

## Expectations

Mark Manson – April 2020

When something thwarts our expectations, we tend to react in one of two ways: anger and/or sadness.

What determines that anger or sadness is whether we believe our loss was within somebody's control or not. If we believe it was preventable or controllable, then we get angry. If we believe it was unpreventable, then we get sad. For instance, if I'm dead set on watching Bob Ross reruns this morning, and I find my wife hogging the TV, chances are I will get pissed off at her. After all, she's responsible for my ruined expectations. But let's say I find out that The Joy of Painting was inexplicably cancelled everywhere on earth yesterday, then I will become deeply, deeply sad.

These two human responses, anger and sadness, are coalescing into their own little camps in response to the pandemic. All of our hopes and dreams for 2020 have been shat upon, irreversibly ruined. Some people see everything closing down, the economy getting wrecked, livelihoods destroyed, and they think it's an irrational overreaction. They see the disruption in their own lives as preventable and unnecessary. And they are fucking pissed.

Meanwhile, others have resigned themselves to the fact that social distancing and quarantining are necessary side effects of a pandemic. They believe that there's nothing more any of us could do, the damage has been done. They give in. And they get sad. And mopey. And write long weepy articles about staying sane at home.

But both of these reactions, while completely different on the surface, are rooted in the same experience: the destruction of one's hopes. The angry people are pissed because they expected their lives to go one way but the stupid fucking media/politicians/scientists/whoever made it go another. The sad people are sad because they expected their lives to go one way but now this horrible, horrible thing has happened, and there's nothing anyone can do!

We all define what "normal" is supposed to be for ourselves. Then we become attached to that vision. "I'm gonna work hard and buy a bike and hang out with my girlfriend and start a donut delivery business." We marry that vision of normalcy. We take it for granted. And inevitably, we become incredibly upset when that normalcy is taken away from us.

But here's an idea: What if this disruption is normal?

Think about it: pandemics have occurred throughout all of human history. For hundreds of years, people have responded by social distancing, cancelling events, closing businesses, and yes, even cancelling church services. Schools and public spaces were closed in Asia in 2009 and 2001 and in North America in 1957 and 1918. Isaac Newton famously came up with his theories about gravitation and optics while quarantining at his mother's house during 1666. The word "quarantine" itself comes from the Italian word "quaranta" which was invented in the 14th century as a response to the black plague.

Similarly, economic and political crises are the norm for human history, not the exception. And more often than not, they are caused by human fear, stupidity, and irrationality. These things happen every 20-30 years almost like clockwork in most parts of the world. Going back through history, you can hardly go more than ten years without some major, world-altering event that disrupted tens of millions of lives and often had catastrophic implications.

What's more, the human reactions to these crises are also quite normal. Social distancing has historically produced protests and political backlash from those whose livelihoods become threatened. Economic crises have invited intense government intervention, generating widespread inequality and political outrage. Even the complaints that everyone is overreacting—nothing to see here, see, hardly anyone even died—are not only common, but practically universal.

This isn't the "new" normal. This is just normal. Incredibly normal. As are our responses to it. We are maddeningly unoriginal in our experience right now. But as long as our expectations are confined to our tiny individual bubbles of experience, and our focus only looks a couple years into our past or future, then we'll feel perpetually sad and/or angry at having been robbed of our imaginary "normal."