

What I Learned About Myself at the Grocery Store: Mindfulness Lessons from COVID-19

Elaine Smookler, March 20, 2020



Image by Studio KIVI

Elaine Smookler didn't expect to find herself fighting the urge to panic-buy while shopping this week. Here's how mindfulness helped her to slow down and remember kindness.

I could see the last bag of 2% milk lying on its side, still untouched in the supermarket dairy section. I tried to stay calm as I motored quietly towards it, hoping no one else had noticed. I moved my eye-line so it would look like I was perhaps interested in chocolate milk, or maybe skim—there was still lots of that. The pandemic was upon us, and I wasn't going to make it without 2% milk!

A dear mindfulness colleague called me an hour before that moment in the grocery store, with urgency in her tone. "Have you gone shopping? You have to go shopping, right now, I'm not kidding. We are all about to go on lockdown, go get food right now!" My colleague is a doctor, her husband is a doctor, I thought they would be the first ones to laugh this whole thing off as some kind of social media mind-madness.

That phone call felt like a turning-point moment. Until then, I had been warmly hugging and hand-shaking all those who still wished to. I was pretty sure that this was all way over the top, and I was not planning to go and buy a case of toilet paper, or bottled water, or even one canned good. I wasn't worried about a thing. It was all very curious, though. Then, exponentially the whole world seemed to go pop and suddenly almost ten billion of us were all pretty focused on one thing—the zombie apocalypse was here, and my friend was right. I definitely needed 2% milk.

My thoughts and feelings were in tumult as I counselled myself not to panic-buy while feeling the strong desire to back a truck up and just start shoving anything I could get my hands on into an army of carts.

I took a breath. I felt my feet connecting with the floor in front of the mozzarella. It would be OK if there was only medium cheddar left. I had faith that I could regulate myself enough to handle it. Even as I heard that thought cloud waft by, I wasn't sure I believed it. I was certainly seeing just how many things I want. I could feel myself clinging to feeling I needed to have cheesy comforts to keep me warm and safe during a pandemic.

I keep waiting to find out that this is actually some kind of theatrical event and that I am part of a flash mob made up of everyone on planet earth. Maybe, in six months, we will all receive video footage of who we are under pressure. Can't wait. Here's what I have already noticed about myself:

I am happy to say that I did, in fact, check in with some people older than I to see if they might need me to bring them some food. I also watched myself hesitate from clearing the shelf of all the gluten-free corn cakes, (because I just don't want to be at an apocalypse where I can't have a corn cake!). I wanted to, but I didn't take them all. Yay, me. However, I did notice myself feeling quite focused on the needs of *my* household, first and foremost. Although this makes sense, sort of, when many friends and neighbors contacted *me* to see if *I* needed anything, I wondered whether I might be more self-absorbed than I'd realized. Hmmm. You see, the pandemic was already leading to new awareness.

I went outside to quietly contemplate what felt like a science fiction movie. I could hear a dog barking loudly, nearby. Normally, this might irritate me, but as I could feel my shoulders go up I reminded myself that we were *all* on lockdown, and as Scottish author, Ian McLaren suggested, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.”

And just what is that battle? In a way, it’s the battle of self-interest versus the greater good. We really are all in this together. You might not be susceptible, but your cavalier relationship to being exposed could bring harm to another, perhaps even someone you love and care about. Our interconnection is inescapable: rich, poor, tall, short, quick or slow—if we breathe, we are part of what is occurring. When we are kind to ourselves and each other, when we remember that ultimately none of us will get out of here alive anyway, when we can allow this experience of a global pause to give us a moment of space, a moment of grace, a moment to reach out, while you are still alive, and send warm hearts, loving thoughts, and acts of kindness great and small. Let us welcome an epidemic of kindness and care, for ourselves for each other. And don’t forget to wash your hands for at least 20 seconds.

8 Ways to Survive and Thrive, Mindfully

1. It can be helpful to always remember that thoughts are not facts. Before you panic, with actions that follow suit, allow wisdom to guide the path by asking yourself what EVIDENCE are you using to prove to yourself that all your fearful thoughts are true?
2. Know which government health sites are available to offer you cohesive, direct, evidence-based information. Perhaps noticing what happens when panicking itself becomes an epidemic.
3. Social Distancing is difficult, but death might be less preferable.
4. Wash your hands! Who knows, maybe this is really all a plot orchestrated by mothers everywhere. This time, listen to them, and wash your hands a lot!
5. Slowing your rhythm down will help you bring greater awareness to how often you touch your lovely face, after touching things that aren’t your face. Awareness is an enormous ally in helping keep any virus in check.
6. If you feel ill, stay home, drink lots of water, rest and give your immune system the best possible chance to protect you.
7. Notice fight, flight, freeze arising in supermarket parking lots, toilet paper aisles, liquor stores, and any place that has what you want.
8. Contemplate what it means for you to navigate a pandemic in alignment with your inner being. Be intentional, gentle, and aware so you can nurture the choices around who you want to be when it all goes down.