

## Quarantine is Forever

### How Uncertainty About the Future Is At the Heart of What Makes Life So Difficult Today

The greatly elevated incidence of mental illness – depression, anxiety, irritability, and substance abuse, among other things – stemming from the coronavirus quarantines is well known and increasingly discussed online and across various media platforms. The causes of our mental suffering, ranging from the trauma of social isolation to debilitating economic insecurity, are also well known. But I want to focus attention on another cause of our emotional suffering that has been underemphasized: the psychic effects of the simple but irreducible fact that our current situation may very well persist indefinitely. It is the time dimension that accounts for the intensity of the suffering.

People can tolerate a lot of pain if relief is within reach.

Consider your garden-variety pre-pandemic depression. A crucial part of the clinically depressed mind is the belief that suffering is the natural and inevitable state of affairs, that what “*is*” is the way it will always be. The logic of depression is that the past determines the future and that loss, grief, disappointment, self-criticism, and helplessness are never-ending. The author, Elizabeth Wurtzel, put it this way: “That’s the thing about depression: A human being can survive almost anything, as long as she sees the end in sight. But depression is so insidious, and it compounds daily, that it’s impossible to ever see the end. The fog is like a cage without a key.”

This is how we experience depression in normal times. But consider what happens to such suffering during this period of social disruption and quarantine. The world itself mirrors and exaggerates the logic of depression. The fact is that we don’t know how or when it will be safe to return to some semblance of normal life. We simply don’t know. We’re told that we will have to wait 12 to 18 months for a vaccine, but even so we don’t even know that for sure. So, whatever frustration and stress we feel right now, the objective reality is that the solution or end point is not in

sight. Thus, social reality mirrors and reinforces the logic of the depressed mind. The year to 18 months we're told it will take to create a viable vaccine seems like forever.

*Forever.* Stuck at home *forever.* Unable to go to a restaurant—*forever.* Unable to work out in a gym—*forever.* Unable to go to school—*forever.* Of course, it isn't literally forever but to the depressed or anxious mind, objective reality hardly matters. Subjectively, a year seems like forever and that prospect is corrosive to one's mind, body, and spirit. And, of course, none of this is to deny that for some people, the loss of a job, a family member, or their health might very well be permanent. When people experience the drum beat of the same rhythms, the same habits, the same environment, the same people (or lack thereof), the Groundhog Day - like quality of our experience impales us so much more when we see it stretching on into a distant and uncertain future.

One day bleeds into the next, creating a feeling of timelessness that is frightening when projected into the future.

Though I'm a therapist, I don't really have any special "tips" for helpful ways of dealing with this monotony that seems to stretch into a dreadful "forever." I've seen only a few things that have any salutary effect—and then, only with some people. First, it's important to fight against any type of self-blame. The oppression you feel is not your fault and is shared by millions of people. Second, you might get some peace of mind by trying any one of many different types of mindfulness or meditation techniques. And third, I think that we would all benefit from lowering our expectations and consider just getting through another day without harming ourselves or others as a success.

A successful day means just getting through it.

I fear that all of the self-help gurus running around urging us to use our quarantine "productively," for example, to learn another language or develop our creativity, are inadvertently setting up a standard that invites people to feel like failures. Sure, some people can and do get satisfaction from such pursuits but many

more feel inadequate if they can't do them, and, instead, just opt to watch Netflix and eat takeout food. The self-blame adds to the stress and the pain. It would be more productive to just focus on getting through the day.

We don't know when this quarantine and social distancing will end. I suspect that some of its more toxic elements will be present for a long time. But, to quote Anne Lamott describing the process of grief and mourning: "It's like having a broken leg that never heals perfectly – that still hurts when the weather gets cold, but you learn to dance with the limp." Maybe that's the most we can hope for.