

Social Anxiety, #MeToo, and COVID-19

The last two months, I've spent many extra hours walking and biking. Encountering other people outdoors – and watching all parties avoid each other like lepers – is an eerie experience. Few human societies have ever made *severe* social anxiety so blatant. Viewing strangers with fear is the new normal.

How would you react, though, if someone got angry at you for avoiding them? The conversation might go like this:

Angry: Why on Earth are you avoiding me?

Anxious: I'm scared of getting sick.

Angry: I don't have any symptoms.

Anxious: Great, but I'm still scared.

Angry: Of what?!

Anxious: Of what might happen.

Angry: The risk is very low!

Anxious: But the damage is severe, and the list of potential risks is endless.

Most people today would probably strongly side with Anxious over Angry. If Angry grew despondent, however, you might (remotely) offer some constructive advice. Starting with: If you want someone to interact with you despite the risk, strive to put their mind at ease. Empathize with their fear even if you don't agree with it. Humor them. Adjust your behavior to make them feel safe – and be friendly about it. It may not seem fair, but you're the person who seeks more social interaction.

Which reminds me: Before the coronavirus crisis, anger was building against “#MeToo backlash.” First-hand experience suggested, and research confirmed, that many men were avoiding close contact with female co-workers. In particular, men were reluctant to socialize with or mentor women. Why? Because they were afraid of being accused of sexual harassment. The conversation went much like this... or would have, if the Anxious

felt free to speak:

Angry: *Why on Earth are you avoiding me?*

Anxious: *I'm scared of getting #MeToo'd.*

Angry: *I haven't #MeToo'd anyone.*

Anxious: *Great, but I'm still scared.*

Angry: *Of what?!*

Anxious: *Of what might happen.*

Angry: *The risk is very low!*

Anxious: *But the damage is severe, and the list of potential risks is endless.*

This time around, though, most people would vocally side with Angry over Anxious.

Am I really comparing the risk of contracting coronavirus with the risk of being accused of sexual harassment? Verily, because the parallels are loud and strong.

In both cases, people use social distancing for risk reduction. In both cases, the risk of most specific interactions is low. At the same time, however, people encounter an endless succession of risky situations – and the bad outcomes are very bad. Many (most?) men would rather endure sickness than public accusation.

While you can protest that, “the rate of *false accusations* is low,” that’s a lot like saying, “the rate of *deliberate infection* is low.” In both cases, the main danger is not intentional harm. The main danger is that social proximity allows *unintentional* harm. People don’t just infect others without meaning to. They also offend others without meaning to. If your motto is “safety first,” you naturally keep your distance to avoid both contracting disease and giving offense.

I grasp that #MeToo was partly motivated by the desire to *reduce* social anxiety of women. Unfortunately, instead of *reaffirming* universal good manners, #MeToo fought social anxiety with social anxiety, all but heedless of collateral damage.

As you can gather, I was disturbed by the rise of social anxiety years before the virus. Now

social anxiety has reached pandemic proportions. What is to be done? Rather than counter-productively condemn others for their paranoia, my goal is to deescalate the tensions. "Safety first" is a tempting but dangerous motto. Instead, let us all try to "Make risk reasonable again." Use moderate caution yourself- and kindly invite others to do the same. Listen to both Anxious or Angry. Side with neither.