

The Four Children of COVID-19

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March 13, 2020

The Jewish holiday of Passover is less than four weeks away. It is looking like COVID-19 will impact the possibility of gathering multiple generations of family and friends who would typically squeeze together around the dining table for a banquet of traditional foods and the retelling of the Israelites' exodus from slavery to freedom.



Photo Credit

One of the climactic moments of the Passover Seder is the portrayal of “The Four Children” and the questions they ask about their relationship to this epic story - one wise, one wicked, one simple and one who does not know to ask. As COVID-19 traverses the globe, similar to the four children, people have all kinds of questions. What do each of the children of the Passover Seder have to teach us about the questions we ask and the answers we supply for today’s global pandemic?

1. The wise child. Curious. Sophisticated. Engaged. Understanding that we are all connected - with each other and with history. The wise child teaches us the wisdom of asking good questions. As of this writing, when I google “COVID-19” I get 3,460,000,000 results. Wise questions call for wise leaders. Whether leading a Seder or a large organization, wise leaders provide frequent, accurate, and relevant information. Wise leaders are transparent about what we know with confidence, what we do not know, and what we are doing to secure the information needed to keep people informed and safe. Such actions build trust and reduce stress and anxiety.

2. The wicked child. Disconnected. Sabotaging. Disinterested. Sometimes called the rebellious child. Mistrust sits at the base of this behavior. Public health depends on public trust, but we live in an era of declining trust in institutions and public leaders. From the moment China announced the unusual cases of respiratory virus, the world was suspicious. And the US has not done much better with four out of five Americans reporting significant mistrust in the federal government. To fight COVID-19, we need to build trust in leaders and institutions and fight the spread not only of germs but also of misinformation and rumors.

3. The simple child. Humble. Modest. Sometimes simple is also profound. The simple child takes us back to basics. It is the simple child in each of us that is focused on singing “Happy Birthday” or the “ABCs” as we wash our hands. Keeping a distance of six feet from each other is simple math. Establishing a blue team and a red team to alternate work schedules takes us back to the simple days of summer camp and color wars. Some of the most effective strategies for attenuating the transmission of the virus are also very simple, in principle. The most effective leaders are distilling complex, incomplete, and evolving data into essential information and devising straightforward and achievable behavioral plans.

4. The one who does not know to ask. Not knowing. And not knowing what we do not know. This is the fourth child. This is the mindset that leaves people vulnerable to being unprepared when disaster strikes. This is the mindset that interferes with effective and early prevention efforts. And it is especially difficult to promote a mindset of precaution and prevention when risk seems remote and we are running low on trust. This mindset is part of the story of our slow and uncoordinated national and global response to COVID-19.

5. The child not at the table. Some Seders include a fifth child. The one who is absent from the gathering. Why are they not there and how do we connect them to the community? Maybe this is the child that is most important as we think about serious mental illness and COVID-19. Those with serious mental illness are likely to not be at the table. Marginalized by communities, they are among our most vulnerable even at the best of times. Our best leaders remember the most vulnerable among us - especially at times like now.

COVID-19 is wreaking havoc worldwide. We are experiencing widespread increases in stress and anxiety levels. While none of us can make this novel coronavirus go away immediately, we all can play a role in mitigating the mental health impact. Accurate and transparent communications build trust. Effective plans build confidence. Care for the most vulnerable increases faith in humanity. Together, they promote the mental health and wellbeing of us all.