

PHI: *It seems like they're constantly coming out with new or changing information regarding COVID-19. How do I find the line between staying informed and consuming so much news that it makes me anxious?*

Response from Rhoda Olkin, PhD:

This is a timely and very relevant question for all of us. We are more isolated as we shelter in place, while we consume more news. The information regarding COVID-19 can feel contradictory and confusing. It's easy to feel overwhelmed. However, there are starting to be clearer trends as medical professionals learn more about this new coronavirus. Masks and social distancing are the main factors that reduce transmission of this highly infectious disease.

Where can one turn for reliable information? I recommend listening to medical professionals, and not to politicians. Good sources are the physicians and researchers who appear regularly on MSNBC, and those from Johns Hopkins and the University of Washington. I pay attention to Dr. Fauci, as he is very experienced in pandemics. And I try *not* to pay too much attention to what my friends say—although many of them are very careful, others are more casual.

It's no use arguing because, ultimately, we each make our own decisions. I err on the side of caution, but I'm privileged in that I live in a house with a backyard and have a job I can do online. Others have fewer options, are frontline workers, or need a paycheck.

Obviously as polio survivors we have special fears about getting the virus, whether because of worries about our breathing or a history of negative hospital experiences. We know that a vaccine can wipe out some diseases. But the initial COVID-19 vaccines are more likely to be like the seasonal flu vaccine—about 50% effective, and only for a limited time. Thus, it seems we are in this for the long haul. Therefore, choose one to two trustworthy sources, stick with those only, and ignore the rest. Use your own best judgment—I trust you.

... choose one to two trustworthy sources, stick with those only, and ignore the rest. Use your own best judgment ...

Be mindful as well of what *else* you are doing with your time. Balance is key. If news and staying informed puts drops of anxiety water into the glass, you need to do things to take the water out of the glass, so that it never spills over. Reading fun things, creating, planting and gardening, laughing, deep breathing—these are ways to decrease the water level. And remember that *this too shall pass*, even if not as quickly as we would like.



Dr. Rhoda Olkin is a Distinguished Professor of Clinical Psychology at the California School of Professional Psychology in San Francisco, as well as the Executive Director of the Institute on Disability and Health Psychology. She is a polio survivor and single mother of two grown children.

PHI: *Some of my family seem to have gradually let down their guard as the pandemic has ground on. My youngest daughter, who lives nearby, lets my grandkids go on playdates and she regularly jogs with a group of friends. I don't want to tell them not to visit me, but when I gently suggest that she be more careful, she blows me off and says I'm being overly cautious. I feel like I'm being forced to choose between my health and my family.*

Response from Stephanie T. Machell, PsyD:

Of course you don't want to be forced into such a choice. It's awful not to get to spend time with your family, especially your grandkids. But imagine how awful it would be for everyone if you got COVID-19—especially if you got it from them.

You said your suggestions to your daughter have been “gentle.” It's time to be more assertive in how you express your concerns. Because she is dismissing your concerns, I wonder whether she understands what getting COVID-19 could mean for a high-risk person like yourself and how that would affect your entire family. Be clear with her about the possible consequences of a severe case and that even “mild” cases appear to lead to serious complications (including for healthy low-risk people like her and your grandkids!).

If she responds by telling you how low your risk is (about 20% of cases are severe), you could compare this with the risk of death from playing Russian Roulette (1 in 6, or about 16%), an activity I doubt she'd want you or her children to pursue.

Let her know how frightening it is for you to be placed at risk by her choices, and how worried you are about her family's safety. Engage her in conversation about what she is doing to protect herself and your grandkids. Is she meeting her friends outdoors, wearing masks and social distancing? Are your grandchildren

doing the same? Are the people she interacts with also taking precautions both with her and when they are with others, and how confident is she that they are trustworthy? Is she part of a social “pod” that interacts only with other members?

Remind her that all these precautions make interactions safer but do not eliminate risk altogether. Many high-risk people who avoid going out become infected by family members who are going out but taking precautions. Discuss ways you can be together safely, enjoying each other's company at a distance. Outdoors is best, in a private yard (if you have one), large porch or deck, or at either end of a driveway. If you're able, you can go for (masked) walks or hikes or to outdoor attractions where social distancing is possible.

It's hard not to have physical contact with your grandkids. If they're old enough to understand and follow rules, there are pictures online of safe(r) ways of hugging. You could make a game of it, with prizes for the most creative way of sending love to each other. For example, one of my clients got creative with her granddaughter and “sent” hugs back and forth via the family dog!

Remember, you are still the parent. You have a right to defend your space and yourself by setting boundaries and making rules. Protecting yourself protects your family as well. Best of luck navigating this difficult time! ■

Dr. Stephanie T. Machell is a psychologist in independent practice in the Greater Boston (MA) area. She specializes in working with those affected by polio and other physical disabilities. Her father was a polio survivor.

