How to worry better

As the coronavirus outbreak continues, the science of dealing with uncertainty can help us make better decisions, says Rachel McCloy

Many people seem to be dealing with the current coronavirus outbreak in one of two ways: by panicking or shrugging. There is a great degree of uncertainty around how bad the epidemic will get, which means it is easy to over or underreact and make the wrong choices. By understanding the psychology behind what is going on, it is possible to find the elusive middle ground of worry.

When we face uncertainty about the future, events can feel like they are out of our control. This often triggers negative emotions, such as fear and anger — emotions that we are motivated to try to reduce. However, when it comes to the coronavirus crisis, the actions we take to regain a sense of control tend to be the least effective for controlling the virus. Panic buying large quantities of food and cleaning products is an example of this. Not only may this do more harm than good by creating a shortage in the supermarkets, as is happening with toilet roll, it distracts from more effective steps people could take.

Another measure that may increase our sense of perceived control more than is warranted is the wearing of face masks by healthy individuals. The masks themselves only protect from infection when fitted perfectly, and can also have unfortunate consequences. People tend to touch their faces more than usual when wearing face masks in order to adjust them, which may give the virus an alternative way into their bodies, such as through their eyes. Mask-wearing may also cause people to feel more confident that they will avoid infection. This over-optimism bias makes them more likely to engage in social contact, increasing their chances of exposure.

More appropriate things to do from a public health point of view are simple infection control actions, such as frequent and careful handwashing, general good hygiene and self-isolating if you start to show cold-like symptoms. Unfortunately, these seem to have much less of an effect on our perceived sense of control.

This is because each measure on its own feels small, and so doesn’t have much of an effect on our emotions. Even though a step may not be effective, people can feel anxious about not taking it, and so they do it anyway, especially if they see those around them doing the same.

Additionally, there is the sense that, although we can do our bit by washing our hands frequently and improving general hygiene in our own homes, minimising the spread of illness is also dependent on others doing the same thing. This diffusion of social responsibility can make one person’s action seem like a drop in the ocean, and again cause people to feel like they have little control.

So what to do? Boosting messages from public health organisations that provide clear and appropriate guidance is important. This will ensure these aren’t drowned out by misinformation and reports that normalise unhelpful behaviours. Minimising uncertainty by making sure people hear information that is timely and relevant to their specific circumstances is also likely to help reduce short-term panic.