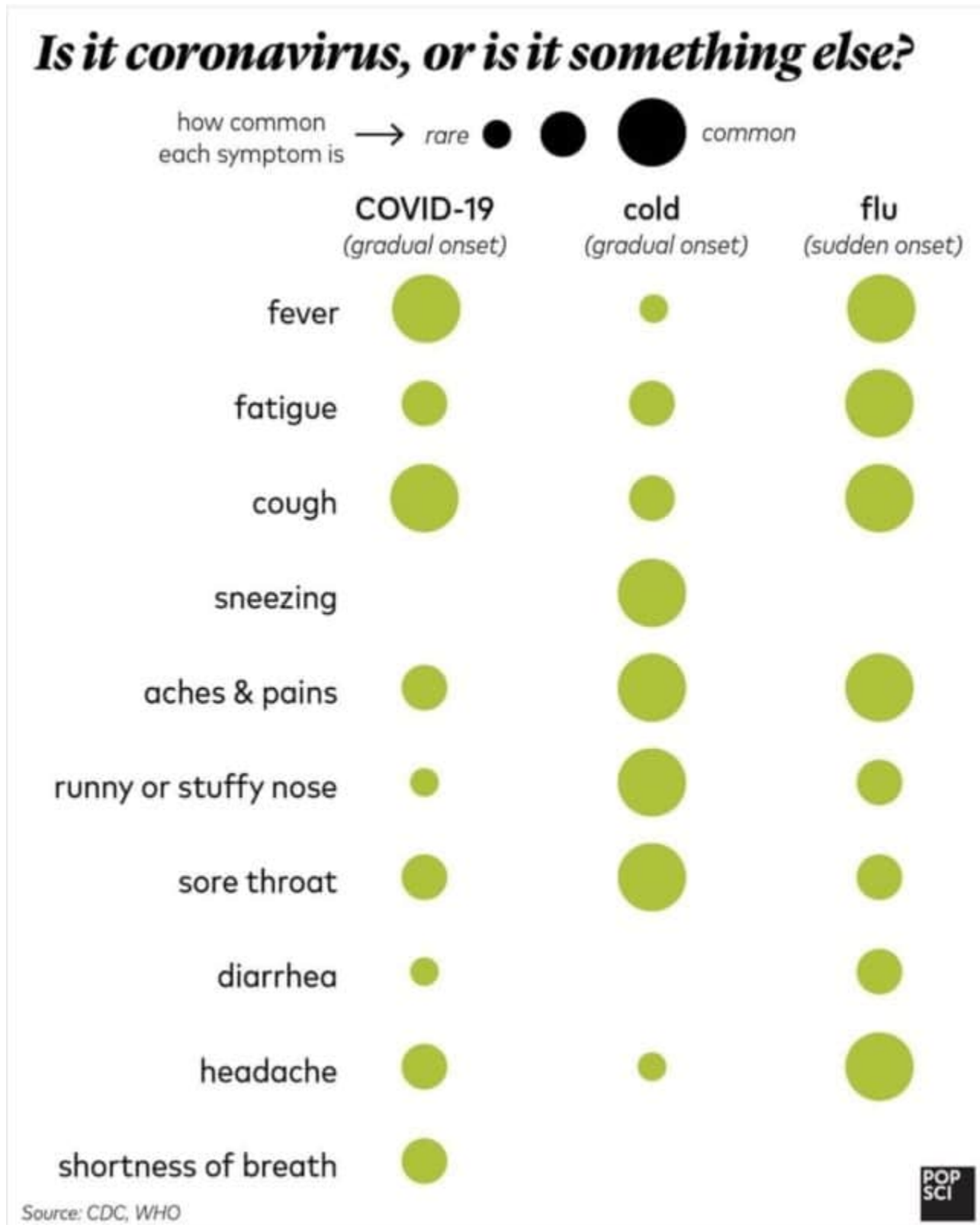
Keep the threat in context. As with any pandemic, most people who get it do not suffer from the most severe symptoms that require hospitalization. And most people who get it don't die. While the death rates are likely 10x to 15x higher than the seasonal flu, most people will recover from COVID-19 in just a few weeks. News media drive traffic to their websites and programs by over-estimating the threat, so keep things in perspective when you read the constant news updates.

Focus on your own needs and the things that bring you comfort and keep anxiety at bay. Maybe that means spending more time with certain close friends or family. Maybe it means exercising, reading, or gaming more. Maybe it means isolating oneself in one's own apartment or home, and hunkering down until the worst has past. This is the time to pamper yourself, to take of yourself and your own emotional needs first. Self-care is key to get through any crisis.

Stop following the news (especially multiple times per day) on the outbreak. This may seem counter-intuitive ("I need to be kept informed!"), but if the constant updates are causing you increased anxiety, you can remove that stimulus from your environment. Consider taking a technology break. The numbers will likely continue to rise in the US for weeks, maybe even months to come. Being bombarded by the constant drumbeat of these rising numbers can be overwhelming to most. Just review updates once per day to stay informed.

But don't isolate yourself if you crave and need social contact. While technology has done a lot to help fill the gap, face-to-face contact doesn't need to be entirely avoided. You're perfectly safe visiting with friends and family, as long as you take the normal precautions you've heard a million times already (e.g. washing your hands, try to avoid touching your face, etc.). If you're still afraid of going out to a public spot like a bar, restaurant, or coffeehouse, consider just going over one another's house for the time being.

You will get through this coronavirus anxiety and come out the other side of the pandemic okay. Just don't panic, use your common sense, and take reasonable precautions and measured actions to help keep yourself safe.



Coronavirus vs flu vs cold graphic

Image credits: Vox, PopSci



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