

Note to our guests and readers:

Our common language is English. It is the language that most of us understand (more or less) and that gives us the opportunity to exchange our ideas. However, since very few of us are native speakers, we often fight for words. The summaries of our guest evenings are prepared by the sisters who moderated these evenings. We make these summaries available uncensored to give our readers an impression of the issues that concern us. Since we unfortunately lack the resources to have all of our sisters' texts edited professionally, we apologize to the readers for any language deficits. We hope that the summary of our guest evening themes, regardless of their linguistic presentation, will spark your interest in visiting us on one of our guest evenings.

The theme of the guest evening:

Fear in times of corona

Fear seems to be an omnipresent topic, at the moment. Fear of a new kind of virus, fear of what isolation does to us and fear of the economic consequences of all these things. Before we turn any further to the fears surrounding the corona pandemic, we should - first of all- understand the basics of what fear is.

We have all experienced fear in our lives: a phone call that could bring bad news, a high-stakes presentation in front of colleagues or superiors, a barking dog, late at night, on a walk in the woods. In earlier times, this could have been a wolf, posing a direct and immediate threat. Such immediate and direct threats to our well-being or even our lives are rare today. But fear still influences us today.

From an evolutionary point of view, fear makes sense - as a reaction to a dangerous situation. Deep in the brain, the amygdala fires, stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol are released. Physical performance increases. Tense muscles, increased pulse, blood pressure and blood sugar make an immediate reaction possible. This reaction is the often-mentioned fight-or-flight behaviour. Basically, fear helps surviving dangerous situations by heightening our anticipation and reactions.

This means on the one hand that fear is natural and useful. It keeps us wide awake and active when it comes to dealing with essential or even existential threats. At the same time, fear can be a bad advisor. It can lead to unfavourable or entirely harmful behaviour, especially in complex situations.

There is also the morbid, self-sustaining, self-provoking fear. Anxiety disorders, phobias, consequences of trauma are accompanied by fear that stands in the way of a healthy life. This fear – or better anxiety - fuels itself and can affect people's lives in a severely negative way. During this talk, however, I would like to mainly talk about ordinary and situational fear, about the fears that we all have, to some degree.

What coping mechanisms can we currently observe?

On the one hand, it seems completely reasonable to buy a mountain of toilet paper out of fear. The threat scenario is clear: toilet paper is quite essential for (comfortable) survival, an emergent pandemic threatens my toilet paper supply, buying toilet paper en masse is the sensible response. At the same time, however, I might dismiss the fact that such

“hamster” purchases aggravate the shortage or cause it in the first place. Pity for latecomers without toilet paper does not register at all. We are under stress, we isolate ourselves socially, aggression and strong reactions to weak stimuli guide us whether it makes sense or not. We also know fear-driven avoidance behaviour. We are so afraid and busy with imagining what could go wrong, we might forget to take advantage of the few possibilities that are clearly available to us. Reason and rational thinking is switched off, so to speak.

With that in our mind we can say: fear depends less on the actual threat than on the perceived threat. It is not reality that causes fear, but how we perceive that reality. And it is clear that fear-driven perception is not always rational or appropriate.

It is also not quite correct to speak of "the fear", a singular fear, i.e. a uniform reaction and a single emotional state. Our upbringing, life experience and personality contribute significantly to how we deal with fear. Some of us are less prone to fear, some more fearful, some because of life experiences, others because of their led them to not make those experiences in the first place.

Young people met in groups despite the distancing rules because they believed that nothing could happen to them, and older people still go shopping today despite the high risk of infection. According to them "whatever happens, happens". How the fear of social isolation (social/physical distancing) is dealt with is also different. Pensioners with limited social interaction might suffer less than younger people who are used to daily meetings with friends. For some of us, the walls are closing in and the end of the world seems imminent. Some can be almost relaxed when dealing with a pandemic and extensive restrictions in everyday life. Some look with great need for new studies and breaking news, some avoid Corona coverage completely.

Both the way the situation is handled, and the severity of the fear reaction thus open up a spectrum. Some can hardly help but ignore the threat, some cannot think of enough horror scenarios. Some are very calm despite acute awareness of danger, some experience incredible fear.

As is so often the case, the healthy and constructive approach lies halfway between the extremes. Both ignoring danger and willingly surrendering to fear echo what has been mentioned before - fear is not a good advisor, and often works past rational thinking when it comes to complex and sensitive decisions. For us this means: as natural as fear is, it is also important to deal with it consciously. Seeking out specific information instead of compulsive news consumption, sober reading of statistics and allowing fear to exist without letting it paralyse us are good guidelines in a situation where both fears and their causes are not easy to pin down.

For it is precisely this lack of clarity that shapes both our perception of the pandemic and its current - and possible - consequences. The life-threatening primeval wolf or the dreaded workplace meeting can be clearly contained, in one place, at one time. And afterwards it's over. A virus is everywhere and nowhere, even retreating into one's own home provides only limited safety. The future consequences - and the ways to deal with the crisis in the now- are also uncertain. Hourly reports and far-reaching political decisions

suggest (justified) urgency and relevance. Competing predictions about the medical and economic consequences are causing sleepless nights for many people because of fears of social isolation, fear for their own jobs, fear for their parents who might already be at serious risk. At the same time, we are certainly less afraid than, for example, more directly and severely affected New Yorkers or Italians.

We also react differently to this uncertainty. On the one hand, a quick surrender can occur here. If such giant and powerful entities as the economy, science or medicine communicate unclearly, sometimes contradictorily or even fatalistically, what can I do? If they don't know, who does? Better to just stay at home and be afraid! Just like with those paralyzed by fear, the reaction here is reminiscent of learned helplessness (a classic description of depression), a certainly unhealthy emotional state in our situation.

Others yearn for control when control is lost in these uncertain times. A mountain of toilet paper, 50 litres of disinfectant and enough food supplies for the next five crises should protect us from any apocalypse. And even though it can't be harmful to be prepared for emergencies in principle, the behaviour here is closer to warding off a scary ghost with a ritual.

The fear of uncertainty and how to deal with insecurity also leaps over into the sphere of the political. Who decides when we are safe, and how? According to which criteria? Are human lives more important than economics, or is preventing an economic collapse more important than some human lives? Is infection control more important than many of our fundamental rights? From Trump's or Bolsonaro's ignorance in the face of an imminent danger to actionism, politicians around the world react in different ways.

Not without reason, of course. First of all, as I have already explained, both reactions are entirely human, and politicians are human beings too. On the other hand, politicians also react to us.

Loud advocates of strict distancing rules and long-lasting measures become louder with every (premature?) loosening of restrictions. "Public life should pause when people could die!"

Others organize public demonstrations for the preservation of the right of assembly, no matter the risk and regardless of the threat to others. "No matter what, nobody takes normalcy away from us!"

Thus we are dealing with the same spectrum of political demands, formulated out of fear, as we see in politics.

We can discuss together whether politics or citizens provide impulses or only take up what is already present in public discourse. What is certain, however, is that the private handling of the fears of individuals now also finds its representation/ counterpart in the public sphere.