



Take COVID-19 fear and translate it into action: psychologist

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HALIFAX -- The COVID-19 pandemic has forced Maritimers to adopt a new routine of staying home and practising physical-distancing. With no definitive end in sight for these precautionary measures, many people are noticing increased anxiety levels.

Dr. Simon Sherry, a psychologist with Dalhousie University, says uncertainty is difficult to tolerate.

“Uncertainty gets that much worse when you start to catastrophize it,” says Sherry.

“I also think that a lot of this anxiety is driven by what coronavirus is -- it’s a novel threat. This is new, it’s unknown. It is almost exotic. It’s a kind of threat that we are not used to and that evokes a lot of fear in our brain.”

Sherry says it is important for people to remember that the situation is temporary and survivable.

“What you see from other disaster situations, or pandemic events, is that most people are brave and we need to count on that in this moment,” says Sherry.

“In fact, what I think that people need to do, is to actually weaponize our fear. Take that fear we feel and translate it into action. Use it to wash hands, use it to control sneezes, use it to self-isolate and to distance. We can put our fear to good use as a motivational tool to make the behavioural changes we can control, that will ultimately get this pandemic out of our way.”

Government and health officials have repeatedly stressed the importance of physical-distancing to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Sherry says, while physical-distancing is of utmost importance, we can’t rule out social or emotional connections.

“I am heartened by people who are finding and innovating ways to remain connected and to pull together amid this adversity,” says Sherry.

For some, physical-distancing is becoming second nature, however, Sherry says he is doubtful it will have a long-term effect on how society interacts.

“Instead, based on past studies of similar situations, we know that the vast majority of people – within a matter of weeks, if not, a matter of months – will return to normal. I understand that

normal left town a few weeks ago, but this is a temporary state for us and we'll get back to our normal rhythm of life soon enough."