



## **ANNAMARIE JAGOSE**

Hello, I'm Professor Annamarie Jagose, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Sydney.

Welcome to this Sydney Ideas conversation. Welcome to those who are joining us live online and to those listening on the podcast later.

COVID-anxiety is the title of our panel today. And truly, who hasn't felt it? Even those of us who were quite relaxed several months ago, perhaps are now more familiar with the notion of COVID-anxiety.

It's a weird and precarious time, a time of great uncertainty across the world. I found myself using the word 'unprecedented' more times in the last week than I probably used it in my life.

We're grappling with constant and sometimes confusing and contradictory messages; and trying to work out what does this mean for our health, for the people we love; for our communities, our jobs, our futures.

Today in this conversation, we're going to do our best to make sense of the rapidly shifting COVID19 events by bringing together academic experts from different disciplines to think beyond the physical health ramifications; to issues of the mental health, anxiety, communication and general sense making aspects.

Let me introduce our panellists today.

Professor Nick Enfield is a professor of linguistics, looking at language, culture, cognition and social life.

Professor Ian Hickie is a leading expert in public health and co-director of the Brain and Mind Centre.

Dr Claire Hooker has a number of research areas, but most pertinent to our conversation, is her expertise and politics, ethics and history of infection control.

Professor Agnieszka Tymula's research combines methodology from economics, psychology and neurosciences for a better understanding of how people make decisions.

And our fifth panellist Professor Julie Leask, public health researcher, focusing on vaccination and infectious disease risk communication, with a background in public health, nursing and midwifery.

So Nick, starting with you, why is how we talk about coronavirus so important.



## **NICK ENFIELD**

As a linguist, obviously I'm crucially interested in the role of language in all of this. And to my mind, what's important is that all of the information that we are trying to make sense of; that we're drawing on, is packaged using a language in one way or another.

People around the world are reading about this in different languages. Within a single language we're getting our information from different sources, some are experts, some are not.

Texts are very specific to particular realms of knowledge; we might be looking at information coming from within medicine. Or we might be just hearing the opinions of somebody we know on Facebook.

So we have this flood of information. And we need to make sense of it. So from my point of view, thinking about the role that language plays is really crucial. And what I want to emphasise here in relation to anxiety and so on is the need for mindfulness around the words that we see being used in, in all of this information.

So to give it a couple of examples, we've read about whether COVID-19 cases, you know, who do they affect? How serious are they for any given individual? What's the likelihood of serious illness or death, and we've seen descriptions of the number of cases that are mild.

So we might be reassured by the use of the word mild, but when we look a little bit more closely in certain contexts, this time has been used for cases which, in fact, for everyday people, we would consider it to be extremely serious; they would include cases where people have been hospitalised. But perhaps, you know, not using a ventilator or in ICU.

So they will be very dreadful physical experiences, but could be technically still classified as mild. So, that would be one example.

And I think there are other cases, other kinds of terms, many, in fact that we could discuss as we go along today, terms like social distancing, terms, like extreme measures for the kinds of measures we're all taking at the moment, where, in fact, there are some really quite different understandings of what these terms mean.

And we really don't want to have confusion, which we clearly, you know, are currently experiencing, we really do want people to be calibrated and to have a common understanding about, about what our decisions mean.

And so, as individuals, what I want emphasise is that people should be mindful, which means pausing when we see a certain framing being used a certain term



being used - taking a step back and trying to think, where's this term coming from? Who's using it? What's the context?

And through that, a little moment of pause and bit of mindfulness about the language we see; we can begin to make better decisions, which, you know, hopefully will allow us to act more rationally. So I'd be keen to discuss those points and pass it back over to you.

### **ANNAMARIE JAGOSE**

That's great, Nick, good to see that emphasis on mindfulness. And certainly, I'm sure we're all mindful at the minute of specialist vocabularies that are leaking out into the everyday and being taken up in different ways, which maybe makes a good pitch across to Claire Hooker. Claire. Can I ask you, what can we learn from epidemics in the past? What does history teach us?

### **CLAIRE HOOKER**

History teaches us unfortunately, some many grim lessons and on many occasions we do see that even a small amount of negative language can easily coalesce, for example, around places or types of people who might be particularly feared.

So the history of epidemics, unfortunately has often exposed many of the fractures that exist in societies themselves.

In in our case, there has been rightfully concerned, for example it how easily we all dismissed, or many of us dismissed COVID-19 as something that would only impact the elderly, as if the elderly were not our own beloved parents and grandparents, elders and leaders in so many ways; as one example of how that shows or perhaps exposes broader dismissive attitudes towards the elderly, across society.

But part of what I would like to say today, too, is that they also give us the opportunity to pay attention to and dwell on our strengths.

That despite many concerns, we see so many Australians taking the government's advice on trust, distancing themselves physically; turning their lives upside down, in an effort to contribute to the greater good of all of us surviving this as best we can.

And those wonderful moments of care and solidarity are as important or perhaps some of the most important aspects of this experience; as are the many factors that tend to exacerbate our fears.



## **ANNAMARIE JAGOSE**

Thanks, Claire. Look, it's really interesting to hear you talk about in the COVID-19 context, the importance of acting for the greater good. Which leads me to ask Ian a question, Ian. This is obviously a complex time for people's mental health. And you're on record as saying that there is value in being anxious but pro social.

## **IAN HICKIE**

Yes, that's my message. Anxious is good. To say 'calm down, don't worry' is entirely unhelpful in the current situation, we are all worried; the immediate threat, the impact on our lives, the social dislocation that is happening and in the danger of the self-isolating language, is to imply that we act more individually and we're alone.

And then people get overwhelmed and feel helpless. It's actually a time to behave collectively and smart in your own local communities that keeps you safe and the people you care about as has just been emphasised.

Whether the elderly, the pregnant, the young your partners, your kids, whatever, collective action so the messages need to turn into smart local collective action we'd be pro social.

Now anxiety orientates you towards responses if it goes the wrong way and gets overwhelming people become helpless and engage in anti-social actions, hence the panic buying, strip the supermarkets, keep people from my door type ideas, or in the United States buy gun's type-ideas in the extreme.

In Australia, we have traditionally had a history of volunteerism; of collective social action of not relying on central government or being told by central government, but actually behaving collectively.

So, we've got to think through and Nick's issues about words matter here. When we say physically isolating, we need to say but more socially connected, and more acting as groups to be pro social.

As we face the collective threat. We're all in it together. The 'we' not the 'I' needs to dominate the response. So a lot of the communications at the moment from government and from health agencies are very simplistic. Wash your hands, do what *you* do, in a sense, don't cough, etc, as distinct from 'it matters what we *all* do'.

And some of the problems I think we're having at the moment of simply telling people what to do, miss the collective. So the rest of us have to think, hang on, hang on, not just do what do I do? But how do I behave in the most connected social way?



Because we're humans, we do care about each other. And we behave most effectively when faced with threat; when we behave collectively.

### **ANNAMARIE JAGOSE**

That's great. And I'm really picking up on that strong message about thinking about the 'we' not the 'I'.

And that also lets me bridge very nicely across to Agnieszka because in your comments around the way in which anxiety orients you to responses, I think we have been thinking a lot about decision making; our own decision making on an individual basis and then collective decision making at community and governmental levels.

So, Agnieszka can I ask you a little bit? What are the features of human behaviour that you would see very visibly operational and people's decision-making processes in a COVID-19 context?

### **AGNIESZKA TYMULA**

Yes, so, you know, as a researcher studying behaviour I'm now witnessing this fascinating, from a research point of view, on a massive world-scale; decision-making experiment; and you know, not that I like coronavirus happened but we are learning a lot about human behaviour in extreme situations.

And I have to say that what we are seeing is not that people suddenly started behaving, making these decisions in different ways, but rather we see the same behavioural patterns like aversion to losses; aversion to uncertainty following the crowd when we don't know what to do, but they're just magnified by the corona virus and there are good behaviours and there are bad behaviour.

Of course, as the researchers and policymakers, we are interested more in understanding the ones that reduce people's well-being so that we can understand how to mitigate them.

And I think they be mostly related to this idea of loss aversion and operational uncertainty. I think that what all of us could do is actually stop for a second and try to think what drives our decisions.

And this introspection and awareness of the mechanisms that drive our own behaviour, I believe would help us make better decisions and would put us in a better place as a society.



## **ANNAMARIE JAGOSE**

That's fantastic. Agnieszka. I think the thing about decision making, in making it kind of transparent to oneself is really important and the number of panellists, yourself included, have pointed to the importance of feelings of uncertainty and ambiguity and how to orient oneself correctly, in such a confusing environment.

Julie, I'd like to turn finally to you to ask when we're faced with uncertainty and ambiguity. How should we best talk about and communicate in such contexts?

## **JULIE LEASK**

Well, the first thing is that the people who are doing the risk communication need to acknowledge ambiguity and uncertainty.

They're dealing with a great deal of uncertainty in a technical sense. You know, the knowledge about this virus is very rapidly evolving.

So the way it spreads, whether there's transmission between people from someone who doesn't have symptoms, and so forth. These are all really important questions that have implications for our everyday lives. And yet a lot still not known

And that means that the messages, the inconsistency in the messages has a temporal nature. So they change over time. And they have a jurisdiction on inconsistency because we're dealing with states and territories and a federal government.

And they have an action word inconsistency when we see things that politicians say, for example, like don't panic or stay calm, or there's nothing to worry about all quotes from politicians in the last few weeks.

And yet what's actually happening is a major disruption to our daily lives. And even though it's uncomfortable, the best way to do that, we know from studying risk communication during health emergencies, is to acknowledge uncertainty. Tell people what you do know what you don't know.

Tell them how much to worry. And give them some rationale behind the decisions you're making. All the way along, acknowledging that those decisions may change because you're still coming to terms with what is known about this virus and the way it behaves in populations.



## **ANNAMARIE JAGOSE**

That's great, Julie. So, let's open up to the broad panel conversation. Now, I think our audience hopefully gets a sense of the specific sort of disciplinary expertise that you're all bringing to the conversation.

And there's been a number of comments made across those introductory statements about the way that there is no one simple message.

And yet, across the world we see government's trying to pass simple messages into populations trying to control or encourage certain forms of behaviour and discourage others. And I think we see individuals, struggling a lot to understand what might be the best situation or the best response from them?

How can we think about this? Perhaps going back to you Ian, and your notion of the collective over the individual?

What are the ways that people can bridge the gap between their own imperfect knowledge and the knowledges that Julie points out unnecessarily imperfect because we don't have a complete kind of knowledge understanding of the situation that is evolving temporarily pretty quickly.

## **IAN HICKIE**

This is such an interesting thing, because we have I think, sort of old century centralised one correct voice will tell you what to do.

But that actually, people learn what to do by sharing information and testing with each other. 'I heard this you heard that' we talked about it, what does it mean? What should we do in relation to it?

As people access different levels of information, those who are more savvy and more interested in where the raw data comes from want to see more transparency.

How they then explain that with the people they live with, the people they work with they interact with becomes really important.

So we normally resolve these things, actually through conversations. Now we have lots of technologies, lots of ways of doing that.

So I found it fascinating, lots of politicians say, get off Twitter, get on Facebook, don't talk, don't share. I'd say the reverse; get on there, ask which misunderstanding somebody else can clarify, you know, no, no, no, it didn't mean that it meant this, you



know, in a certain situation you're in at the moment is the complete confusing set of issues about going to school going to childcare or not?

What does it mean in your community, more information that's powerful and transparent, and then transacted within the society.

Julie's point about lack of certainty is really important. This is a dynamic, evolving situation, the situation in Australia is not the same as internationally.

The situation different parts of Australia is different. There are different clusters, there's those have been exposed. What you need to do as a community is work through that. And the people who know more, share more, but we all talk about it.

So what is it we're worrying about in our head. What's my misunderstanding? What's my misinterpretation of what was just said? So we can work that through. And that requires the fabulous use of the interactive medias like we're doing now.

People got different perspectives that can share them that then result in the most useful action, but also promote that there are useful actions, not just panic. So I think what we're seeing is that a lot of public health messaging as done by governments etc, hasn't moved into the 21st century, isn't interactive, doesn't allow people to ask questions and clarify.

What does that mean? What happens in public transport? You know, should we all get off or not? What happens? What happens with school? Should we all get off or not? Simple black and white absolute answers, and I've read it,

## **CLAIRE HOOKER**

Ian, I'm sorry, we're all going to acknowledge at this moment that it's quite hard to interject in the Zoom environment.

So our collective apology for the apparent interruptions, but Ian, I was enjoying what you were saying so much? Because it reminded me of the fine grained information that social media and communal context provided in bushfires.

And many people similarly want something more they want fires near me, but they want the fine-grained local information that added context and detail beyond fires near me, so that they could make the right sets of decisions that were pertinent and relevant and salient for their particular situations.

And I think, indeed, we see exactly this really strong, reliable sense making process occurring through the channels that people can access.





## **NICK ENFIELD**

And I also add to that, that I think it's, there's a question about the populations within which information flows and one of the kind of downsides of social media is that we're exposed to claims we were exposed to views that come from people who we've never met, who, we never will meet, sometimes that's absolutely fine.

But other times, it's hard to get checks and balances on the kind of information that we're getting. Whereas when you bring things down to the local level, you're dealing with people who you will deal with, again, in the future, who you've dealt with in the past, people's reputation matters more.

And basically, our levels of trust go up a lot more. So I think that there's really interesting effects of that kind of more local community exchange of information.

And I've already started experiencing this, I've just had people in my neighbourhood set up a community sort of web page where we can communicate with each other about who needs flour and sugar and that kind of thing.

So I think that there's very interesting effects of levels of trust around information coming back to Anne's point of being able to use social media as a source of information where discussions can happen.

## **ANNAMARIE JAGOSE**

So maybe I can pick up on it and ask the panel to speak about the fact that we're negotiating in a crisis situation, a very complex, multi levelled, communicative structure, and perhaps structured across the coordinates of trust on the one hand is is Nick you're speaking of now, but also panic as Ian has mentioned trust and panic are two very sort of galvanising feelings.

How do we negotiate the completely complicated communication environment, if we oscillating between those two.

## **IAN HICKIE**

So mistrust, mistrust and social dislocation will lead to panic, unreliable messaging, don't know who to trust.

Don't know who's reliable and non-transparency in that situation is important. So unfortunately, we've been in a world where the degree of global trust has



deteriorated; degrees of local trust have deteriorated, polarisation of views has become common.

So this is a real test of the social fabric locally, who do you trust? I think we're very lucky in Australia.

Things like the National Broadcasting Service we have. We've had trusted information sources, allowing those to interact with local systems as Nick was just emphasising, and as Julie was emphasising, in real time; letting people know what are the sorts of issues that are in consideration, and that there are systems that are actually operating to take best international learning. Best evidence has been never through this panel, what we know from the past what we know from other research, and then help that into local action.

If it remains too high level, too depersonalised doesn't actually help me to know whether I should go to school today. Take public transport today. Meet with friends today.

Why different rules in different situations, then mistrust and panic goes up, people just retreat to knee jerk responses.

So think it is a really interesting situation that we've got, on the one hand, the upside of new technologies & connectedness. On the downside, we're not operating in a period of great social trust. So I think the community issues exactly as Nick emphasised, how do you reestablish that?

And it's mainly with people you're already connected with, and then sharing that information, workshopping that information yourself, and being open to discussing what is causing you anxiety, what is causing you fear, what is the likelihood that next thing will happen?

The fires near us example? I'm one of those people who thinks we should have an app 'virus near us', not on its own, but in combination with the other sources.

## **JULIE LEASK**

So can I can I just dip in there and, it's Julie here, and say that when we're thinking about sustaining trust, we're thinking about the responsibilities of a number of different institutions and trust is really important to sustain in a in a crisis like this, it's your number one resource for maintaining community cooperation.

So there's just, I do have some thoughts around the different institutions who are responsible for that, but over to you AnnaMarie.



## **ANNAMARIE JAGOSE**

So I was just going to feed into the conversation, a comment made from a live audience, from Kate Beere, who introduces herself as a community-based crisis counsellor, with a psychology background.

And she's pointing out that she's often having to produce information packs for different groups, and she customises them for her perception of how willing they are to receive detailed information, or perhaps more for a younger audience or perhaps a more sort of effective reassurance for older audiences.

This makes me think about the ways in which an infectious disease; whatever it's epidemiological kind of construct, is a scary proposition for a lot of people, partly because it crosses or almost violates the social boundaries that we often set up for ourselves in our everyday lives.

The people that we feel comfortable, say cohabiting with; strangers on the street, or different national populations imagined as threats or otherwise.

Is there a way in which we could engage as a panel about the way in which infectious diseases you know, the very the very notion of you know, what we call community transmission, injects a sort of anxiety into the structural forms that usually we find reassuring?

## **IAN HICKIE**

Annamarie that's such a great question because you can't help but cognitively, when faced with an invisible threat, to start to try and make sense; humans have to make sense, if only and to believe that they can be in control.

So this really challenges the cognitive processes and the social processes of humans.

Most other threats, like the bushfires, and certain kinds of things, or wars or events, you can see who it is, you can identify the other, you can retreat to your own social groups so the trust amongst your own group goes up, because you have the belief whether it's true or not, that you can actually protect your own in a particular way.

In this particular situation, you have to actually overcome that and see everybody as being affected, you know, rather than trying to say it's a Chinese virus, or it's Asians, or it's those who just got off the boat from the US or some other particular thing or the, you know, my friends don't have it, but the other random man in the street does, you know, so it's really challenges our cognitive and normal social responses.



So it's actually the invisible nature of it; the unknowing nature of it is something that causes extreme anxiety, because it's directly contrary to our inbuilt instincts, cognitively and socially, which is why it's so important to have this kind of rational discussion if you like, unless we take care of all of us, we are all at risk.

## **NICK ENFIELD**

So just wanted to pick up a little bit on the question about cognition.

And that's kind of the challenges there. And turning it back to some of this sort of questions of mindfulness that I started out with.

I think one of the big challenges is for people to learn about their own kind of cognitive foibles, if you like and, and the ways in which we tend to respond to things using you know, sometimes flawed cognition or limitations in some sense. (Cuts out)

## **JULIE LEASK**

While we get Nick back on I might just come in there and comment that, you know, often we think of people's sort of fast thinking, you know that that that thinking when we're fearful and anxious as being a kind of bias, and it can lead to these heuristics or mental shortcuts, when we're thinking quickly can lead to predictable biases, but they can also be useful in helping us make snap judgments.

And you know, they're, if you think in evolutionary terms they're argued to be one way we've survived is to be able to think quickly and get away from danger. But I'd like to draw this discussion about how we sustain trust to focus on the institutional responsibilities and one is the mass media.

And another is the government and the way they interact together. Because all the things that we've discussed so far, so the importance of language for example, the way images are used can make very powerful messages for people.

So if you know as Ian said, if we, you know, as Trump is calling this the China virus, which is a terribly toxic kind of language and will deeply stigmatise people for years to come.

As we've learned from the SARS experience, it's very important that latest pay careful attention to their language; that we do frame things as having community benefit, that we make sure that when we're putting an image alongside words that we don't co-locate particular population groups and contribute to further



stigmatisation, because as editors we've got our own vast subconscious biases; and also the responsibility of government to work well with the mass media and meet the needs of the media.

And that relates to that issue of transparency; giving good rationale and maybe taking a little bit more time between decisions and communication of those for a little bit more engagement so that the decision making doesn't become overwhelmed with politics, which will lead to more mistrust.

### **AGNIESKA TYMULA**

So, maybe let me jump in here after Julie from a behavioural economics perspective, I have to say I totally agree that media played a really big role in things that actually impacted on all of us like panic buying, because it's kind of helped fuel the fear in people that they will be actually losing access to things that they've been taking for granted forever, like, you know, basic necessities like pasta, food and other things.

And when that happens, people actually use the loss aversion starts demanding and want to buy more of the products that they fear that they might lose access to. And they're willing to pay more for them.

You must have noticed in your local corner stores that now pasta can sell for five times as much as it used to, and people are still buying this. And that's because this messaging in the media has been very much around people losing access to the basic goods that they use every day.

And I just want to say one more thing that I don't think that it's our brains turning to mashed potato because of the corona virus and are suddenly becoming completely irrational when we are making our decisions. I think we're actually responding rationally to our beliefs about what be available.

And the beliefs are that, you know, certain goods will not be available in the future, then we want to purchase them to make sure we have them.

### **ANNAMARIE JAGOSE**

That's great. And I think Agnieszka and Julie, your two comments around behaviours, but also behaviours that are driven by communication hierarchies, I guess, whether mass media or governmental or the kind of synergistic sort of connection between those two and connects nicely to another comment question actually did an audience member Julianne is asking he or she is imagining herself is



a as a communicator, in this case, a communicator inside a family structure to her own kids.

So again, in a swirl of adult communication, a lot of us are also in positions, role holders or perhaps familial roles where we find that we have to communicate uncertainty and ambiguity.

And Julianne's particular question is, you know, she's got kids at home and she's saying they're asking 'How long will we be at home from school and away from our friends'? And she's finding it hard to know how to answer in an honest way, perhaps in the way, Julie that you emphasised at the start where transparency was an important goal.

## **JULIE LEASK**

Yeah, it's funny actually, Claire and I were talking with each other yesterday about this clay, you might want to elaborate but that idea of government giving put the public sense of what will trigger the reopening of schools, the opening of borders again; it's not going to happen for a long time now.

We don't know how long, but at least knowing what will trigger those decisions and what factors will be made and weighed up because there is a lot of weighing of risk and benefit, will help people have some sense of predictability and will reduce the risk that decisions are confounded by politics. Claire?

## **CLAIRE HOOKER**

Yes, I'd like to say a couple of things on that. My first comment is. I'm speaking as a mother worried that at any moment her children will come bursting into this webinar through the door behind me.

I've had that conversation this very morning, how long will this last? And my best response to that is to use a picture. Because the picture lets us at least lay out on a number line where the dimensions of uncertainty might lie.

If the peak might be somewhere between May and July, then where we can start to set our expectations in a range of dates a little bit further along. So one of the things that I've noticed is that many people are sharing on social media, simple and effective visual graphics that let us get some sense of tangibility around the abstract notions such as what an exponential curve looks like, that everybody needs to access.



And somebody said to me yesterday, why isn't the government providing us with these simple graphics to explain some aspects of their planning? And I think that's a really good question, because it could help us put some parameters around uncertainty, as Julie was just suggesting. AnnaMarie, you had a comment on them.

### **ANNAMARIE JAGOSE**

So I think really good connections that Julie and Claire are making there around, as you've just said, clear, putting parameters around uncertainty.

Julie's suggestion, which I think has a weight of risk communication expertise behind it, is to point out that when you don't have an answer, because it's not knowable, ie a child's question of how long before we can go back to school and see our friends; you might nevertheless, in a transparent in a useful way, be able to point to some indicators that will arise in order for that thing to become possible.

Claire, you've also brought in, I think, the idea of social media. And I think you know, anyone who has any kind of social media profile at the moment and perhaps, even if you have absolutely none and are only reading the mass media would understand how much social media is being energised vigorously by COVID-19 discussions.

Kate Beere is an audience member back on the chat line to talk about the ways in which some social media responses are very strongly driven by cynicism, because seeing a lot of ambiguity and contradiction in the messages; the example she gives us that, you know, we're talking about physical distancing, but the schools are still open. So people feel well, that's just nobody's messaging properly.

We can just be cynical and make kind of jokes about it; are the ways in which the panel thinks it is useful to respond to a cynical or sarcastic or I guess undermining responses to ambiguity.

### **JULIE LEASK**

I think we need to I actually think the role is for the communicators here. We've got different leaders who are doing variable jobs with their communication.

And in a sense, I'd love to see a communicator in chief, you know, someone who's very knowledgeable, has very good communication skills like some of the examples we've seen from the Victorian chief health officer, the Singapore PM, Jacinda Ardern, the New Zealand pm and each of you know it, everybody, the communicators are human beings.



So it's not as if bad communication is a reflection of somebody who just doesn't care, sometimes people do actually care, but they lack the communication skills to show that they care. And so the task of government right now is to sustain and perhaps regain a little bit of trust.

And for that to happen, I think would require a bit of a revolution in the way things are going right now.

And for, to be honest, for the prime minister to take advice on good risk communication and listen to it, and do work inwardly to address his own clear frustration about the behaviours that he's seeing and not liking and get a bit of understanding of behavioural science and how to communicate with people in a way that's compelling and draws cooperation rather than division.

## **CLAIRE HOOKER**

Julie and I have worked together on risk communication, and we know that for more than 20 years, any risk communication manuals such as those that have been published by the WHO, or the CDC since the early 1990s; emphasise that risk communication is a two-way process.

It's about actively listening to your impacted constituents and key stakeholders and addressing their concerns on their terms, rather than telling them what to do or what to think.

If you don't do that, and what tends to happen is that people move into distrust and then outrage and when they become outraged, all the research shows very clearly, they stop being able to listen to you.

They don't process information will and they respond from the perspective of their outrage. That's what we've seen happen in a by the book way with respect to the school closures.

Nobody talked to key stakeholders who were teachers, and parents. Teachers, particularly. No one asked what they needed, or to feel safe, or how to manage their environments and their work tasks effectively.

Instead, the message was sent to them that they could just be pushed out into a situation outside of their control in order to allow healthcare workers to go to work.

And that devaluing of a teacher's role was an absolutely strong driver for outrage, which led people to focus on apparent inconsistency in the messages, such as why are we not allowing people to gather in crowds unless they are so called children?





Is someone 16 a child? Or do they magically have a higher viral load on their 18th birthday, those sorts of inconsistency. In fact, all of those decisions and policies had risks. Behind them that were well worth listening to.

But we have pushed ourselves into a position where our mistrust and outrage, makes it almost impossible to hear the complexity in the rationale, which is what we actually need to be able to cohere around. And Ian has something to say on that point. I think

## **IAN HICKIE**

Well just to pick up, I think the key thing here is for all the people in the public arena, don't do what I say do what I do.

If you see there's panic in the supermarkets, and the worry is about food supply, they need to see the political leaders surrounded by the supermarket's and all those people who said there is no food shortage in Australia.

We can manage that. Okay, through partnerships if you want to see collective social action, you need to see all of our political leaders and social leaders engaging together to solve the immediate problems that we are worried about, in particular ways.

What we tend to see is every single person on their own in aid, you know, pretty conference or media conference giving a particular view about what you should do and probably waving their finger at you at the same time, even though the messages themselves may be inconsistent. If you want to show what to do if you want people to do what you do *show* what to do.

So in the political situations through the parliament through other areas, and you see examples of this overseas, people actually physically oscillating but socially connecting; people proving collective social responses on the key issues that Agnieszka was highlighting the things that people behaviour tells you they're worrying about. If it's food supply, if it's certain other set of issues, show how to do it, and model the behaviour.

We've had a ridiculous situation of keeping four metre apart, but saying it's fine this week for the AFL and NRL to carry on having players crawl over each other as if that's somehow exempt in a particular way. You know, you've got to show what it is collectively that you want people to do, and model that and not waste a lot of time and the behaviour that's evident in the community will tell you, you know, the Bondi Beach example over the weekend, people are clearly ignoring it - show what to do.



## **ANNAMARIE JAGOSE**

It's been a fantastic discussion across our panellists.

I'm going to just give you all one last opportunity here to dig deep and think about what might be your best tip, or your most succinct advice for listeners wanting to make informed decisions about how best to manage in the coming days, weeks and very likely months.

## **AGNIESKA TYMULA**

So I think, you know, we can't control what the politicians will be telling us and what messages we will be getting through social media.

So it's important that we are aware how we make decisions. So we've been talking about a lot today about minimising uncertainty, as small chance of something bad happening is terrifying.

But if we manage to narrow down the odds to some range, it will be less terrifying and we will make better decisions, more informed decisions, based on a number that we found somehow constrained. Second thing that I wanted to say is that very often the same problem can be framed in two different ways. In the last frame, or in a game frame, we can be talking about losing life and about saving lives. These things make a big difference.

And so be aware that you have a tendency to over weigh losses relative to gains and sometimes try two different scenarios and see what you would do if you framed it another way.

And last thing that I wanted to say is, as I was watching panic buying in Australia, I think many people did not think about the opportunity cost of their time, the time that they spent buying pasta and you know, trivial cheap goods, while at the same time they did not think about their retirement savings because that was not you know, that was not in the media. So they were not reacting that either.

And they were instead following the crowd and, you know, buy into much of the pasta. So always try to stop and think what is the opportunity cost of the action that I'm taking now.



## **JULIE LEASK**

I'd like to pick up on and yes, cheers. points there in terms of the game frame actually find this really helpful.

If you look at the data from Wuhan over 44,000 people with diagnosed with COVID-19, 81% of them had mild disease. Now, what that actually meant was that they had a fever a cough, respiratory symptoms, but they didn't have to go to hospital they might have had a bit of breathlessness, but that was as bad as it got.

Of course, then 19% did have more severe disease so we could think, gosh, you know, this is really scary; 19% had more severe disease, and that is scary. There's no doubt about that. But the fact that 81% had mild disease is, is I think, an example of how you can use gain frame to think differently about risk, whatever that is.

So, I think also in terms of going into the next months and managing this and the enormous disruption that people are encountering in their daily lives, some losing jobs; 21% are saying they'll have severe financial stress from this.

Some of the just the very simple individual things we can do. I sort of summarised, as an A, B, C, D, E, F, which I can briefly go through so A is for being aware of how you're feeling and how you're responding, and knowing that it's normal to be sad, stressed, confused and Bs for being healthy, and all the things that come with that.

And C is for coping constructively. So using typical methods that you deal that you use to deal with stress, and trying to avoid unhelpful methods like drinking to excess.

D is for distancing yourself from media coverage that you find stressful; and giving yourself a bit of a break from the topic.

E is for educating yourself by going to a reputable source, something that you trust, it might be the Government Department website, it might be an Aboriginal health community controlled health organisation, and

F is for family and community and that's looking after each other element, and looking out for each other element. So social distancing, it doesn't have to be social, it can just be physical and we can still connect on the phone.

Last night, my mum and my husband and I started singing the score of the Messiah. And it felt like the 70s growing up as a kid where we used together around the piano, except we were using YouTube for our accompaniment.

So you know, back to some old ways for us that maybe we'll discover some different and fun things that we we haven't done for a while because we've been so absorbed in our screens. So they're just some thoughts that I had.



## **IAN HICKIE**

I think the key thing at the moment is 'we', if we behave collectively, we'll save lives now. And we'll save the economy in the future.

The more the 'I' bit – just save myself – becomes dominant then the social fabric will be further tested and deteriorate, more lives will be lost and the economic future will be worse.

So that kind of issue trying to weigh up as Agnieszka said, what is really at stake and focusing on it, and how does that influence our collective behaviour? Because this is a collection thing.

You know, we need a large number of Australians to behave as a community, nationally, and then locally because what's at stake is lives in the short term, and our economic, social and emotional well-being in the long term.

## **CLAIRE HOOKER**

I think I want to say to Australians that, yes, we've got this, we can do this. I see so much creativity and innovation in people as they find ways to support themselves and each other and invent new ways of being connected and of communicating.

And what I really hope that we do is instead of focusing in a last frame way, on the things that have gone wrong and on who to blame; that we give ourselves a lot of opportunity to use this as a chance to invest in culture, to make the arts more central in our lives.

To remain connected to our family and singing around singing the Messiah, with the YouTube in the background, talking to our colleagues more often overseas, being able to use the skills we gain in this time to bring us through a healthy recovery in the months to come.

## **ANNAMARIE JAGOSE**

It's great look, it's really nice to finish by touching down on some practically-oriented sort of human-sized suggestions for how we can reorient in these unprecedented times.

A comment has come through from a listener who's who loved Julie's suggestion of a communicator-in-chief thought that was a really fantastic idea.



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## TRANSCRIPT

**Sydney Ideas podcast**

**COVID-19: Fear and anxiety**

Wednesday 25 March, 2020

We've also been in a very, very small way, demonstrating I think, some adaptability and resilience in the face of difficulties.

And Nick Enfield, crashed zoom and had to exit unexpectedly in the middle of our panel discussion, but can I thank Nick Enfield, Claire Hooker, Agnieszka Tymula, Julie Leask and Ian Hickey for being a great panel here today, and thanks for the audience comments and good luck with the future.

### **ANNA BURNS (SYDNEY IDEAS PODCAST HOST)**

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Finally we want to acknowledge that this podcast was made in Sydney, which sits on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. It is upon their ancestral lands that the University of Sydney is built.