

Panic is a Dangerous Disease - On its Diagnosis and Prevention¹

Apl. Prof. (retired) Dr. Georg Lind

June 1, 2020

Fear of it has spread faster than the corona virus. Fear is a natural reaction to danger, sometimes saving lives, sometimes endangering lives, especially if it grows into a panic pandemic, as seems to be the case at present.

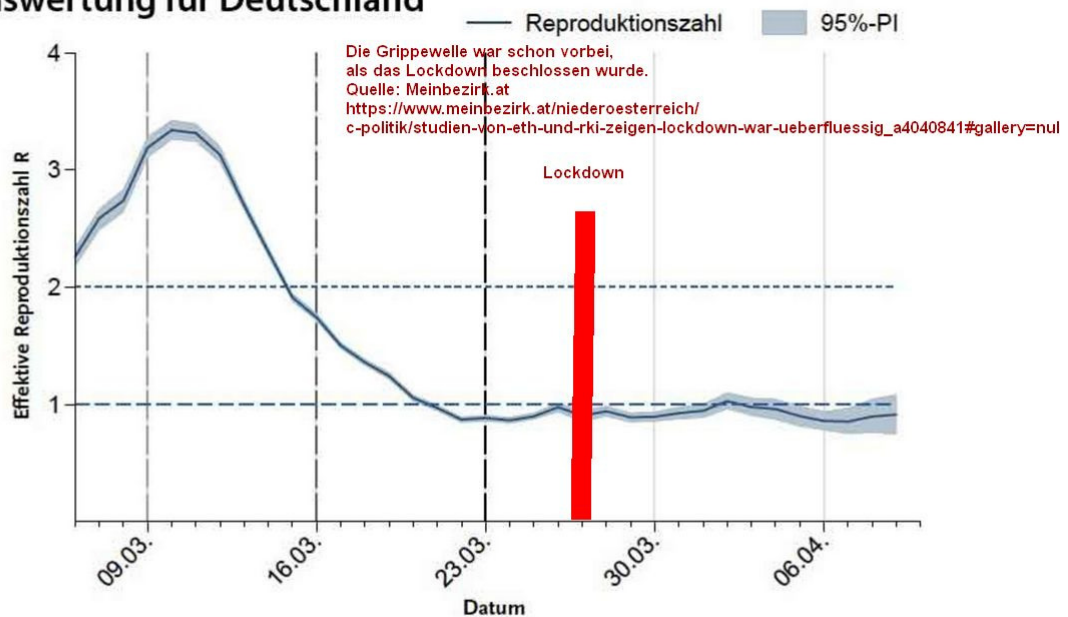
To prevent panic damage, evolution has equipped us with a relatively large brain. Philosophers see this organ (above all the forebrain, which occupies the largest place in the skull) as the seat of reason, psychologists as the seat of the ability to solve problems by thinking and discussing, i.e. moral competence. Moral competence has been shown in experimental and correlative studies to be very important for various forms of social behaviour. If people do not possess a minimum of this ability, they can only solve problems and conflicts by violence, deceit and looking away or by submission to authority (LeBon 1911/2019; Lind 2019).

Panic can cause greater damage than what one is afraid of. It becomes pathological when it disables the ability to think and discuss. It can affect all of us, including politicians and other opinion leaders. In such cases the danger of panic increases. A panic pandemic develops which spreads through various communication channels and is itself amplified.

Panic often has a long lasting effect. In fact, in some cases it only arises when the danger is already over, as seems to be the case with the Covid-19 "pandemic". In Germany (also in Switzerland, China, etc.), the massive restrictions of basic rights through anti-virus measures such as restrictions on going out, closure of day-care centres, schools, universities, most shops and services, distance rules, compulsory masks, etc. were only decided when the infection rate had already dropped to the level before the pandemic, so the measures were no longer necessary (see diagram).

¹ I wrote this paper during the panic-pandemic triggered by the global Covid-19 infections in 2019/2020. I have revised it a couple times to adapt it to new insights. I let "DeepL" make the translations. It is still preliminary. A monograph on the psychology of panic and its social and political effects still awaits to be written. GL

RKI Auswertung für Deutschland



hochgeladen von Dr. Peter F. Mayer

Note: The lockdown (red bar) was ordered when it was not needed anymore, namely days after the number of infections dropped down to the level before the pandemic. The data were published by the Robert-Koch-Institute, which is the German government's scientific institute for epidemiology. Thus, the lockdown could not have any effect at all. Similar data stem from China and Switzerland, where the lockdowns were also ordered only after the flu had ended already.

Apparently no natural immunity is formed against panic pandemics. In humans, insight usually only develops after panic disasters. Only after catastrophes, it seems, do people remember that these are the consequences of a panic disorder, against which something must be done early on. But it is also possible to do something before that to make people immune to panic. To do this, you have to understand what triggers it, how to recognize it and what you can do to counter it.

Trigger of panic

Panic can basically be triggered in two ways: directly and indirectly. Directly it is triggered when we feel directly threatened, for example by a snake that we think is poisonous or a person pointing a gun at us. Usually our whole body reacts to such a threat with great tension, so that we are able to flee or defend ourselves. If our thinking is not completely shut off by our fear, we can decide whether it is really a poisonous or a harmless snake, and whether the pistol is pointed at us intentionally only by mistake.

Indirectly, panic is usually triggered by authorities and their multipliers (media), who declare that we are at war or in a deadly pandemic. Indirect panic also occurs with animals. As soon as a leader issues a warning and flees, the whole herd immediately follows the leader without thinking whether it could be a false alarm. Some animals even follow the leader to their death.

Frequent fear and panic can lead to people becoming chronically anxious, i.e. reacting particularly quickly and violently to panic and finding it difficult to get back down from their fear. They can thus become entrenched as phobias and depressions. This can be a consequence of education when parents used threats and fear as a means of education to keep their children from undesirable behaviour, or when teachers tried to motivate their students to learn by humiliating them and making them afraid of bad grades. I know many people who, even in old age, still have nightmares of situations they were very afraid of as children. Phobias, anxiety attacks and depression are so widespread that one must speak of a widespread disease.

People react very differently to indirect fear triggers. Roughly speaking, four types of human reaction can be distinguished. The first two can lead to overreactions and great damage to the individual and to those around him. Only the last two can mitigate the consequences of an anxiety reaction to danger and limit its damage:

1. Refusal: people refuse to bow to the measures of authority if the authority is fundamentally distrusted. It does not seem to matter whether this authority itself did things that destroyed the trust of citizens or its predecessors. The same applies to the direct triggering of panic: people refuse to react to their own feelings of panic because they distrust their own feelings or do not want to be guided by them.

2. Blind obedience. When people do not consider themselves capable of questioning the orders of authority, or when they are simply afraid of its power, they follow blindly. You do what you are told. By this submission one also sees oneself relieved of any moral responsibility for one's own behavior. One has only carried out mistakes (see the Milgram experiments and also Hannah Arendt's book "Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil").

3. Thinking obedience. When people only obey orders after they have critically questioned and discussed them with others, one can speak of thinking obedience. This term was used by the Federal Administrative Court in 2005 to justify the right of soldiers to refuse orders if they contradict human rights. Thinking and discussing in the face of danger is therefore necessary, because only in this way can authority be prevented from making wrong decisions and the damage of panic be limited.

4. Democratic obedience. When people, after careful consideration and joint discussion of all conceivable causes and consequences of a danger, determine democratically what is to be done when the danger occurs, then authorities can act quickly without having to panic people.

Symptoms of pathological panic

Not everyone who's worried is scared. Caution is not panic. Fear and panic hardly ever show up in surveys, but in people's behaviour. There are some sure signs of a pathological state of panic:

- Personalization: panic-stricken people do not respond to the arguments and facts that someone presents to them, but fend them off by trying to undermine the credibility of the reporter by diffusion: "it's all conspiracy theory"; "extremists say the same thing as you do"; "you've been wrong before, people can't believe you"; "you've changed completely!"; etc.

- Anonymous comments that pick out side issues or attack things that have not been said or written at all, and which are aggressive in tone: of ingratiating ("I think what you say is good, but..."; insinuations ("You are putting yourself in a row with..."); assignment to ostracized groups that are currently being pilloried by the "leading media" ("outsiders", "anti-Semites", "Reich citizens", "AfD", "left-wing extremists", "terrorists" and others); and so on) up to open attacks ("liars", "irresponsible", "dangerous" ...).

- Restriction of counter-arguments to the repetition of low-content key words, which are given by political and scientific authorities and leading media (current examples: "pandemic", "novel virus", "corona damage" [instead of "action damage"] "solidarity", "conspiracy theories", "second wave", "gradual easing", "dropping", "case numbers").

- Refusal to talk: "You can't say that!"; "I don't feel like talking about that"; "Please stop it!") "Leave me alone!" and so on.

- Little or no interest in justifications and evidence: It is often enough for panic-stricken people that an authority has "said" something. Reasons overwhelm them. For scientifically proven evidence, they cite simple counter-examples: "But the professor on television said that this is not true. "Stop giving me reasons." "But in Italy I saw how the coffins were piling up..."

- Attribution mistake: For panic-stricken people the proverbial glass is always half empty instead of half full. "We have too many sick people" instead of: "We have too few hospitals, too few nurses, too few oxygen equipment, too few protective suits, too few breathing masks, too little information about which clinics still have beds available, etc." or "People are not behaving properly" instead of: "We have not informed them properly."

- Unilateral registration of confirmatory information; information confirming the success of the government's own defensive measures and actions will be kept. Information showing their failure and harmful consequences will be ignored. In the case of the "corona defence": bankruptcy of small businesses; distress of the homeless; psychological consequences of social isolation; fear of treatment; neglect of old people and people in need of care; lack of childcare for parents who are both working; children getting bored; relationship breakdown due to lack of contact; weakening of the individual immune system due to lack of exercise, lack of air and sunshine, building up a huge debt burden that prevents investment in climate and environmental projects, in better schools and in the health system, etc. and so on.

- One-sided focus on a single cause (such as the corona virus) while ignoring all other possible causes of death (e.g. environmental pollution by toxins in the air and drinking water, incorrect treatment of the sick, multi-resistant germs, aggressive incubation of the lungs, etc.)
- Exaggeration and falsification of dangers by substituting terms that cause little fear with terms that cause fear: "sick" instead of "infected" (and without symptoms), "died of corona" instead of "died with corona".
- Compulsion and draconian orders instead of recommendations: Orders without a solid justification, but with threats of punishment (unusually high fines and even prison sentences) even for minor offences; threats of recurrence of danger (here: the Corona pandemic) and of increased penalties instead of recommendations with explanations of their necessity and their scientific basis.
- Social ostracism for dissenting opinions. Example: Citizens who demonstrate against the restriction of important basic rights are defamed across the board without mentioning their concern. Politicians who weigh up health protection and the preservation of fundamental rights are branded as irresponsible. Dr. Wodarg, who on the basis of his many years of experience and competence as a doctor and health politician believes that the current corona "pandemic" is an ordinary wave of flu, is vilified in television programmes ("Die Anstalt", ZDF on 24.3.2020) and thrown out of the "Transparency International" association, where he was also a member of the board. His videos on the Internet were temporarily blocked. Numerous respected epidemiologists, virologists, nutritional specialists and environmental physicians are hardly mentioned in the main media, only because they can show that the alleged dangers are small and the countermeasures are exaggerated.
- Exploiting panic for political repression. With the argument to fend off dangers (war, pandemic) from the citizens, their basic rights are restricted, parliaments and courts are obstructed, freedom of opinion is restricted or completely abolished by state and private censorship and the protection of privacy is massively perforated.
- Exploiting the panic for business: The main beneficiaries of the panic are the manufacturers and distributors of medicines, tests and vaccines, i.e. the pharmaceutical industry and its shareholders, as well as the media, which encourage its users to panic by pretending that the danger is not yet over or that there is a new outbreak of the danger.
- Vicious circle: A panic feeds itself. By eliminating free discussion about the true magnitude of the danger, about its causes and about the effectiveness and harmfulness of countermeasures, mistakes cannot be corrected. Even those responsible can then hardly find their way out of panic, because they fear fierce resistance from citizens who are in a state of panic. Thus, panic persists, even if there is no longer any reason for it and its damage far exceeds the damage of the original danger. In extreme cases, panic can end in a fatal disaster.

What to do?

You can protect yourself from panic and get out of it and you can do something to make people immune to panic.

If most of the above symptoms apply to you, you should do something about it. I know of people who only became aware of the panic disorder through this checklist. Some have been cured. Others have deleted this list immediately and more or less kindly called me names. Between these two extreme reactions, some said that they might want to look at the list later. Most people who are personally affected by the panic measures are not annoyed by them, but by the virus ("Corona damage") or by "stupid executors" of the state orders. They think they can live well with the panic, but demand that society, i.e. the taxpayers, are liable for the damage suffered and pay them compensation.

Many also think that "this thing will pass at some point". Someone (politics, science, mass media) will bring it to an end. We citizens would only have to do what is ordered and wait and see. The measures against the imaginary danger are considered to be right in any case. Politicians or celebrities who plead for a (quicker) lifting of the measures are often attacked violently and scientists who doubt the reason for the panic are not listened to or are insulted and ridiculed. It can therefore hardly be assumed that their hopes will be fulfilled that the matter will eventually pass by on its own. Their lethargy will keep the panic alive.

It is therefore time for a new "enlightenment". Its motto was the philosopher Immanuel Kant's request: Sapere aude! Have courage to think!

I say "was", because we will have to reformulate this request. Courage is not enough! Only when we have learned to think will courage help. If we cannot think, courage will not help. Much more important than courage is therefore the ability to think. Wilhelm von Humboldt did more for enlightenment than Kant by introducing compulsory schooling. The lack of the ability to think is not, as Kant thinks, the fault of the individual himself. Rather, this lack is the consequence of insufficient preparation of people for life in a democratic way through school. Anyone who believes that courage is enough ignores the difficulty of living in a democracy and making one's own decisions and also fails to recognise the importance of schools for democracy.

The ability to think is the most important precaution against panic. Thinking does not mean the ability to think in any kind of contemplative way, but the ability to solve problems and conflicts, i.e. the ability to weigh up conflicting certainties, to solve moral dilemmas and to discuss with those who think differently, even and especially when fear threatens to paralyse thinking and discussion.

We call this ability "moral competence". This ability, its development and its importance for behaviour, has been well researched. We also know that moral competence is promoted very effectively and with little effort, for example with the Constant Method of Dilemma Discussion[®] (KMDD), which has been tested and evaluated many times (see my book: "How to Teach Moral Competence", 2019; Logos-Verlag, Berlin). The KMDD is a very effective and yet not very complex

method for the promotion of moral competence. However, the KMDD's effectiveness depends on the quality of the training of the teachers who use it.

(Feedback on this text, which is still under development, is welcome).

Vita

Dr. Georg Lind, born in 1947, was a full professor of psychology at the University of Konstanz until 2010 and is now a freelance author and teacher trainer. His main interest is in moral competence, i.e. the ability to solve problems and conflicts through thinking and discussion rather than through violence, deception and ignoring or submission to an authority. Without this ability, according to Lind, living together in a democracy is not possible. He developed the objective Moral Competence Test (MST), which is used worldwide to measure the impact of educational measures. He has also developed the Constance Method of Dilemma Discussion (KMDD)[®].

Contact us: LindGeorg@posteo.de.

Literature

Le Bon, G. (1895 / 2009). *The Crowd. A Study of Popular Mind*. Sparkling Books.

Lind, G. (2019). *How to Teach Moral Competence. With Discussion Theatre*. Berlin: Logos

Internet: *Moral Competence*. <https://www.uni-konstanz.de/ag-moral/home-e.htm>