

Future-Oriented Thinking and Proactive Coping in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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“We have therefore made the assessment that coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) can be characterized as a pandemic,” said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020 [1]. WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic in 2020 as the virus spread increasingly worldwide, indicating that the threat posed by the 2019 novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) keeps escalating. Since its first identification in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, 2019-nCoV has caused an outbreak of COVID-19 and global panic. COVID-19 did pose a serious threat to human life and health at the beginning of 2020. However, lessons have been learned from previous disease outbreaks of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), Ebola, polio and flu, etc. prompting governments to hone their health care system and to rapidly respond to threats like 2019-nCoV. As such, 2019-nCoV soon drove an all-of-government and all-of-society response. For example, the Chinese government took urgent and aggressive action to contain the pandemic soon after human-to-human transmission was realized [2]. The Chinese government as well as others’ issued rigorous quarantine orders leading to the possibly largest enforced isolation in the human history. With the adequately prepared infrastructure, most counties were able to respond as early as possible to contain the outbreak.

In this editorial, I will attempt to integrate opposing views and to coagulate a stable position as to the public health mitigation measures, e.g. the lockdown policy. Most of the epidemiologists and idealists have indeed advocated an extremely restrictive policy, whereas human rights experts as well as economists have criticized all of those extreme measures like lockdown. Nevertheless, the only way to avoid contribution of another failure to history is to face up to the multiple facets of the mitigation measures in different countries or regions [3]. In light of this, some could also propose more strict and prolonged lockdown targeting the vulnerable group while less stringent measures for the lower-risk groups so as to minimize both economic losses and deaths.

As most individuals born before 1990 have a lingering fear of SARS, the initial panic caused by 2019-nCoV was over-whelming. Due to challenges as regards basic needs like food and water access as well as accommodation safety, many individuals faced inevitable helplessness, let alone financial problems including income cut or job loss [4]. Furthermore, increasing infections and deaths arising from COVID-19 have led to global psychological stress [5]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown loneliness resulting from social disconnection has been recognized as an important public health issue [6]. Confined at home ever since the Spring Festival in 2020, a traditional Chinese festival of getting together when people return to parental home from different places and enjoy the company of family members, one may reflect, with full time. Due to the strong contagion, the high incidence of lethality, and the lack of a pharmaceutical prevention or cure, individuals ought to take necessary measures to protect themselves and others, which include but are not limited to wearing a mask, staying at least one meter away from each other, and cleaning their hands regularly. Under the influence of negative emotions, one may act impulsively, a tendency termed negative urgency [7]. Factually, COVID-19 has a tremendous impact on mental health, including psychological disorders including fear, worry, anxiety, depression, and difficulty in concentrating or sleeping.

Future-oriented coping describes a strategy for planning to cope with potential events that may occur in the future as stressors [8]. This psychological term vividly illustrates an old Chinese saying “Be on alert against potential danger when living in peace”, which high-

lights the wisdom to learn from experiences, to ensure positive outcome and to mute their ill impact. Appropriate future-oriented coping that may influence life satisfaction and mental health, is vital for the well-being of individuals. Proactive coping is a future-oriented strategy as the opposite counterpart of negative urgency, which denotes the preparedness for future stressors and impending losses [7]. Thus far, the neural mechanism underlying future-oriented coping remains incompletely known. By using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), researchers revealed that the links between the parahippocampal cortex and the claustrum/insula might contribute to proactive coping [8].

Prompted by the 2003 SARS outbreak, China has made a rapid progress in the public health system since then [9]. Proactive coping by the Chinese central government and local authority was noteworthy. The “lockdown” of Wuhan City, the epicenter of COVID-19, that is suspension of public transportation into and out of the city, fully alerted the Chinese public to the gravity of COVID-19. The Chinese Government has kept the public aware of prevention strategies by providing daily updates on surveillance data in a transparent manner, i.e. on Internet and social media [10]. More importantly, the government has published several guidelines on the diagnosis, treatment, prevention and control of COVID-19 [11]. Civilians consciously quarantine themselves at home and minimize going out unless necessary. As a result, the Chinese government could declare that the peak of COVID-19 in the country was over on March 12, 2020.

The unpredictable future of COVID-19 was initially exacerbated by misinformation and the public’s misunderstanding of health messages [10]. Under the strong leadership of the Chinese government, the future-oriented coping of Chinese people is also noteworthy for the staged success. A valuable piece of experience from China is “concerted efforts in a common cause”. In specific, the researchers race against time to formulate a detailed profile of 2019-nCoV, the central and local governments make decisions based on scientific principles, and the civilians actively cooperate with the government and health authorities. As with any previous battles against disasters an invariable highlight is well illustrated by another Chinese proverb, i.e. “If one is in need, all render help”. Immediately after the recognition of the COVID-19 outbreak, millions of Chinese volunteered to the front line against the plague [12].

Different from the SARS outbreak, special emphasis has been placed on psychological crisis intervention for patients, medical staff and people under medical observation [10]. Psychologists and psychiatrists used telephones, Internet and WeChat, etc. to help civilians under mental stress. This advancement may effectively reduce psychological effects associated with quarantine like depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorder [13]. Despite this remarkable advancement, a higher priority for the government, the psychologists and the psychiatrists is to cultivate positive mental health so as to develop and implement initiatives. Personal resilience and healthy coping behaviors during the crisis should be encouraged as well. In this regard, proactive coping is vital for stress management and personal resilience of individuals with the challenges of lockdown.

The fight against COVID-19 is largely unprecedented in terms of delivery of scientific information [14]. Efforts to understand and improve proactive coping may inform us of individual differences, and the personal and social resources [15]. Decision-making should be based on proper interpretation of scientific principles. Governments are seeking to avoid panic among their populaces, which is understandable but sometimes unacceptable [16].

Declaration of Authorship

Dr. Hongliang Zhang is affiliated with the National Natural Science Foundation of China. The views expressed are his own and do not necessarily represent the views of the National Natural Science Foundation of China or the Chinese government.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no competing interests.

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