

# Too Terrified to Talk About It

I recently compared the fear of contracting coronavirus to the fear of sexual harassment accusations:

*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.*

When I said “many,” I was picturing 10-20%, but I felt genuinely uncertain. So I decided to run some Twitter polls to get a better handle on the situation. The results suggest that I was much too cautious; almost 90% of *all* respondents (not just men) would rather endure sickness than public accusation. About two-thirds of respondents “definitely” prefer coronavirus.

*All things considered, which would you prefer?*

*(a) contract coronavirus*

*–or–*

*(b) be publicly accused of sexual harassment by a co-worker?*

*— Bryan Caplan (@bryan\_caplan) May 26, 2020*



The results are only slightly milder if you specify a social media scandal rather than a work scandal:

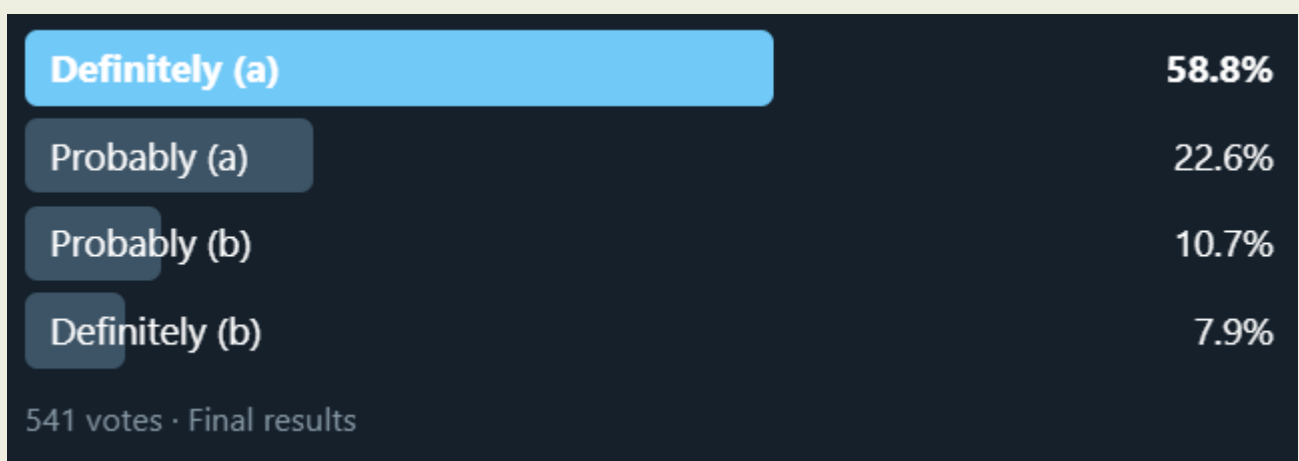
*All things considered, which would you prefer?*

*(a) contract coronavirus*

*-or-*

*(b) be publicly accused of sexual harassment by an acquaintance on social media?*

— Bryan Caplan (@bryan\_caplan) May 26, 2020



The implied terror made me wonder: If coronavirus pales before sexual harassment accusations, what *doesn't*? So I tried something extreme: work accusation versus a lifetime of celibacy.

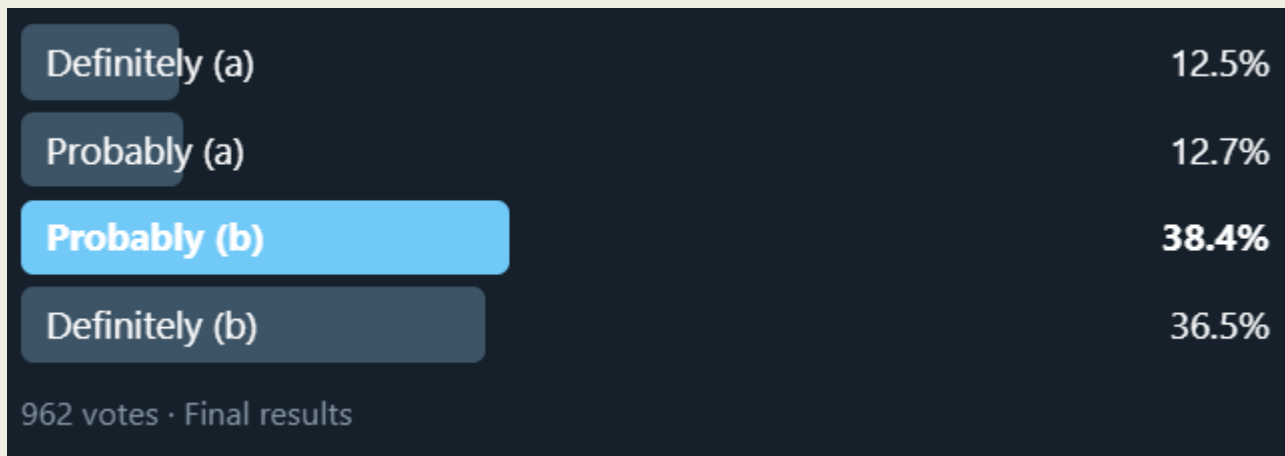
*All things considered, which would you prefer?*

*(a) be celibate for the rest of your life*

*-or-*

*(b) be publicly accused of sexual harassment by a co-worker?*

— Bryan Caplan (@bryan\_caplan) May 26, 2020



Even here, about 25% of respondents prefer celibacy. While I'm tempted to disbelieve, I guess I can accept that 25% of people fall into at least one of the following categories: (a) highly risk-averse people; (b) people who are no longer very interested in sex; (c) people who think their mating options are very poor. More strikingly, just over one-third of respondents *definitely* prefer to endure an accusation. Notice, moreover, that accusation need not imply the harsh consequences of firing or ostracism. Celibacy, in contrast, is a life sentence by construction.

At this point, I decided to flip the survey around. Sure, being accused of sexual harassment is bad; but perhaps it's comparable to the badness of *being* sexually harassed. The result? Only about a third of my respondents deem workplace sexual harassment worse than coronavirus:

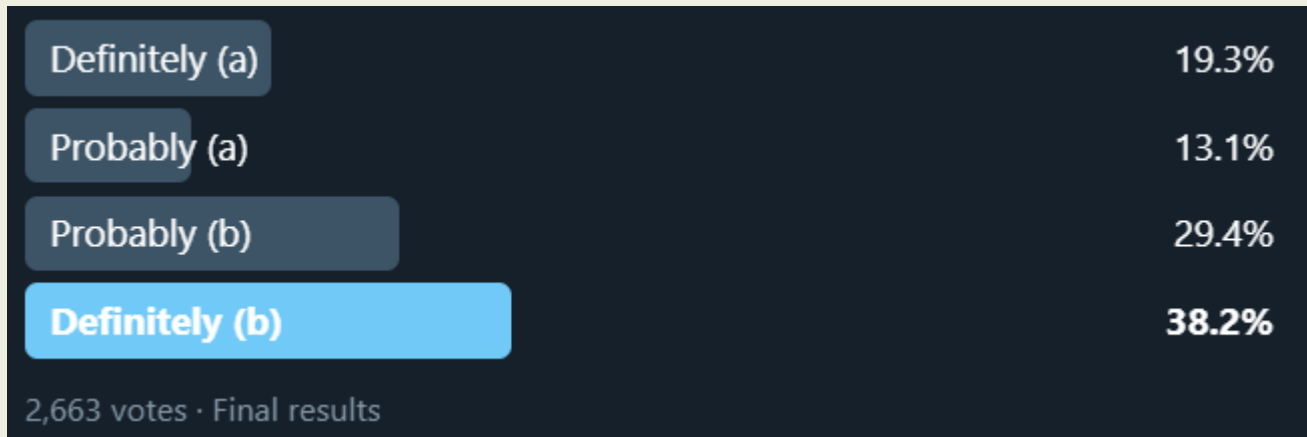
*All things considered, which would you prefer?*

*(a) contract coronavirus*

*-or-*

(b) be sexual harassed by a co-worker?

— Bryan Caplan (@bryan\_caplan) May 27, 2020



Kahneman's work on focusing illusion reminds us that, "Nothing in life is as important as you think it is, while you're thinking about it." Inspired by this insight, I maintain that people are overly worried about coronavirus, sexual harassment, *and* sexual harassment accusations. Why? Because society keeps reminding us to think about these specific traumatic experiences. Still, I see little reason to doubt the *relative* importance that people assign to these dangers. In absolute terms, most people remain terrified of coronavirus, so it's hardly surprising that sexual harassment worries them less. The fact that sexual harassment accusations actually worry the average respondent even *more* than coronavirus, however, suggests that most workers really are living in fear during normal times.

Why then don't we hear more about their terror? *Because people - especially men - are too terrified to talk about it!* At risk of hyperbole, the situation brings to mind the *Twilight Zone* classic, "It's a Good Life," where the whole world lives in mortal fear of omnipotent child-tyrant Anthony Fremont... including his father, Mr. Fremont.

*Anthony Fremont : No kids came over to play with me today, not a single one, and I wanted someone to play with!*

*Mr. Fremont : Well, Anthony, you remember the last time some kids came over to play. The little Fredricks boy and his sister.*

*Anthony Fremont : I had a real good time.*

*Mr. Fremont : Oh, sure you did, you had a real good time, and it's*

*good that you had a good time, it's real good. It's, uh, just that...*

*Anthony Fremont : Just that what?*

*Mr. Fremont : Well, Anthony, you, uh, you wished them away into the cornfield.*

Catching coronavirus is bad, but apparently not as bad as the cornfield.