

Two Errors Our Minds Make When Trying to Grasp the Pandemic

Arthur C. Brooks

In short, rumination on what you would be doing if it weren't for the coronavirus is a destructive waste of your time.

Error 2: Confusing uncertainty with risk

Why does my friend spend so much time consuming information about the coronavirus? She isn't a scientist, and doesn't work on anything related to the pandemic. Still, she visits the [Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center](#) every day to see if the curve of cases and deaths is flattening. She watches hours of news in which experts are interviewed about the pandemic's trajectory and when they think life will return to normal.

She is making another cognitive error: She is mistaking uncertainty for *risk*. Uncertainty involves unknown possible outcomes and thus unknowable probabilities. Risk involves known possible outcomes and probabilities that we can estimate. Risk is not especially scary, because it can be managed—indeed, risk management is the core business of the insurance industry. Uncertainty, on the other hand, is scary, because it is not manageable: We can't measure the likelihood and impacts of the unknowable.

At present, COVID-19 is more of an uncertainty than a risk. Will you get the virus? What happens if you do? When will the crisis end? Are we creating an economic depression? People can opine and make informed guesses, but no one really knows the answers to these questions.

It's natural to try to convert uncertainty into risk by gorging ourselves on available information. So we watch 24-hour news channels where hosts interview people with only marginally more knowledge than we have. We scour the internet for predictions. We look at the Dow Jones Industrial Average as if it were the zodiac. Surely, we think, if we just knew enough about something, we could accurately assess how much we're at risk.

[Read: The psychology of irrational fear](#)

But all of that is an exercise in futility. The information we now have about the coronavirus is incomplete; in an effort to apprehend risk, we have simply wallowed in more uncertainty. And after a few hours of doing that, we will be more anxious than when we began.

The solution to these two problems is to follow three simple steps: acknowledge, distinguish, resolve.

In the case of disappointment, start by acknowledging the fact that you are disappointed at missing out on some things—it would be strange if you weren't. Then, distinguish your disappointment from regret by thinking about your own role in this global catastrophe. Note that while the crisis affects you, you had no role in causing it, so rumination and counterfactual thinking aren't productive. Finally, resolve not to let your disappointment interfere with what you *can* affect and the choices you *can* make today.

These steps can help you manage living with uncertainty, as well. Start by acknowledging that you do not know what is going to happen in this crisis. Next, distinguish between what can and can't be known right now, and thus recognize that gorging on all the available information will not really resolve your knowledge deficit—you won't be able to turn uncertainty into risk by spending more hours watching CNN, because the certainty you seek is not attainable. Finally, resolve that while you don't know what will happen next week or next month, you do know that you are alive and well right now, and refuse to waste the gift of this day. (One more practical suggestion: Limit your consumption of news to half an hour in the morning, and stay off social media except to talk to friends. No cheating!)

Disappointment and uncertainty are inevitable, but we don't have to turn them into suffering. Ruminating over *what might have been* and *what might happen* will reliably deliver unhappiness. If you practice eliminating these mental errors during the pandemic, you'll be happier today, and better equipped to deal with the hard parts of ordinary life, whenever it resumes.

We want to hear what you think about this article. [Submit a letter](#) to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.

Arthur C. Brooks is a contributing writer at The Atlantic, a professor of the practice of public leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School, a senior fellow at the Harvard Business School, and host of the podcast The Art of Happiness With Arthur Brooks.

Two Errors Our Minds Make When Trying to Grasp the Pandemic

Arthur C. Brooks

In short, rumination on what you would be doing if it weren't for the coronavirus is a destructive waste of your time.

Error 2: Confusing uncertainty with risk

Why does my friend spend so much time consuming information about the coronavirus? She isn't a scientist, and doesn't work on anything related to the pandemic. Still, she visits the [Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center](#) every day to see if the curve of cases and deaths is flattening. She watches hours of news in which experts are interviewed about the pandemic's trajectory and when they think life will return to normal.

She is making another cognitive error: She is mistaking uncertainty for *risk*. Uncertainty involves unknown possible outcomes and thus unknowable probabilities. Risk involves known possible outcomes and probabilities that we can estimate. Risk is not especially scary, because it can be managed—indeed, risk management is the core business of the insurance industry. Uncertainty, on the other hand, is scary, because it is not manageable: We can't measure the likelihood and impacts of the unknowable.

At present, COVID-19 is more of an uncertainty than a risk. Will you get the virus? What happens if you do? When will the crisis end? Are we creating an economic depression? People can opine and make informed guesses, but no one really knows the answers to these questions.

It's natural to try to convert uncertainty into risk by gorging ourselves on available information. So we watch 24-hour news channels where hosts interview people with only marginally more knowledge than we have. We scour the internet for predictions. We look at the Dow Jones Industrial Average as if it were the zodiac. Surely, we think, if we just knew enough about something, we could accurately assess how much we're at risk.

[Read: The psychology of irrational fear](#)

But all of that is an exercise in futility. The information we now have about the coronavirus is incomplete; in an effort to apprehend risk, we have simply wallowed in more uncertainty. And after a few hours of doing that, we will be more anxious than when we began.

The solution to these two problems is to follow three simple steps: acknowledge, distinguish, resolve.

In the case of disappointment, start by acknowledging the fact that you are disappointed at missing out on some things—it would be strange if you weren't. Then, distinguish your disappointment from regret by thinking about your own role in this global catastrophe. Note that while the crisis affects you, you had no role in causing it, so rumination and counterfactual thinking aren't productive. Finally, resolve not to let your disappointment interfere with what you *can* affect and the choices you *can* make today.

These steps can help you manage living with uncertainty, as well. Start by acknowledging that you do not know what is going to happen in this crisis. Next, distinguish between what can and can't be known right now, and thus recognize that gorging on all the available information will not really resolve your knowledge deficit—you won't be able to turn uncertainty into risk by spending more hours watching CNN, because the certainty you seek is not attainable. Finally, resolve that while you don't know what will happen next week or next month, you do know that you are alive and well right now, and refuse to waste the gift of this day. (One more practical suggestion: Limit your consumption of news to half an hour in the morning, and stay off social media except to talk to friends. No cheating!)

Disappointment and uncertainty are inevitable, but we don't have to turn them into suffering. Ruminating over *what might have been* and *what might happen* will reliably deliver unhappiness. If you practice eliminating these mental errors during the pandemic, you'll be happier today, and better equipped to deal with the hard parts of ordinary life, whenever it resumes.

We want to hear what you think about this article. [Submit a letter](#) to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.

Arthur C. Brooks is a contributing writer at The Atlantic, a professor of the practice of public leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School, a senior fellow at the Harvard Business School, and host of the podcast The Art of Happiness With Arthur Brooks.