

By Kai Liu

How I faced my coronavirus anxiety

In early February, I was working from home when I received a message informing me—and all the other professors at my university in China—that courses would be taught online because of the novel coronavirus. I was already feeling anxious about the mounting epidemic, and my university had locked its doors a few days earlier. Then, when I realized I'd have to teach students online, my anxiety level grew. I didn't have any experience with online teaching platforms. I was also skeptical about how effective they'd be. "How will I gauge the students' reactions to my lectures through a computer screen?" I wondered. "Will they learn anything?"

I live in Xuzhou, China—roughly 500 kilometers from Wuhan, the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike Wuhan, my city isn't on lockdown, but residents have been discouraged from going outside and many businesses and institutions are closed. I've spent most of the past 2 months at home, along with my wife and daughter, fearful of the future and wondering when life will get back to normal.

Thankfully, none of my family members, friends, or colleagues have tested positive for the novel coronavirus. Working from home is also possible for me because my research doesn't involve lab work. But the spread of the virus and the rapidly rising death toll have weighed heavily on my mind. I've found it difficult to sleep. I've also had trouble focusing on work. One day early in the outbreak, I sat down at my computer intending to write a grant proposal. But all I could do was stare at the screen.

Years ago, I'd heard that Taoism philosophies were helpful for finding internal peace. So, I decided to listen to a few recordings. One instructed listeners to "govern [yourself] by doing nothing that goes against nature." That resonated with me because I realized that I'd been trying to push my anxieties aside and force myself to concentrate on work—an approach that wasn't working because it didn't feel natural. From then on, I told myself that it was OK to feel anxious, even if it impeded my work. That helped to lessen my internal struggles.

Over the past 2 months, I've also learned how to teach courses online, and I have found unexpected joy in that process—even though I struggled at first. There were multiple online teaching platforms to choose from, and I didn't know which one was best or how to use it. I opted for a platform that had a large server, thinking that it would



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cope better with heavy usage. My university provided some helpful guidance, and I also learned through trial and error. My first lecture was especially difficult because I couldn't see the students' faces. I was accustomed to lecturing in front of an audience. Online, I felt like I was speaking at my students but not getting anything in return. I communicated with a few of them afterward to get their feedback and they agreed with me, saying that I needed to find a way to make my lectures more interactive. So, I started to encourage my students to leave questions for me in the platform's comment section during my lectures.

Almost immediately, my students started peppering me with questions. I was surprised by the level of engagement. In a normal classroom setting, they are afraid to raise their hands; most wait until after the lecture is over to approach me and ask a question. But online, students were more comfortable sharing their questions in front of the entire class. That was a great outcome because if one student has a question, it's likely that another student has the same question and would benefit from hearing the answer. I've also been pleased to see from the homework assignments that they are following my teaching well.

China was the first country to close its universities, but over the past month, universities in Italy, the United States, and elsewhere have made similar moves. I hope that my story can provide inspiration for academics who are fearful of what's to come. It's OK to feel anxious. But I'd also recommend staying open to change. You never know what you'll learn. ■

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