Editor's Note: This opinion article first ran in The Guardian newspaper on March 3, 2020. In the time since its publication, coronavirus guidelines provided by health organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization have changed significantly. Around the world, updated guidelines call for people to shelter in place, and to wear a mask any time they enter a public space.

The novel coronavirus, called SARS-CoV-2, and the disease it causes, COVID-19, are sweeping the globe. With thousands of deaths already, and many tens of thousands of people infected across the world, it's safe to say that the coronavirus has become one of the biggest events of the 21st century. It may only be a matter of time until we see outbreaks everywhere, with public health authorities warning that the disease will probably soon start spreading locally regardless of where you are on the planet.

If nothing else, the coronavirus is scary. And that is, in and of itself, an issue. Let me explain.

The problem with scary things is that we aren't very good at reacting to them. Humans are, when push comes to shove, awful at interpreting risk. We're much more freaked out over turbulence on a plane than a near-miss in traffic, even though of the two a car crash is far more likely to be the source of our untimely demise.

We fear what we don't understand. And what we fear, we seek to control.

In the case of the coronavirus, there are some pretty obvious examples. Reports are out that people are panic-buying everything from toilet paper to ibuprofen, even if there is no outbreak in their local area nor a strong likelihood of a shortage of either any time soon. People are taking to pharmacies in droves, dragging masks off the shelves like there's no tomorrow. The main reason to buy a mask – something that health authorities have been saying for weeks – is if you yourself are sick, because it stops your phlegm from getting on other people's faces. [UPDATE 4/30/2020: The CDC recommends cloth face coverings for people, as "surgical masks or N-95 respirators are critical supplies that must continue to be reserved for healthcare workers and other medical first responders." You can learn how to make a no-sew cloth face mask here.]

And don't get me started on those selling supplements to cure coronavirus, because if we want to look at exactly why each immunity-boosting echinacea tea is probably worthless we'll be here until the end of time itself.

There's no shortage of people selling supplements to cure this new infectious disease. There is, however, a distinct lack of evidence that any of it works.

Which brings us to one of the scariest parts of the coronavirus, that is, perhaps, what's really got people on edge. Most of the recommendations are things that other people have to do. Wearing masks when you're sick. Staying home if you feel unwell. Covering your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze. Seeking medical care early. And relying on other people – without having much control over your own fate – is something that none of us likes. Yes, you should wash your hands and stop touching your face, but neither of these feel like an intervention. They don't make us feel safe.

And really, that's what this panic is all about. Coping with the fear. Trying to find a small measure of control over a situation that seems to be made of pure chaos. Even though it's probably not going to work, we all really want to be able to do something to keep ourselves from getting sick. Buying 15 tubs of hand sanitizer feels like a buffer against the darkness, even if you'd really be just as well off getting a normal bar of soap.

So amid the scary stories it's worth remembering that, while we may not have control over everything, there are evidence-based things you can do to help yourself. The World Health Organization has a series of simple tips on its website that anyone can follow. Wash your hands more often, and practice not touching your face. Yes, it seems boring, but often the best advice is precisely that. Even if the pharmacy shelves are entirely clear of N95 respirators, you can probably find boring old soap that'll be more useful anyway.

Ultimately, the most important thing to do is not to panic, because panic is a killer. Take a deep breath, remember that "pandemic" describes a disease's spread not its severity, and keep an eye on the news.

Fear is OK. Fear is natural. We're all afraid, with even the experts admitting that there is a huge number of things about this outbreak that we just don't know yet.

Just don't let the fear control you. You'll probably have to live with it for a while yet.

Gideon Meyerowitz-Katz is an epidemiologist working in chronic disease. The opinions in this article belong to the author and do not necessarily represent the views of Newsela or its editors

(Q1) According to the article, why are people buying large amounts of hand sanitizer?

1. Hand sanitizer is more effective than regular soap at battling diseases.
2. Buying hand sanitizer makes people feel safer during the coronavirus scare.
3. Hand sanitizer is the only way to effectively stop the spread of the coronavirus.
4. Buying hand sanitizer is a good alternative if face masks are sold out.

(Q2) Why are people more concerned with turbulence on a plane than a close call in a car?

1. People are generally bad at interpreting risk.
2. Being concerned is a natural way to stay safe.
3. Planes are a more dangerous way to travel than cars.
4. Turbulence happens more often than car accidents.

(Q3) Which piece of evidence from the article is MOST relevant to the author's argument?

1. The novel coronavirus, called SARS-CoV-2, and the disease it causes, COVID-19, are sweeping the globe.
2. Reports are out that people are panic-buying everything from toilet paper to ibuprofen, even if there is no outbreak in their local area nor a strong likelihood of a shortage of either any time soon.

C. Take a deep breath, remember that "pandemic" describes a disease's spread not its severity, and keep an eye on the news.

D. We're all afraid, with even the experts admitting that there is a huge number of things about this outbreak that we just don't know yet.

(Q4) The author claims that there are steps that individuals can take to protect themselves from the coronavirus.

Which selection from the article provides the MOST sufficient evidence to support the claim?

It may only be a matter of time until we see outbreaks everywhere, with public health authorities warning that the disease will probably soon start spreading locally regardless of where you are on the planet.

B. People are taking to pharmacies in droves, dragging masks off the shelves like there's no tomorrow, even though the evidence strongly suggests that masks are a waste of time for most people.

C. Which brings us to one of the scariest parts of the coronavirus, that is, perhaps, what's really got people on edge. Most of the recommendations are things that other people have to do.

D. The World Health Organization has a series of simple tips on its website that anyone can follow. Wash your hands more often, and practice not touching your face.

(Q5) If you had to rename this article, what would you rename it and why?