

Making Rational Decisions as COVID-19 Fears Grow

As the number of COVID-19 cases rises, including the detection of Saskatchewan's first presumptive case, public fear is also climbing. Gordon Asmundson, a psychology professor at the University of Regina, has been specifically researching the impacts of fear and anxiety surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the past week, he said he has seen a "clear escalation in concern, anxiety and fear." A number of high-profile events being cancelled recently have also made the disease hit closer to home for many people now. The Junos were cancelled on Thursday morning. All major North American sports leagues have cancelled or suspended action until future notice.

"This is really becoming tangible and real for people in a way that it wasn't before," said Asmundson. That fear in a growing number of individuals contributes to a larger sense of collective social anxiety. "This is one of the unfortunate characteristics of fear," he said. "It too is contagious, so when we see other people panicking ... we tend to do the same thing."

But as people's emotions ramp up, rational thought is not always guiding their actions, leading to what Asmundson called a "somewhat understandable but irrational trend of panic buying." "People are trying to control their emotional response to this unknown and uncertain situation by doing something that makes them feel prepared," he said.

He pointed to the flocks of people emptying stores of toilet paper as an example. While toilet paper has nothing to do with treating COVID-19 symptoms, Asmundson said seeing lots of other people buy the product and hearing reports of potential toilet paper shortages scares people into thinking they should also be buying it. "You see everybody else doing it, so (you think) 'I better go do that as well.' And really, there's no rational reason for doing so," he said. Panic buying isn't just limited to irrational items, however. Asmundson said he has also heard of people stockpiling unreasonable amounts of Tylenol or Advil. This raises concerns of shortages of the medications for people who actually need them.

The impact of widespread social fear also reaches beyond the stores and into the health-care system. With fear circling, experiencing any type of cold symptoms can cause people to rush to the nearest emergency room when many could simply call HealthLine if they believe they might have COVID-19. This unnecessary influx of patients into hospitals and clinics puts an added strain on the health care system, said Asmundson.

On the flip side, people who are complacent about the disease or feel they are untouchable also present a health risk as they are less likely to take precautionary measures like washing their hands frequently or practicing social distancing. "What we really need to do is try to find a balance in our emotions so that we can make rational decisions," he said.

This article was written by Lynn Giesbrecht, Regina Leader-Post and published on <https://leaderpost.com/news/saskatchewan/make-rational-decisions-as-covid-19-fears-grow-says-psychology-prof/>