

Why Hong Kong panic buying happened: herd mentality, the media, overreaction and distrust

- Toilet paper offers no protection against the coronavirus, so why the panic buying and even armed robbery in Hong Kong
- Mental health experts offer some reasons for the irrational behaviour and how it affects large groups of people

Topic | Wellness



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The panic buying seen in the past few weeks as people rush to stock up on essentials during the coronavirus outbreak [\[1\]](#) caught Hong Kong by surprise. First it was face masks [\[2\]](#) – understandable given the nature of the virus – but then it was rice and toilet paper. We’ve seen people queuing overnight for goods, there was even an armed loo roll heist [\[3\]](#). So, what is driving this behaviour?

Hong Kong clinical psychologist Dr Cindy Chan explains that panic buying is about people trying to get a sense of control. There are so many unsettling factors surrounding the Covid-19 outbreak – the increasing death toll, people having to work from home, and schools being suspended – that people have the sense that they are losing control of their life.

“People feel they need control, so they go out and buy things – rice, toilet paper – and feel that they are doing what they can for themselves, getting a sense of control. It’s a groupthink phenomenon, the herd mentality,” says Chan.

From a neuroscience perspective, when we face a threat – and Covid-19 is a threat – the amygdala, the part of our brain that processes fear and emotions, is over activated. This heightened activation temporarily shuts off rational thinking.



Empty shelves in a supermarket in Hong Kong. Photo: Justin Chin/Bloomberg

“We cannot reason rationally, we are more easily affected by group think, our behaviour becomes more irrational,” says Chan.

Dr Sara Houshmand, a clinical and counselling psychologist at Central Health in Hong Kong, says that in extreme forms, these seemingly protective behaviours often suggest a misappraisal or exaggeration of an anticipated threat. What’s more, the behaviour – panic buying – reinforces misappraisals. While it offers a brief sense of relief and control, acting on anxious behaviours often reinforces the driving belief that one is angry.



Dr Sara Houshmand is a clinical and counselling psychologist at Central Health in Hong Kong.

“Most people engaging in these behaviours would agree that toilet paper offers no real immunity against the novel coronavirus. Over time, these seemingly protective and innocuous behaviours have the capacity to keep individuals in a cycle of continuous stress and anxiety and do compromise individual health,” says Houshmand.

Dr Christian Chan, an associate psychology professor at Hong Kong University, says the level of anxiety seen in the recent wave of panic buying reflects a lack of trust in the government.

“The question of where you get your information from, who you trust, is something we’ve been dealing with for the past few months, we’ve already seen people fall into the trap of dubious news sources,” says Christian Chan, adding that people need to be savvier about how they get their information in a crisis, and to schedule their news intake to avoid feeling overwhelmed by it.



Dr Cindy Chan is a Hong Kong clinical psychologist.

“The problem is the trust in the government is at a historic low, so people trust whoever can deliver face masks whether it’s [pro-democracy activist] Joshua Wong or [HKTVM chairman] Ricky Wong. The government needs to re-establish that trust so that when they say there is no shortage of toilet rolls and rice, people believe them.”



John Drury is a social psychology professor at the University of Sussex in the UK.

John Drury, a social psychology professor at the University of Sussex in the UK, has done extensive research into crowd psychology and warns that the advice “don’t panic” is worse than useless. He says such advice is based on the mistrust by the government of the – potentially irrational – ‘masses’. This in turn sows mistrust as it suggests the government is holding something back from the public.

“Reference to ‘panic’ risks creating mistrust among members of the public themselves. When the government and the mass media tell us that our neighbours are ‘panic buying’, we imagine those around us acting individualistically, rushing to hoard goods for themselves,” says Drury, adding that this drives more people to look out for themselves.



A woman with three bags of toilet tissue in Tsuen Wan. Photo: Edward Wong

Drury notes that it is the media, even more than politicians, who mobilise the ‘panic’ cliché to describe consumer queuing and stock piling. He suggests a way out of panic buying mode is for people to think in terms of their community.

“When people think of themselves in terms of their social identities, they will be more cooperative, less ready to push into queues, and more willing to share dwindling supplies with strangers than when they think of themselves in terms of their personal identities,” says Drury.

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Houshmand encourages people to think in terms of the mind-body connection. Panic is linked to the emotion of fear and the drive to fight or flee. That fear is communicated within our body through the limbic system, the lower brain, and involves the way our heart beats, our breath, and how oxygen is carried around the body. We may become shaky or get sweaty. These sensations may set the mind racing, triggering further panic.

“At such times it can be difficult to access frontal lobe thinking. If you cue the body to distress – by breathing slowly [4], doing exercise – then you will be able to think more clearly. [Fearful] thoughts cannot be taken as facts in that moment,” says Houshmand.

Cindy Chan says it’s important to recognise that we are all facing panic and anxiety to some extent. Becoming aware of our own panic – and that of our significant others – helps us to step back and see things in perspective.

“Mindfulness meditation [5], chatting to friends, will help calm down the amygdala. Making yourself calmer can reactivate the rationale brain to objectively rationalise the current situation. Count how many packs of toilet paper you have at home, how many more you need to buy in the coming month,” she says.



Emma Ross makes aroma inhalers at home. Photo: Edward Wong

Stop and smell the roses

Aromatherapist Emma Ross has been busy over the last few weeks doing what she does best: choosing and blending essential oils to improve her clients’ well-being. She makes handcrafted inhalers to help reduce anxiety. The work is done at the dining table of her Mid-Levels home.

“If you feel panicky, the act of stopping to take out your inhaler and take a few deep breaths will calm you down, and you also have the impact of the essential oils,” says Ross, who trained in aromatherapy [6] in the UK and has lived in Hong Kong 12 years.

The beauty of using an inhaler – a small nasal stick similar to the classic Vicks menthol inhaler – is that it offers the most immediate way of getting the oils into the blood stream.



Ross tailor-makes her essential oil inhalers. Photo: Edward Wong

“It passes through the nose, into the respiratory system and down into the lungs where components of the essential oils diffuse into the blood stream and are transported around the body,” says Ross.

While some essential oils are known for their relaxing qualities – think lavender, frankincense, neroli, rose and sandalwood – Ross says it’s essential that the scent is one that appeals to the individual.

“I’m amazed by what different people find relaxing. People often choose things I wouldn’t think relaxing, but they do. I make the inhalers according to a person’s smell preference and how they will use it,” says Ross.

The inhalers cost HK\$80/inhaler, or HK\$80 to HK\$150 for 2ml to 10ml rollerball) and can be ordered through her Facebook page ([facebook.com/pg/emmarossholisticaromatherapy](https://www.facebook.com/pg/emmarossholisticaromatherapy)) or by contacting her at Physio Motion ([physiomotion.com.hk](https://www.physiomotion.com.hk)).

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[1] <https://www.scmp.com/topics/coronavirus-outbreak>

[2] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-and-crime/article/3051862/scores-hongkongers-hit-mask-scam-facebook-hundreds>

[3] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-and-crime/article/3050907/armed-gang-steals-hk1000-toilet-paper-coronavirus>

[4] <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/health-wellness/article/3002901/wim-hof-method-how-ice-baths-and-breathing-techniques>

[5] <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/health-wellness/article/3022870/why-constant-complaining-bad-health-and-how-stop-doing-it>

[6] <https://www.scmp.com/article/429313/aromatherapy>