

## COVID-19, ANXIETY, AND FEAR

A recent study has shown that more than sixty per cent of UK adults report feeling worried about how COVID-19 is affecting their lives. The main problems include worry about the future (63%) feeling stressed or anxious (56%) and feeling bored (56%) (Marshall et al. 2020); my recent experience is that such feelings are not confined to the UK.

Having experienced the long UK Lockdown, I have flown into Malta this week to do business and Visit Family. I have experienced the effect on two elderly persons who I know that the pandemic is having on their lives. Before the pandemic, they used to be very happy to go outside, to visit restaurants and theatres. Today they hardly go out at all, and the furthest they will go is to a church a few hundred yards away. One of them is extremely fearful of catching COVID-19, and believes what she says are frequent reports that even persons who are fully (Doubly) vaccinated can contract COVID-19 and die. Hence they now question what Vaccination was for after all.

Unvaccinated persons are more likely to become infected with COVID-19 and are more likely to spread the illness. Of course COVID-19 could be spread by vaccinated hosts harbouring the virus, but the chance of this happening, although as yet unquantified, is surely much less than with persons who are vaccinated.

The truth is that the effect of all of this on my two elderly ladies, who need to be able to go out in order to live their lives, and who are now very isolated, may be in fact more concerning than the risk of their contracting COVID-19.

There are some things we could do to help reduce anxiety and fear of COVID-19.

The first thing is to recognise that what we as individuals want to achieve by 'Managing' the epidemic is different from what governments of states want to achieve. An individual person may not want to contract the illness, while a government may be aiming simply to reduce the incidence of the illness so that the country's services are not overwhelmed. The objective of the Government is more possible and realistic than that of the individual, who really wants the illness to stop and go away, (which might be unachievable), but the mismatch between the individual's objective and that of Government may mean that, whatever the results of Government policy are, those individuals who want the illness to go away will see the results as failure, and will continue to be fearful and anxious.

The only way to solve this problem is for Government to be extremely clear in its communication as to what its objectives are and how it aims to achieve them.

Next the problem arises that COVID-19 is a new disease, so guidelines on treatment change frequently as new information is found. Guidelines are very useful when a disease is known and treatment is likely to remain the same for several years, but they are much less useful if treatment changes rapidly in a new disease. This has happened, for example, with the question of whether to vaccinate pregnant women (Girling 2021, Womersley et al. 2021). At first, because early trials did not include pregnant persons, it was not advised that pregnant persons should be vaccinated, later, as more information became available, it was recognised that pregnant persons should in fact be vaccinated (Mahase 2021). This is very simply how guidance develops as knowledge develops, but the change caused confusion, including some persons who now feared following the latest guidance, and this has been exacerbated because, since each country has a different licensing system, the changes were brought in by different countries at different times, leading to doubt by patients as to which guidelines should be followed. The same problem has arisen with breastfeeding mothers, so that in the UK, breastfeeding doctors actually have considered lying about their breastfeeding status, so as to get the vaccine (Hare & Womersley 2021) while previous advice cast doubt on of the safety of the vaccine in breastfeeding women (Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation 2020, Rimmer 2021).

One understands that the media will wish to analyze in detail every new piece of guidance, but this analysis, if done injudiciously, can lead to further confusion for the general public. What all this illustrates is that clear, simplified, messaging is really essential to achieve optimal vaccination rates and to reduce anxiety and fear in the population which is threatened by COVID-19. There is a responsibility on all Media to avoid spreading false information, but also to avoid complex detailed discussion which may confuse people every time there is a change in advice, but rather to explain clearly the reasons for the change.

### References

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Mark Agius, MD  
Board Member of Cen.Stu.Psi.  
Retired Associate Specialist, Bedford, UK