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Perspective Article

## Survival and Wellbeing in the Time of Covid-19 - @

**Maria Grazia Spurio\***

*Master in Neuropsychiatry and Forensic Psychology, Director of Centre for Research and Psychological Studies Genius Academy via C.A. Jemolo 83 ROME, Italy*

**\*Address for Correspondence:** Maria Grazia Spurio, Master in Neuropsychiatry and Forensic Psychology, Director of Centre for Research and Psychological Studies Genius Academy via C.A. Jemolo 83 ROME, Italy,  
E-mail: [dott.m.g.spurio@hotmail.it](mailto:dott.m.g.spurio@hotmail.it)

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** When it is necessary to face such an overwhelming test as the Coronavirus pandemic, everything is at stake: economic well-being, health and perhaps also survival. The purpose of this article is to point out the new application of guided fantasy on specific phobias generated by the situation of emergency we are living, in order to immediately become stronger and more successful, and consequently, to increase the level of resistance and strength of the immune system.

**Methods:** According to neurophysiologists, fantasy can be a valid help to free us and dissolve sensations such as fear and discomfort related to unpleasant experiences. Through specific guided fantasies it is possible to influence the heartbeat, blood pressure, breathing, rhythms and brain waves forms, motility and gastric secretions, and the functioning of the immune system. Through the imagination it is possible to experience new ways of thinking, feeling and acting, acting on a cognitive, affective and behavioural level. As an alternative to the possibility of evoking the hypnotic state through the presence of the psychotherapist, for the restrictive conditions imposed by Covid-19, the Centre for Research and Psychological Studies Genius Academy, has prepared some downloadable material online, as well as a virtual reality viewer

**Results:** The application of virtual reality to guided fantasies useful for dealing with the anxieties generated by the pandemic, started in March 2020. The project has undergone a strong implementation compared to the initial assumptions, due to a very large number of people who have requested to experiment with this approach. For this reason, although between May and June the first quantification of the reference universe may be available, in order to provide an in-depth analysis of the results achieved thanks to this technique, it will be necessary to continue the research until May 2021, when the results data will be presented to the scientific community. This article offers a perspective and illustrates the starting conditions of the project.

**Conclusion:** Guided fantasy as a method of coping with specific phobias has already been widely tested by clinical practice. It is therefore believed that this new application, beyond the boundaries of traditional psychotherapy, opens up new horizons of study and research in a society that is constantly looking for new solutions.

## INTRODUCTION

We are experiencing a period of emergency and difficulty like no other we can even remember. The human mind has unexplored and extraordinary abilities that help to cope and overcome even the toughest and most problematic situations. Are there things we can do in this period that we have to stay home, to face the menace of the dreaded COVID-19? In other words, are there exercises, or practical things that we can do every day to become stronger and more successful, and consequently, to increase the level of resistance and strength of our immune system?

### THE PANDORA'S BOX

In the Coronavirus-experience, for a number of reasons that will be illustrated in continuation, it seems to be activated a situation similar to the Pandora's box that, in Greek mythology, contained all the miseries of the world, which were free to come out after its opening. Pandora's box opening is a common metaphor in modern colloquial language, and it means that an action, or a specific situation, has negative consequences on many subjects. Although the sentence 'to open Pandora's box' is very common, the origin of this expression is not known by everyone. It derives from Greek mythology, in order to explain that human existence is characterized by moments of transition and significant changes such as major losses, bereavements, births, the end of school, and of professional and relationship periods. Each of these situations can be experienced in a different way, depending on individual sensibility, even if they all share the same inner state: the breaking of a balance that had worked so far, as well as the scheme for dealing with life that, now, has to be changed, because it is no more valid.

This psychological process induces the person to look for new balances, more suitable for facing changes, and furthering development. This has often an emotional cost, not completely painless, because it is often accompanied by an anxious state, given by the uncertainty of possessing the skills required, which is to modify

and replace the previous schemes with new and unknown ones [1]. When one has to face such an overwhelming test as the Coronavirus pandemic, everything is at stake: economic well-being, health and perhaps also survival, therefore it happens that enormous pressure causes the Pandora's box breaking. After its opening, all the anxious states, the worries, the uncertainties that had been accumulated, kept closed and compressed up to that moment, come out. Worries and previous anxieties find now a connection with the frightening proof that everyone is experiencing. It is evident that in such a mental attitude, attention shifts outside the individual, and it is transferred to the justified anxiety provoked by the situation, being amplified exponentially.

This conduct is expressed in some persons through an obsessive attention to all the information regarding the state of the Covid-19 pandemic, the focus is on all sorts of related news, the chronicle of deaths, changes at a territorial level: regional, national, international. In these cases, it is particularly difficult to foresee the possibility of overcoming the state of anxiety and depression, as the person is completely focused on external situations, over which one has very little control and which make one feel further exhausted and crushed, threatened and terrified. Of course, it is very important to pay attention to what is happening around us, keep oneself informed and follow the given instruction in order to collaborate to win this such a war. Let us not forget, however, that as long as the locus of attention is only external and not internal [2], no real path of questioning the important anxious structure that underlies the problem will be activated. The dysfunctional way of controlling and solving the situation does not produce positive results, as the person is unable to manage the situation and therefore one gradually begins to lose control.

### Locus of Control and Guided Fantasy: New Application in Coronavirus Time

According to the indications provided by the Italian National Council Order of Psychologists on Coronavirus: Indications for citizens and psychologists, support to the authorities:



“The perception of risk can be distorted and amplified to the point of panic conditions, which is almost unjustified, and it increases the risk, because it leads to less rational behaviours and a lowering of the organism defences, also biological. A valid psychological attitude can help not only the person itself but also ones family or friends, triggering a virtuous circuit, and increasing the “resilience quotient” of individuals, families and communities”. <https://www.psy.it>

The expression locus of control [2], literally means “a place where the control is exercised”. With reference to psychological well-being, it has been observed that individuals with an internal locus of control tend to assume a style of thought that influences the implementation of behaviour oriented towards the achievement of goals [3].

The emotional response deriving from this style of thinking is functional to the achievement of the purpose, and consequently, those who have an internal Locus of Control (LOC), are able to cope with stress in a more adequate way. However, an external locus of control also helps individuals to preserve well-being: ones role and responsibility in the occurrence of negative events are minimized; on the contrary, an external and / or fatalistic explanation of what has happened is given, the sense of guilt is reduced, brooding is removed, and one is able to canalize mental energies to better deal with the consequences.

However, when the locus of control (external vs internal) is rigid and inflexible, negative effects are found on the motivation of individuals and on their way of regulating and managing emotions: those who present an internal locus of control would seem more disposed to anxiety, while those with an external locus of control appear to be more disposed to depression. Furthermore, those who show external locus of control depend on others, have low self-esteem and failing self-efficacy. In any case, there are no individuals who exclusively have an external or internal locus of control. For this reason, in a balanced and adaptive belief system, functional to the well-being of the individual, it would be desirable to have a mix of loci, internal or external, adaptable to the different situations that occur. Considering the cultural aspects in relation to psychopathology, a meta-analysis has taken into consideration more than 40 years of studies on the locus of control [4] with the aim of verifying whether the association between the locus of control and psychopathological symptoms remains the same, or if there are differences between individualist (western) and collectivist (eastern) cultures.

The results of an analysis of 152 independent samples (more than 30,000 adults in total) in about 18 different cultures, have seem to have confirmed cross-cultural differences in the magnitude of the relationship between LOC and psychopathological symptomatology. In general, the analysis reveal a strong association between LOC and depressive and anxious symptoms; the positive association between external LOC and anxious symptoms was weaker in collectivist cultures than in individualist ones.

Based on the considerations done so far, we could conclude that the mind, first of all, being subject to cultural, social, individual and relational pressures, can experience dysfunctional adaptive situations, therefore, just like a musical instrument, it sometimes needs to be tuned and perfected. The human mind also performs different functions which express themselves on the basis of different reading plans or registers.

The logical and rational part of the mind, that is mainly located in the associative areas of the cortex, performs rational functions. The

emotional part, performing function related to emotions, resides in the most ancestral limbic areas where our deepest emotions are located, of which we do not often have full awareness. The threatening pandemic situation that we are experiencing, shifts the needle of control to the outside of the individual, but as highlighted above, except for keeping up to date in a balanced way and collaborating by doing our part, one has very little else to do, because all the rest is beyond ones control.

Instead, what one can intervene significantly and functionally is on the management of those emotions, phobias and anxieties, left free by the opening of the Pandora’s box. According to neurophysiologists, fantasy can be a valid help to free us and dissolve sensations such as fear and discomfort related to unpleasant experiences. Through specific guided fantasies it is possible to influence the heart-beat, blood pressure, breathing, rhythms and brain waves forms, motility and gastric secretions, and the functioning of the immune system [5]. Through the imagination it is possible to experience new ways of thinking, feeling and acting, acting on a cognitive, affective and behavioural level.

In fact, one of the main strengths of the imaginative technique of guided fantasy is its great versatility as it allows it to be applicable in a creative, personalized and tailor made for each person, but also for a specific moment of his life. A great number of studies and experiments have shown that when one imagines something, the brain areas activated are the same of the ones involved in the perception and experimentation from really experience, which involve the senses. Through the imagination, new ways of thinking, feeling, and acting can be developed, going to intervene on a cognitive, affective and behavioural level. Neurophysiology makes clear that the use of guided fantasy and creative imagination developed in two different and specific moments can affect the enhancement of memory, problem solving and planning.

The first moment involves lateral thinking, not logical, but divergent and capable of establishing free associations between things. Afterwards, convergent thinking evaluates and analyses all ideas in order to find a new and valid response to the experience. The changes and solutions experienced during visualization can then be transferred to the waking state, as, the only act to imagine, as we have pointed out, leads to brain activation similar to that present in action, at the same time determining the development of resilience, that is, the ability to recover from difficulties and disappointments, to face and overcome a traumatic event or a period of difficulty. Guided fantasies can therefore be one of the most useful activities to promote and increase relaxation and soothe stress, particularly at a time where environmental stimuli are reduced and anxiety-provoking.

The use of imaginative techniques and their usefulness in different sectors is well known, for example, it has been shown that they can be very functional in sports, in the preparation of a competition to find concentration and concentrate oneself [6]. They can also be used effectively for school anxiety or for worries or, when one has to face an important interview or a public speech. Even in cases of situational phobias such as that of the coronavirus, specific guided fantasies such as that of the ‘secret place’ which can gradually direct the person to immerse oneself in the fantasy world of a secret place known only by the person can be very useful. In this inner imaginative place where one can return every day, all the senses are solicited with specific inductive words: sight, hearing touch, smell.



As an alternative to the possibility of evoking the hypnotic state through the presence of the psychotherapist, for the restrictive conditions imposed by Covid-19, the Centre for Research and Psychological Studies Genius Academy, has prepared some downloadable material online, as well as a virtual reality viewer with in order the help the person to enter in ones 'secret place'. In this imaginative place one can find refuge, in order to recalibrate, to experience free creativity, tranquillity, desire to live and finally feel oneself good, finding new energies, inventive and imaginative potential to face reality. Returning from the 'secret place', the state of well-being caused by the daily exercise of the guided fantasy will contribute to strengthening the immune defences and, in a less anxious and depressed, but more likely view, to face life with a more inventive and functional attitude to the situation .

The application of virtual reality to guided fantasies useful for dealing with the anxieties generated by the pandemic, started in March 2020. Between March and April 2020, a great interest in this approach has been registered, steadily growing, to the extent of 10 percentage points every week. It was therefore hypothesized to draw a dead line in late May in order to analyse the first data collected and present the first results. However, with the changing perspectives and, in parallel, with the growing feeling of anxiety due to the continuation of some limitations, uncertainty about the future and economic difficulties, around the middle of May there has been a sudden

surge in the number of people who have requested psychological support through this new technique. Therefore, the data are still being collected and will be thoroughly analysed and presented to the scientific community in May 2021.

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