



## On DORSCON Orange and Fear

In light of the recent coronavirus situation and, in particular, the raising of DORSCON alert level to Orange, we are witnessing a range of reactions all over the world. In Singapore, masks, hand sanitizers, and alcohol wipes are now precious commodities. People are recoiling whenever someone sneezes or coughs. Supermarket shelves are rapidly being cleared up and plans are being cancelled. We are experiencing a lot of fear.

### Why Do People React The Way They Do?

In modern society, numerous risks (e.g., terrorism, catastrophes, and pandemic outbreaks) lurk around every corner. Whenever people witness an emergency situation or see someone getting harmed, our brains are hardwired to react in a certain way. The amygdala of the brain (emotional system) gets activated together with regions of the cortex (cognitive system) that analyze and interpret behavior. In times of stress and uncertainty, this thinking part of our brain gets hijacked by the emotional system, resulting in **panic** and **groupthink behavior**. This translates into a phenomenon more commonly known as survival mode or fight-or-flight, which is driven by the need for self-preservation, protection, and safety. Such primal instincts date back to prehistoric times, where we needed to be on the constant lookout for danger in order to survive. The same primal instincts are activated in our present-day crises. We are hyper-focusing on the virus.

### The Cost to Us and Society

While our brains react to keep us safe and protected, the resulting panic inadvertently leads to massive costs borne by our society. Chinese nationals or people of Chinese descent are experiencing discrimination. Tension, stress, and anxiety are at an all-time high; we worry about our health, our job security, and the larger economy. Panic buying has also led to stocks running out. Consequently, people who are sick have found themselves deprived of essential items like masks and Vitamin C. Panic buying further breeds anxiety rather than alleviates it, creating a downward spiral of panic and anxiety. Thankfully, our Government has taken action to monitor black market sales, protecting us from the cost of inflated prices.



## How Do We Protect And Care At The Same Time?

Interestingly, while we are wired for self-preservation, research has shown that in times of crises, people are also capable of responding in prosocial ways. Last week, netizens shared accounts of people giving out free masks and hand sanitizers – a counter-intuitive move when we should be considering our self-preservation. How do we dig deep, and find in ourselves this capacity to manage our fight-or-flight responses?

**1. Acknowledge our commonality in this crisis.** We are all struggling with fear, to varying degrees. Validating and acknowledging our fears, knowing that we may get triggered by each other, is a first step to managing our anxieties. Name the fear and pause to consider our responses. Resource-sharing could unite rather than divide our community in this time of need.

**2. Respect each other.** As this would be a hot topic, be assertive with your feelings of discomfort or anxiety should this topic be too difficult for you. Also notice if this topic escalates fear and anxiety in your friends and family. Listen and respect if they prefer not to engage in this.

**3. Exercise individual responsibility and buy as you need.** It is not necessary to stockpile on food and other essential items as this breeds undue panic. Hoarding necessities also prevents others from attaining them, especially those who may need it more than you do. This creates huge inconvenience to others, and in turn, promotes a climate of hostility.

**4. Expand your infotainment.** The virus situation would inevitably be on major headlines. Be intentional with your choice of information and entertainment rather than be consumed by inaccurate updates and precautions borne largely by fear and panic.

**5. Workability of the blaming behavior.** Being a keyboard warrior could help air your grievances. But pause to think about how this generates additional stress and tension both within your social circle and the larger society. We could seek to understand different perspectives and choices, rather than engage in the blame game.

**6. Fact check and watch out for fake news.** Turn to reliable sources of information such as [www.moh.gov.sg](http://www.moh.gov.sg) and gov.sg WhatsApp service ([go.gov.sg/whatsapp](https://go.gov.sg/whatsapp)). Fact-checking could help to ground us, especially when we feel overwhelmed with inconsistencies in the news.

**7. Seek professional help if this fear and anxiety is hindering your daily functioning.** Singapore has a pool of registered psychologists listed on the



Singapore  
Psychological  
Society  
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Singapore Psychological Society (SPS) website. Their professional expertise may help you in this trying season.

Let us protect not only our physical health but also our mental health and the community we live in.

Together we can play a part in building a more resilient society in the face of crisis.