

Community Commentary/Opinion: You can be a good neighbor and a global citizen during the COVID-19 crisis

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Are you trying to decide what steps to take about the coronavirus? Maybe you are in an area where there have not yet been any confirmed cases. You may feel confused about the risk, embarrassed about people saying you are under- or over-reacting, or sad that you have to cancel a vacation. Instead of feeling confused or nervous, take action and make some changes and a preparedness plan. Here are the three levels on which to think about why that is a good idea.

First, you should think about the risks of you or your loved ones getting COVID-19. Follow the best practices recommended by the Centers for Disease Control: Wash your hands, clean and disinfect high-traffic surfaces, practice social distancing, think about the older people in your life and their exposure. We don't know yet how many of us will get infected or, once infected, how severe the illness will become. But we do know that COVID-19 spreads very easily so we should be prepared. If you become infected, do you have the things you need at home to treat a flu-like illness? Do you have the right cleaning products to keep the rest of your household from getting infected? What arrangements have you made at work to anticipate the possibility of having to be away to keep yourself or others healthy? Make a plan to cover these contingencies and take the actions now that will support these efforts.

Second, there already have been a series of policies announced at the national, state, local and community level with more coming every moment. Expect that these policies will evolve over time as the threat of disease changes. Some policies are clear and concise, some confusing, some well-articulated, and some too little too late. These policies and directives will likely come from many

directions and each will have an impact on your daily life. You may not be able to get the food, medications or materials you need. In parts of Italy, people are required to line up outside of grocery stores and pharmacies 8 feet apart. What do you need to buy now? Do you have the right contact information for businesses, schools, colleagues and neighbors, so you can reach others if you are in need? Think through these scenarios and make a plan to take care of the items that will likely cause confusion later.

Finally, and most importantly, is the question most people are *not* asking: What can you, as an individual, do to support others and to help global public health efforts? It is critical to understand that individual actions matter, and you have an opportunity to make a positive impact during this difficult time. You may think it is an overreaction for your child's school to close. You may feel planes are safe, 'No one is on them, they have hospital-grade air filters, etc.' But even if you and your kids don't get sick, you can still transmit the disease to others. If you are sick and you don't know it, you may spread the disease to a community that was previously unexposed, or you may come into contact with someone who has a fragile immune system. People fighting cancer and other diseases that affect their immune systems are particularly vulnerable. Could your actions potentially put them at risk? If you decide to travel when authorities strongly suggest not traveling, what happens when you get stuck somewhere? The people and resources being used to try to get you home could be used to help communities in need. If you buy all the hand sanitizer at your local drugstore, what happens to those families who also need it but don't have any? We are hearing a lot about "flattening the coronavirus curve" right now. Meaning, what can we do to reduce the number of serious cases at any given time? Reduced numbers will allow doctors, hospitals, police, schools and drug and vaccine manufacturers time to prepare and respond.

Most importantly, we need to remember the millions of people who are not able to do some or any of the preparedness activities talked about in this article. Preparedness for many is a privilege. So how can you help those who need it? From calling those who are socially isolated to reaching out to community organizations and see what support they may need. Even though it's easy to feel powerless in the face of such a big pandemic, you do have a chance to be a positive force.

Of course, there is much we don't know yet. But instead of allowing fearful feelings to cause panic and inaction, can we instead feel empowered by the fact that we know preparedness is cheaper and is less stressful than emergency response. Preparedness means thinking through scenarios, anticipating the needs, and taking the decisions and actions now that will minimize stress and cost later. We have the power in crisis situations to take action. So, let's help each other by making decisions that keep others safe, and hope that our preparedness is an over-reaction and worth any inconveniences right now.

Kirsten Gelsdorf is a professor of practice at the University of Virginia's Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy and the director of global humanitarian policy. Alison Criss is associate professor of microbiology, immunology and cancer biology at the University of Virginia School of Medicine and director of the Global Infectious Diseases Institute, University of Virginia. Rebecca Dillingham, MD/MPH, is the director of the University of Virginia Center for Global Health and a Harrison Distinguished Teaching Associate Professor of Medicine. David Leblang is the Ambassador Henry Taylor Professor of Politics at the University of Virginia, a professor of public policy at the Batten School and a faculty associate at the Miller Center.