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The unpleasant truth is the best protection against coronavirus

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Any crisis demands political leadership; especially the crisis caused by the coronavirus. First, a virus epidemic can only be stopped if the populace helps. Contagion spreads among ordinary people, and politicians can therefore only solve the problem from afar, by influencing people's behavior. Second, a virus epidemic requires that we break out of one of nature's strongest forces: our habits. We must change our habits to prevent contagion. We must wash our hands endlessly, stop touching our face, avoid handshakes, and generally keep a safe distance from other people. It is harder than you might think.

Political leadership demands two things in this current situation: clearly communication about necessary precautions and clear communication about *why* these precautions are necessary to motivate people to follow the advice. The Danish government has done well on the first part, but has done less well with the latter. To counteract the epidemic, the government's crisis communication about the seriousness of the coronavirus must be far clearer.

Friday March 6, a series of new precautions became effective. Organizers across the country have followed the advice and cancelled events. However, many citizens have questioned these actions. "Is it really necessary? The coronavirus is no worse than a normal flu", many people have wondered on social media. Or as my teenage daughter expressed it: "Is there like anything more ridiculous than this ban on hugging?" The same message (though in a different wording) has sounded from event organizers, accusing the government of overreacting.

You can hardly blame them for an accusation like that. While the government was extremely precise in their advice, they were just as inaccurate and vague in their explanations as to why it was necessary. We were vaguely told that it was due to a strain on the medical system and protecting the elderly and vulnerable people. But what does that exactly mean? Tangible images are necessary to stir our feelings. Normally, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen knows this when she explains her politics with examples from people she has met and spoken to.

The government obviously does not react on vague sensations. It deals with specific forecasts on an epidemic, and it deals with a series of operating procedures for which courses of developments require which actions. We are still waiting to see these, and this is precisely the problem. If we saw them, it would be clear to everybody that the government is not overreacting.

Since we do not have the numbers from the government to relate to, we must make our own estimates. Here is my best estimate based on information from WHO and from other countries. Friday March 6, we had 23 infected in Denmark. An unhindered epidemic of coronavirus has a so-called doubling time of about 6 days. This means that the number of infected will double every sixth day. If we had 23 infected on Friday, there will be 46 infected on Thursday. This is the reason the number of infected during an epidemic grows exponentially. The number of infected can grow very, very fast. By mid-May, we might have a little less than 50,000 infected, and 6 days later, 100,000 infected. A doubling of these numbers might continue for a while. A British worst-case estimate is that 80% of the population are at risk of becoming infected by a new virus like the corona.

The first key challenge arising with an unhindered course of epidemic is hospital capacity. In Denmark, we have approximately 2.3 beds per 1000 inhabitants, just under 13,000 beds in total. British authorities are working with a scenario where 20% of the infected will need hospitalization, based on, among other things, experiences from Wuhan, where the coronavirus started. All beds could thus be occupied by corona-infected people by the second half of May. Even worse, in the province of Wuhan, the hospitalized not only needed beds; they also needed oxygen. How many oxygen apparatuses does the Danish healthcare system have? I don't know, but my best guess is that we have reached the limit way before May, and then people will really start dying.

Thus, the danger of a corona epidemic is not only the actual death rate of (perhaps) around 1%. The danger is an excessive overheating of the hospitals, which will affect other sick people. When all resources are spent on corona-infected, there will be no resources left to treat

your pregnant cousin, your uncle with a broken leg, or your child who suffers from cancer. The consequences of overheating are not only health related. If such a situation arises, there is only one thing to do, and that is to close down society. In that case, we might be heading towards a new financial crisis.

All this is, of course, an estimate by a professor in political science, who is an epidemiological layman. The problem is that we have to make these calculations ourselves. They should be laid out there for us all to see. Even if calculations were off by a few percentages here and there, the message would be loud and clear: We must act now. With this said, it is important to mention that the government is acting. Above are descriptions of how the scenario would appear without actions taken. Which means that based on the recent precautions, the future looks different. Before we will be on safe ground, however, future events must develop very differently.

Why does the government not speak clearer? Mette Frederiksen probably answered that question at the press conference: We must avoid panic. We have all seen American movies where people rob stores and attack neighbors as soon as the streetlights cut off. However, this is not reality, and the concern about panic reveals a certain notion of the citizens. Political scientists take up a lot of room in the government offices, and one of the questions we discuss in political science is whether citizens are competent enough to act in a democracy. The answer is often “no”, and the common citizen is described as both ignorant and emotionally labile. However, a closer look at the research reveals a far more complex picture. People act both calmly and rationally in a crisis, especially when politicians demonstrate leadership.

There is a large body of research on how anxiety affects political behavior. Anxious individuals seek more information; they base their political behavior on factual information to a greater extent, and they are more capable of breaking their habits. My own research shows that when people are specifically worried about contagion, they tend to listen more to political advice about how to avoid contagion, and they intuitively keep a distance to people outside their family. This is precisely the type of behavior you must promote if you want citizens to behave appropriately during an epidemic. The psychology of the citizen is a tool, not an obstacle to effective prevention of epidemics.

Furthermore, the research reveals that the primary consequence of a crisis is increased solidarity. We recognize it when snowstorms close the roads. People help each other, and we actually smile at each other in the bus. Does that also apply in a real crisis? It does. Chinese researchers studied the effects of a massive earthquake in China and found that people in the ruined areas demonstrated greater solidarity with other people. With colleagues, I have studied

Danes' reactions during the two major political crises we have faced in the new millennium: the Muhammad cartoons and the terrorist attack on the Danish venue, Krudttønden. In both cases, the Danes remained balanced and calm. Actually, they showed enhanced solidarity in the subsequent period, also with Muslim citizens. To mobilize citizens against the spread of the coronavirus, it is crucial to speak in specific terms and directly to people's anxiety. In this way, people's habits are broken; they instinctively withdraw from other people physically and at the same time feel more sympathy towards them.

It does not mean that you should scare people. Anxiety is necessary, but insecurity will poison any attempt to guide a population. Anxiety and insecurity may mistakenly be seen as synonymous, but psychologically they are completely different. In psychological research, we talk about learned helplessness as a situation that arises when you repeatedly experience stress without knowing how to act. Then you become lethargic. Conversely, you act if you feel that you have the opportunity and the ability – also in unpleasant situations.

Crisis communication is a balancing act. The psychological state politicians should strive to establish is best described as optimistic anxiety. Citizens must be anxious enough to take the advice from the authorities to heart and optimistic enough as to feel that their actions make a difference – and therefore they will carry them out.

Insecurity is a perfect breeding ground for conspiracy theories and misinformation and must be avoided at all cost. Conspiracy theories about the coronavirus are already circulating on social media. Is it a Chinese biological weapon running wild? Are Mette Frederiksen's precautions actually about limiting political meetings among other parties? We know that insecurity is a major reason people believe in conspiracy theories. When people encounter something significant but lack an explanation, they tend to accept bizarre explanations rather than live with the uncertainty. In terms of preventing an epidemic, misinformation is devastating. If we want citizens to act appropriately, it is vital that their attention is directed towards the authorities and that they have faith in them. Conspiracy theories undermine both things.

So what is the problem with the government's communication on the coronavirus? The problem is, first, that it does not evoke the necessary anxiety because the government – due to unfounded fear of creating panic – does not reveal its projections and numbers. Second, if any emotional response is evoked, it is insecurity. Citizens are not being told about the specific actions found in the toolbox or about the criteria the government uses to decide when to apply the tools. What happens next? The common citizen does not know.

To foster optimistic anxiety, politicians have to focus on three things. First, they should foster constructive anxiety by describing the prognoses of an unhindered epidemic. It takes simple answers to questions like: What are the anticipated numbers of infected? What is the Danish capacity in terms of hospital beds and oxygen treatment? When will demand exceed capacity? It can be explained in a simple graph at a press conference or in press material, and it is also possible to explain possible inaccuracy associated with each projection. People are able to handle complexities when it is clear that it is important.

Second, politicians should focus on fostering the necessary optimism. They must be extremely specific in their advice, just as they are now. They must explain the specific projections on how the epidemic will change if the advice is followed. People have to see the difference between a situation of an unhindered epidemic and a situation where the population takes the advice seriously. This evokes the crucial motivation in the population to change habits on a difficult but central matter: How to act around other people.

Third, politicians should focus on avoiding insecurity. They must be completely clear about the precautions/initiatives that are available in the toolbox, and on which grounds they are putting these precautions into action. How many infected does it take to close schools; when are people recommended to work from home; and when are people prohibited from travelling? Specific information is the best cure against insecurity. If people are stockpiling, it is due to insecurity about whether a shutdown will happen in the dark of night.

Avoiding an epidemic requires the help of the citizens. This means that our political leaders must rise to the occasion, have confidence in the people, and foster the necessary optimistic anxiety. Not only do people have a right to know the truth; they can handle it, even if it is unpleasant. What they cannot handle is insecurity. To remove insecurity, the government has to change its communication strategy in relation to the coronavirus.