

# Releasing Fear During the COVID-19 Crisis

“The world is too much with us,” wrote Wordsworth. Today, frightened by continuous coverage of COVID-19, few would disagree.

“What you focus on creates your experience,” writes Winifred Gallagher in her book [Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life](#). Gallagher continues, “choosing those targets wisely is the key to the good life.”

Gallagher wouldn't advise ignoring COVID-19, yet she would encourage us to lead our mind's attention.

*Negativity bias* is the name given to our attraction to unpleasant emotions such as fear. We pay more attention to bad news, fear, worry, anxiety, depression, and anger. [Due to our mindset bias](#), “studies have shown that negative news is more likely to be perceived as truthful.”

Faced with uncertainty, we want tidy explanations of cause and effect. To feel in control, we surf from one website and pundit to another, hoping for temporary release from our fear.

Psychologist [Dr. Amy Johnson points out](#) that our minds “will come up with a sludge of best guesses in order to give [us] some semblance of certainty.”

We want, Dr. Johnson writes, “to nail down life so that there are no more surprises.” Yet trying to control life “is *therecipe* for insecurity.”

We like to think COVID-19 has spawned a uniquely challenging time, as well as the fear we are feeling today. Yet, anxiety about the inherent insecurity of life is timeless.

In his 1951 book [\*The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety\*](#), British philosopher Alan Watts explained how “the desire for security and the feeling of insecurity are the same thing.” Watts added, “To hold your breath is to lose your breath. A society based on the quest for security is nothing but a breath-retention contest in which everyone is as taut as a drum and as purple as a beet.”

Watts points us to several ways to release anxiety and fear.

## **Live in the Present**

There is all the difference between what we are experiencing and our interpretation of our experience. Most of the time, we mistake the understanding of our experience for the actual experience. Pay careful attention to what is happening around you right now and separate your thinking from your experience. Notice when you place an overlay of interpretation on your actual experience.

To the extent our thinking is repetitive and fearful, we remove the joy and vitality of the present moment. Watts explained it this way:

“Tomorrow and plans for tomorrow can have no significance at all unless you are in full contact with the reality of the present, since it is in the present and *only* in the present that you live. There is no other reality than present reality, so that, even if one were to live for endless ages, to live for the future would be to miss the point everlastingly.”

## **Don't Resist Your Experience**

Notice how you resist your feelings and seek relief. The velocity of our thinking increases as we seek relief. It is in vain that we seek to escape our fear by more thought.

Watts is clear; more thinking brings more pain:

“To remain stable is to refrain from trying to separate yourself from a pain because you know that you cannot. Running away from fear is fear, fighting pain is pain, trying to be brave is being scared. If the mind is in pain, the mind is pain. The thinker has no other form than his thought. There is no escape.”

When more thinking fails to bring relief, we numb ourselves by binge-watching, binge-eating, binge-drinking, or by expressing intense emotions such as anger.

Watts is clear; relief from fear is found by leaning into the fear. To lean into fear, doesn't mean to wallow in it. Rather, it is to acknowledge and feel our fear without adding stories about what is happening, why it is happening, and who is to blame.

Try this: Notice when you rehearse your fearful thoughts as if memorizing lines in a play. Choose to not justify the thoughts you are gripping, and your fearful thinking will pass.

## **Don't Make Fear Into an Idol**

Notice how much momentum your fearful thinking has when, moment by moment, you must construct a narrative to hold on to fear. These narratives – our sense of victimization, our beliefs about who is to blame – become our false idols.

Elsa Bailey, in [\*The Uncommon Book of Prayer\*](#), says this of our false idols:

“Every worry is a prayer. Every complaint is a prayer. Every grudge is a prayer. Every avoidance is a prayer. Every sadness is a prayer. Because they become a focus, a theme upon which we meditate. Of course, we don't call this prayer. We call it thinking.”

Without “praying” to them, false idols fade into the nothingness from which they came.

When our fears and worries occupy our attention, we quickly become overwhelmed. There is no room for an inspired idea or joyful moment to arise in our awareness.

It’s natural to seek a greater experience of God during a crisis, yet our false idols crowd God out. To discover God, Watts writes, “you must cease to try to grasp it in the forms of idols.”

Watts and others are pointing to a willingness to release fear and anxiety by looking in a different direction. Our fearful thinking often provides poor advice. Subtract the frightening mental noise around our experience, and wisdom and peace rush in.

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