



# thePLUM *line*

BY MICHAEL SHARP, MD

## women leaders

**W**hat a long time ago that I wrote my last column. How our world has changed! My themes over the last several issues of *Health & Healing* have been around the body's natural reaction to threat and insecurity—usually manifested in feelings of anxiety, and often combined with other symptoms, especially of the digestive system. How ironic that this is the very issue that most of us are trying to deal with on a daily basis now (plus or minus the digestive element).

We've explored how our nervous system, when activated, is so finely tuned to the environment around us—constantly monitoring for safety, concurrently in a state of readiness to respond to threat, either by fighting or escaping. The body in this condition of vigilance is easily triggered, often misreading innocent signals and reacting with alarm. Loud noises are especially unsettling. Our thoughts can become obsessive, characterized by worry about things we have little control over. We want to control our spouses, co-workers, and people that won't wear masks at the grocery store. All things we're very unlikely to be able to have much influence over.

We think control will help us achieve a sense of security, though our experience with this strategy doesn't seem to support that idea! So what does help?

Most of us localize threats to other people. Most of us who have been hurt, have been hurt by other people. There are many exceptions, but the research into trauma reveals that almost all of our feelings of insecurity come from having been hurt by other people, especially those who were supposed to help us feel secure from our beginnings—our family. Tragically, it is those early experiences that set our nervous systems to fear the very connection with others we need to actually be safe and well.

In the effort to contain the spread of COVID-19, we are told to socially isolate. This is the very thing that makes us more vulnerable and more insecure. I understand that this is the instinct most of us have when faced with insecurity, we get in bed and pull the covers over our head. And yet we are fundamentally social creatures. Being with the people who help us feel safe is the most powerful resource of all. When the epidemic is over and we take stock of what happened to us, we'll realize the tremendous cost to our social networks, and how we cut ourselves off from what we needed most: connection.

By no means am I advocating social mingling. But it is possible to have your best friend or two over to sit in the lawn, bring your own lawn chairs, bring your own drinks or dinner and talk about what is unsettling to you. It is best not to talk about what makes you angry or in judgment of people. This only reinforces the "we-they" dichotomy that perpetuates our insecurities. Putting others down focuses our spirits on being "superior," but short-term gratification of the need to be better by comparing never takes us where we really want to be. We can never be better than everybody, and trying to pump ourselves up by being better-than is a surefire way to feel fine in the moment but crappy in the long run. Better by far to confide your worries to the friends you can trust. You know the rule, right? It's our secrets that make us sick. Grieve your losses, share your soul, bare your concern for each other. Opening up about these things is a pretty nearly sure way to start feeling better.

I believe that people who resist social distancing and use of masks are the most afraid. They fear they will lose control. I've seen this concern spread amongst social media—if they make us wear masks this week, they are going to take away another "freedom" next week. Taken to extremes this paranoia builds intricate conspiracy and "deep state" theories that are not only not true but inflame our fears and then feed on them. But this is what we really know: losing control does not equal doom. Only surrender and kindness truly dissolve doom, being concerned with and caring for each other. This requires a kind of bravery that includes zero bluster—zero. I understand that rules laid down from 'up above' can scare people who are afraid. Only gentle connection will help us find a way to be with each other that isn't threatening. This may explain why states with women governors and countries with women prime ministers have had measurably greater success managing the impact of COVID-19. Women understand how to bring us together with kindness and understanding rather than authoritarianism and, in many cases, have been able to establish safety guidelines more readily accepted than in states and countries led by men.

To your health. 🌱🌱

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