

Book Review of ‘Coping with Coronavirus: How to Stay Calm and Protect Your Mental Health’

Lucie Corcoran

Department of Psychology, Dublin Business School
Dublin, Ireland

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Brendan Kelly is Professor of Psychiatry at Trinity College Dublin and Consultant Psychiatrist in Tallaght University Hospital. He has authored and co-authored a number of books which focus broadly on Psychiatry, History, mental health, law, and health care. His interests are reflected in his array of qualifications, including a medical degree, masters degrees in epidemiology, in healthcare management, and in Buddhist studies, as well as doctorates in medicine, history, governance and law. Recent publications include *Psychiatrist in the Chair: The Official Biography of Anthony Clare*, *The Doctor Who Sat For A Year*, and *Hearing Voices: The History of Psychiatry in Ireland*. This review will focus on *Coping With Coronavirus: How To Stay Calm and Protect Your Mental Health*. Confronted with arguably the most pressing international crisis of our time, this book offers a guide (or psychological toolkit) for anyone to navigate this challenging time, particularly those who are struggling to cope psychologically with the pandemic. Kelly’s interests and qualifications leave him well placed to address such an issue. Royalties from the sale of the book are donated to medical charities assisting with the response to Coronavirus.

Kelly sees the virus as constituting two problems; the illness and its physical effects, and the anxiety created in society by the risk of infection. However, he focuses largely on the latter in an effort to assist readers with anxiety, fear and panic created by the pandemic. He considers the almost endless scenarios one can fret about including, the impact on one’s own health, measures one should take to minimise risk, the possibility of another coronavirus in future or a loved one’s death, or the potential for financial harm. For some the effect can be overwhelming and induce feelings of helplessness. Kelly distinguishes the anxiety regarding coronavirus from other anxiety disorders by highlighting the common treatment approaches to difficulties such as agoraphobia, through which the patient comes to see his/her fears as baseless. With coronavirus, on the other hand, the threat has a rational basis. This presents a challenge, but according to Kelly, not one that cannot be overcome.

Kelly encourages readers to follow official advice (e.g., from the HSE) regarding measures to prevent transmission of the virus; emphasising how effective simple actions can be. The book serves as a toolkit focusing on how readers can: (a) remain informed about coronavirus without obsessing about it or engaging in poorly informed speculation; (b) learn about thinking errors which can add to anxiety about the disease; (c) begin to recognise where emotions are influencing us and how they can mislead us; (d) do things to reduce risk, avoid

heightening anxiety, and look after our psychological and physical well-being; and (e) focus on *being* rather than *doing*.

Overall, the book helps readers to distinguish between reliable and unreliable information sources. Absorbing such information should also be limited, according to Kelly as obsessing over every detail revealed internationally is counterproductive. Moreover, false information can affect us emotionally regardless of what we think at a rational level. Self-awareness regarding one's own information consumption is an important part of this toolkit. Furthermore, the power of thinking patterns are emphasised. Simply being aware of problematic thinking patterns which can add to panic and anxiety is an important step. Focusing on small but effective actions can help reduce the potential for overwhelm. Catastrophisation and negative automatic thoughts are examples of unhelpful thinking patterns which impact mood. Kelly suggests that thought labelling can be a useful step towards reducing these counterproductive patterns. The value in seeing ourselves as connected with all others is also emphasised as a valuable perspective in reducing anxiety and protecting one another. Meditation on compassion is a practice which it is suggested can be particularly effective when facing a global event such as this.

Kelly recognises that we are not always logical and rational, and therefore need to have greater awareness of how our feelings influence us. Labelling the type and strength of these emotions is a necessary step towards better awareness. Perhaps a trickier task is to accept whatever emotion one is feeling. Trying to understand what has triggered an emotion can help to reduce negative feelings which have no clear focus. The difficulty in identifying our emotions is made greater when they come disguised, as behaviours for example, or when we experience conflicting emotions. Again meditation and talking with others are recommended as means to help sitting with difficult feelings. Kelly emphasises the need for 'mindful speech' or 'right speech' (direct and truthful) and listening well to others.

As much as there can be a desire to do something, Kelly suggests we guard against taking just any old sort of action. This can lead to harm. The WHO guidelines are indicated as a reliable source of information as to how best to act and therefore, such advice should be followed and adhered to even when it changes with updated knowledge. For instance, the advice regarding wearing of face masks has changed since the publication of Kelly's book. However, the principle of following reliable and up-to-date advice is emphasised – "Do as advised. And if the advice changes, follow the new advice". Eating, sleeping, exercising, and going outside are advised as useful actions. Kelly describes how engaging in absorbing activities can help us to maintain better mental health.

The book discusses how the coronavirus pandemic could alter how we regard ourselves as human beings. For instance, the value in solidarity with others might be better understood as a result of this experience. Keeping some perspective can help us to keep our anxiety and response appropriate to the risk posed; i.e., regarding the pandemic as a serious public health issue which requires not panic, but a proportionate response. Projection of other difficulties onto the anxiety we feel about the pandemic is also problematic. Focusing some of our energy into physical activities shown to reduce stress can help with this overfocus on the pandemic. Focusing on behaviours (e.g., exercise) can help us to shift away from unhelpful thoughts and maladaptive coping strategies. Talking about our concerns with others can allow us to connect and come to an understanding that many of us share common concerns. Focusing more on *us* and less on *me* can help us to feel the solidarity which may lead to reduced infections.

Overall, this book provides a brief and highly practical guide to all of us during this ongoing pandemic. Kelly's deep knowledge of psychiatry, public health, and Buddhism, contribute to a toolkit for managing the pandemic both practically and psychologically. *Coping*

With Coronavirus: How To Stay Calm and Protect Your Mental Health is available in paperback, eBook, and audiobook.