



Why Emotional Intelligence is Vital to Conquer the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Edythe Richards

One of the biggest problems with the COVID-19 pandemic is how prevalent it has already become before there is a rise in reported cases. Even with most people sheltering in place for the last few weeks, the number of cases doubles or triples every day, and the death toll continues to rise. Italy and Spain most closely resemble what the [US is now facing](#), but their leadership communicated the seriousness of the virus much sooner than that of the US. This likely means that the US numbers will be much higher before leveling off.

We've therefore been asked to change how we live and how we interact with others. The changes we are being asked to make, such as social distancing, are to protect each of us, but are also to promote the common good. We may choose to stay home or not. Vulnerable and elderly members of our community may die, or they may not. We, as both individuals and as members of a greater community are making these choices to comply with the executive orders, or not, consciously, or not. And the choices we make now will determine the course of the virus.

Sacrificing our jobs, our children's education, and in-person contact with family and friends requires a depth of empathy and social responsibility that's new and unique to each of us. Understanding, acknowledging, and acting on these challenges will help us to navigate the "new normal."

One thing's for sure: the pandemic is testing our operating systems, our functioning, and our responses. As Charles Darwin theorized, survival will depend on the "fittest." This doesn't necessarily mean the strongest or the smartest. In today's world, it *does* mean the most adaptable, the most resilient, and the most willing and able to cooperate with others. In other words, the most emotionally intelligent.

Are we ready to tackle this? Do we have the emotional intelligence we need to conquer COVID-19?

Self-Awareness

If you are getting yourself worked up and anxious about the pandemic, you are certainly not alone. First off, you can take active steps to protect yourself and others, and this starts with self-awareness. Right now, the entire world is in a state of uncertainty and fear, and it manifests in our actions. Negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and even panic diminish our ability to think clearly and act productively.

- What you can do: Resist the urge to deny your feelings or react in an ultimately unproductive way. Instead, name your feelings. Take a moment a few times a day to pause and check in with yourself. Ask yourself questions such as
 - What am I trying to achieve?
 - What am I doing that's working?
 - What am I doing that's not working?
 - What can I do to change?

Above all, avoid judging your own or other peoples' feelings. Emotions actually provide a great deal of data not only on why we behave the way we do, but how we can continue on our current path or stop and reassess. In a world impatient for results, self-awareness is continuously tested. It's time to be honest with yourself: *how often do you pay attention to what you're feeling and how it affects others?*

Stress Tolerance

At no time is it more important to withstand adverse events without falling apart. When we're stressed, our brains undergo [chemical changes](#) that affect our overall functioning and can lead to physical problems (high blood

pressure, ulcers, and more), as well as increase or risk for illnesses such as cancer and heart attacks. Chronic stress can also lead to mental and emotional problems, such as difficulty focusing and making decisions, as well as irritability and memory issues.

- What you can do: Regular exercise and mindfulness are vital to staying healthy and managing stress. Recognizing your triggers for stress is the first step in conquering them. Resist the urge for instant gratification or perfection. It's rare that unhealthy habits will change overnight. If you fall off the wagon, process why, but don't beat yourself up. You can get back on tomorrow.

Reality-Testing

If you are someone who dwells on the worst-case scenario instead of objective evidence, or if you dismiss warnings about the pandemic, carrying on as usual, it's time for a reality check. We are all prone to biases that affect how we see the world, how we process information, and how we make decisions. If you can accept that you're susceptible to biases, you can learn to identify and potentially avoid them.

- What you can do: Challenge yourself to find facts and evidence that dispel irrational thoughts and beliefs. Having accurate, truthful information allows you to take precautions, to make good decisions, and feel assured that you're behaving in the best possible way. It's also necessary to be cautious to avoid contracting the virus, or unknowingly spreading it to others. In slowing its spread, we won't overload the healthcare systems, thus [flattening the curve](#).

Flexibility

It's unlikely that any businesses will emerge from the pandemic entirely unscathed. Proactive leaders are deploying strategies to mitigate loss now, and in the future. In no other way is this more apparent than telecommuting policies recently implemented by most businesses. Remote work doesn't give employees permission to slack off, nor does it give managers permission to micromanage. We are all juggling work with family needs, health, and a (real or perceived) lack of control of our lives. The good news is that flexibility in work schedules is correlated with [increased productivity, innovation, and engagement](#). This could be the nudge that's needed to let go of outdated policies and practices – realizing that working differently can be beneficial for everyone.

- What you can do: Nobody likes a micromanager! If you're a leader or manager [with this tendency](#), don't assume that your employees are slacking off because they're telecommuting. Focus on outcomes, not monitoring every minute of the day. Being flexible doesn't mean that you will *definitely* change. It means that you are open to examining a current belief in favor of maintaining your old one. This analysis builds self-assurance and confidence, as well as the versatility to adapt to the "new normal."

Interpersonal Relationships

A pandemic makes clear that we aren't a nation of individual people and our nuclear families. We are a society dependent on one another. Societies where people cooperate [thrive in the long run](#) compared to societies that are more competitive. Selfish behaviors such as hoarding supplies and price gouging erode trust if they become the norm. This could lead to a shortage of resources, putting everyone in danger. By now you've seen the signs everywhere: "We'll get through this together." That means relying on each other. But you have to give as much as you take.

- What you can do: Think of one or two behaviors that contribute to the quality of relationships you already have with your close friends or family. For example, perhaps you listen deeply, disclose your personal struggles, provide acts of service, or regularly reach out to keep the connection strong. How can you apply these behaviors to other people who are not as close? Deliberately employing strategies to build and nurture relationships will positively affect how well you collaborate, if you can rely on others for comfort and support, and how others see you in the midst of the crisis. Are you someone they can turn to for help and guidance?

Optimism

While the coronavirus pandemic could lead to depression, hopelessness, or even nihilism, people are finding the silver lining. From Italians singing from their balconies to Spaniards collectively applauding healthcare workers to communities coming together in support of first responders and local businesses, there are silver linings everywhere if you take a moment to look. Optimism is an important underpinning element of Emotional Intelligence that plays into every other facet of EQ. Optimistic people have a positive regard for how this pandemic will play out, based on acknowledgement and recognition of their own skills, capacity to actively solve problems, and to recall situations where they have successfully overcome obstacles.

- What you can do: Participate in a virtual chats, groups, and interactions. Not only will you improve lives, but you'll spread a wave of gratitude, which is known to increase life satisfaction, health, and numerous other benefits. Perhaps most importantly, the best protection you have against the coronavirus is a strong immune system. And [optimists have amazingly robust immune systems](#).

These are behavioral choices we make every day. The COVID-19 pandemic presents a compelling test of our emotional intelligence – our sense of ourselves, our generosity, and our resilience. Like any crisis, COVID-19 is also a choice, and an opportunity. We can choose to believe in our shared strength. We can choose to allow generosity and emotional intelligence to lead us through this challenge.

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