



# Epidemic of Fear: Cause and Effect

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Version 1: Received: 06 May 2020 / Approved: 06 May 2020 / Online: 06 May 2020

## ABSTRACT

This review attempts to focus on the Epidemic of fear and its causes and effects on the people during the pandemic situation. Primarily the aim was to understand the psychological concept of the origination of fear due to epidemic or pandemic situations. Several theories and researches helped in explaining the underlying roots of the epidemics of fear and the behavioral changes in a person due to this. Through previous researches, a better understanding of the ways to prevent the fear of spreading among us is presented in this paper. Several type of researches and articles were studied that acted as the pillars of this paper reflecting on the causes of the epidemic of fear.

**Keywords:** Epidemic of Fear, Pandemic Situation, Cause.

## 1 Introduction

“Death is a strange thing; most people live their lives as if it doesn’t exist” (Backman, 2014). Majority of us are terrified by the mere thought of death as the evolution of homo sapiens from their ancestors has been such that our brain is hardwired to keep us distant from any harm but fear tends to distort that mechanism and shifts us from a rational approach in order to avoid danger. Pandemics like COVID-19, Ebola that causes millions of casualties, creating havoc and economic fallouts around the globe does one thing that is much more dangerous as compared to the deaths and decline in economy and commercial sectors. Just like the spread of the pandemic virus, there’s something that spreads much more efficiently, something much deadlier, that lurks at any moment inside one’s head i.e., the fear of the uncertainty, the fear of death. Though pandemics can kill millions of lives but the fear of death, the uncertainty, it makes people die every moment, preventing them from enjoying their everyday life, from being with their family, friends, and from getting calmness. During the struggling phase with any form of epidemic psychology, a society experiences the panic situation among individuals and groups, the struggle towards implementing control strategies, the moral controversy, and the interpretation behind the cause of the disease (Strong, 1990). But how these fears originate and what is the effect of these irrational fear? Why in every timeline of the history of a society, either it is developed or under-developed, the system of fear strives there? How do these epidemics or pandemics ignite these dimensions of fear in human beings? This paper focuses on answering the above questions by providing several supports on the origination and the effects of the fear arisen due to pandemics.

Several kinds of research showed that different threats igniting different psychological buttons in people. To have a better understanding of fear caused by the epidemics, lets dive deeper into the term Epidemic

Psychology. Strong (1990) focused on the concept of Epidemic Psychology, considering it as a phrase of double meaning. With the concept of double meaning, it indicates that apart from the reference to the social psychology of epidemics, there's a separate epidemic nature of psychology from the epidemic of disease. Quite similar to the disease, it too can spread rapidly from one person to another impacting the individual as well as the community. Strong reflected three major types of the psycho-social epidemic: the first one is the *Epidemic of fear*. The second being the *Epidemic of moralization and explanation* while the third one is the *Epidemic of the proposed action*. In this paper, the main focus of discussion is the epidemic of fear through behavioral changes and the origination of fear due to the epidemic or pandemic situations. With the understanding of these aspects, the researcher feels to find out the pathway towards the preventive measures to stop the epidemic of fear from affecting us all.

## **2 Behavioral changes due to Epidemic of fear**

The Epidemic of fear can be understood through the behavioral changes in people during pandemic situations. Very few researches have been done in the past on assessing the behavior of people in a pandemic situation. The behavior of people involves interesting yet complex motivations that affect their decision process during a pandemic (Leung et al, 2003). Teasdale et. al (2012) studied the demographic factors that showed the likelihood of people's behavior in a pandemic. It suggested that how less researches were done on evaluating the influence of coping appraisal on the pandemic influenza's behavioral influence. Strong (1990) reflected that the epidemic of fear also signifies the epidemic of suspicion. The suspiciousness is created in the sense of the likelihood of catching the disease and the sense that someone has the disease and would pass it on to me. The fear that the transmission of disease may be through breathing and sneezing, through touching anyone or anything. This creates a room for the fear to reside in one's mind. But why is this fear affecting one's behavior? This paper provides a better understanding of this question by linking the fear generated by epidemics or pandemics with the thread of fear of uncertainty and death. Pandemics raise death anxiety among people (Stacy, 2015). The increase in anxiety leads to rapid changes in the behavior that even leads to shortages as well as the inclination towards medication (Goodwin et.al, 2009). The response behavior includes preventive measures such as extensive hand-washing, face masks, and barriers to avoid direct transmission (Leung et al, 2003). Apter (2020) stated the essence of an epidemic transforms the ordinary activities and meanings. The things that were normal or irrelevant starts posing a sense of fear and suspicion. The doorknob or the kettle handle, the guest's coat, now poses a risk of infection in an individual's mind. This fear leads to extensive usage of hand hygiene, staying away from everyone, not generating interest in any work, the essence of hesitation from where the disease might spring up. Chow (2020) showed the effect of fear of epidemic or pandemic through the examples of the activities of people of United States hoarding toilet papers and other supplies. These all fear holds back a person from being in the moment and enjoying life. And most of the time this fear and suspicion are exclusively different from the actual reality of the disease (Strong, 1990). Cave (2013) studied the usage of defence mechanism people uses to cope up with the fear of death by avoiding certain things in the sense of staying away from those things.

## **3 3.Causes behind the origination of the fear**

### **3.1 Emotional Contagion**

A study showed that during the pandemic threat, rumors spread rapidly due to the Emotional contagion. Hatfield et. al (1994) suggested that practitioners need to be aware of these rumors and the aspect of emotional as well as physical contagion. Emotional contagion refers to the triggering of similar emotions and behavior in one person through the emotion and behavior of another person. Kramer et. al (2014)

suggested that the emotional state of a person can be transferred to another with the help of Emotional contagion without their awareness. In laboratory experiments, emotional contagion is a well-established fact with the transfer of positive and negative emotions and moods to others (Hatfield et.al, 1993). Holm (2017) gave an example related to the fear of a similar fate where a 40-year-old was diagnosed with breast cancer just because she has been saddened by seeing relative suffering miserably with breast cancer. The fear of a similar fate causes early death by taking away the quality time with people immersed in panic, sadness, and regret. People are so immersed in the deep waters of their sadness and fear that they forget to enjoy their life, avoiding visits and talks to close ones. Berry (2017) stated the reason behind the spread of fear rapidly through population i.e., Emotional Contagion. As a social being, homo sapiens have a certain drive to copy and imitate the responses of other people. Emotional contagion is based on this certain principle, the art of developing a similar emotion when exposed to a similar condition of other people. Due to this person who doesn't have a phobia, they too develop the phobias when they are exposed to the people affected. And due to this very reason, fear spreads like a wildfire.

### **3.2 Scarcity or lack of appropriate knowledge**

Cass Sunstein gave psychological insights on how the novelty of a disease of a pandemic generates the excessive fear among the people causing them to neglect the fact of the probability of being affected is low (Ritchie, 2020). Various studies by the psychologists on the perception of risk suggested that the newness of particular diseases elevates this fear suggesting that each epidemic has its psychology just as mentioned by Strong (1990). During an interview, social psychologist David Desteno stated that due to the lack of information about the cause of the epidemic or pandemic, the likelihood of perceiving everything to be associated with the disease increases (Chow, 2020). And this increases the sense of fear among the people.

### **3.3 Fear of uncertainty**

The fear of uncertainty relates to the prediction about future events that often leads to a state of worry and in worse cases Anxiety. Borkovec et. al (1983) suggested the aspect that worry is concerned with future events and is often accompanied by feelings of anxiety. Carleton et.al (2007) showed how previous researches have put forward the notion about the representation of uncertainty as a variable in the understanding of worry. This essence of worry often leads a person to be scared of the chances of getting infected during the pandemic situations. Dugas et. al (2001) studied the concept of intolerance of uncertainty defining it as an individual's extensive tendency to unable to accept the consideration of the occurrence of a negative event irrespective of the low probability of its occurrence. Individuals having intolerance of uncertainty often perceives several disturbing and unacceptable events in their daily life. They found the significant relationship of intolerance of uncertainty with excessive and uncontrollable worry.

### **3.4 Previous experiences and perception of mortality**

Slovic (1987) suggested that humans have formed the ability to sense and then avoid harmful environmental conditions. This ability is necessary for their survival and it creates a sense of fear. The pandemic situations tend to increase these fears. Cave (2013) suggested and studied on the creation of biasness in a person's behavior due to the insight towards their mortality. This bias affects the field in which one misjudge, miscalculate and eventually leads to distortion of reality. Due to this, it hampers the belief system and the person believes any news or story that is being told to them without even reflecting on the originality or the validity. Coyne et al. (1988) suggested that when individuals are faced with the concerns of their mortality, they tend to seek reassurance in others. And this seeking by the sharing of their uncertainties sometimes contributes to greater stress among each other. Every culture reflects some legend, myths or something that promises one to keep going on forever by avoiding death. These myths are revisited and

retold with slight variations by each generation and culture throughout history. Even in the advancement of science, people still believe this stuff through nano-technology, stem science or genetic engineering (Cave, 2013).

#### **4 Why the understanding of these fears is needed?**

Goodwin et. al (2009) focused on the aspect that understanding these attitudes of people during a pandemic helps in enhancing the effects of information campaigns which are aimed to encourage precautions against the infections. This understanding will also aid in identifying the groups that are prone to the risk of prejudice and stereotyping during the situation of a pandemic. A study conducted by Rubin et. al (2009) during the H1N1 pandemic found out that increased hygiene was associated with the increase in anxiety and it affected the normal life-style of people. People have been grappled with boredom with the introduction of social distancing creating mental fatigue during the situations of an epidemic or pandemic. Strong (1990) suggested the possibility that the sense of panic and fear spread silently even in those populations where no-one has yet been infected. These epidemics are quickly followed by the virus of fear, suspiciousness, stigma, and panic posing serious threats to one's mental health. The effect a particular pandemic has on the mental aspect of the human being is quite a worrying issue. Of course, preventive measures are to be taken but that doesn't mean that one should live a life with being afraid of what might happen the next moment.

#### **5 Conclusion**

Epidemics or Pandemics pose a great threat to everyone and it needs to be tackled positively. During these difficult times, certain things are beyond our control but one can control the core effect of these situations i.e., the epidemic of fear. These epidemics of fear have the potentiality to infect almost everyone just like a virus does (Strong, 1990). There are several methods that one can implement to control the fear of spreading. Psychologist Baruch Fischhoff focused on the risks of terrorism where the focus was in the communication discipline. Fischhoff (2011) through the study suggested the ways to carry out communication during the risks of terrorism. In a similar manner mentioned by Fischhoff, the researcher believes that fear epidemic can also be tackled by the identification of those things that people mostly need to know about the cause and effect of the epidemic or pandemic situation. One just has to figure out the way to explain those things in a clear and trustworthy fashion. Systematic Desensitization is a concept and method that is often applied by psychologists to eradicate the sense of fear (Berry, 2017). In this method, the psychologists build up the ability in the individual to tolerate whatever he's afraid of. For example: if one is afraid of spiders. He is asked to read about spiders, look at the pictures of the spider. In short, the individual is systematically made to have a positive outlook towards the spider. Learning to break those associations of small elements of fear is the main principle behind this method. Another method is that to overcome fear, people should start seeing life as a book. Quite similarly just as a book is bounded to the cover, our lives are bounded by the aspects of life and death (Cave, 2013). Even though the book is limited by the beginning and an end, the characters and the content of the book are endless and most of us aren't afraid of reaching the ending of the book. The moments in between the book is what makes it more interesting and hence people should strive to live in the moments with accepting that there will be an end to their book too.

#### **6 Competing Interests**

In accordance with AIJR policy and my ethical obligation as a researcher, I am reporting that there's no funding or payback I'm receiving from this work of mine. We declare that no conflict of interest exist in this publication.

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## How to Cite:

Quadir Ali et al. "Epidemic of Fear: Cause and Effect". *AIJR Preprints*, 50, version 1, 2020.  
(URL: <https://preprints.aijr.org/index.php/ap/preprint/view/50> ).

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