

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Looking for hope

*A review of **Factfulness: Ten reasons we're wrong about the world and why things are better than you think**, by Hans Rosling with Ola Rosling and Anna Rosling Ronnlund, Flatiron Books, New York, 2018*

In a world that seems awash in ill will, I've been looking for good news. The work of Dr. Hans Rosling, a Swedish physician and academic, comes to mind. In his lectures on YouTube and his TED talks, Rosling exposes our ignorance on a global basis. His recent bestseller, published after his death from pancreatic cancer in 2017, is a model of clarity and the best example of the graphic depiction of data I can think of. Rosling is an enthusiast, but he's armed with facts.

What has happened to extreme poverty? Child mortality? Life expectancy? Deaths from natural disasters? The answers are much more positive than we think. Extreme poverty has diminished by half over the past 20 years; 20% of the world's children have had some vaccination protection against disease. Worldwide, adult women now spend nine years in school, compared to 10 years for males; at the same time, general life expectancy has increased to 70 years. The list goes on.

The main culprit in our perception is our ignorance: we just don't know or haven't kept up to date. But there are other reasons, faults in our cognitive processes that impair our thinking. Rosling calls them our 10 dramatic instincts.

Firstly, there is our gap instinct – our tendency to divide things into two groups: them and us, rich and poor, developed and undeveloped countries. Rosling points out such polarized thinking is no longer appropriate on a global basis, and it is more correct to consider four economic levels:

- level 1: subsisting on \$1-\$4/day
- level 2: \$4-\$16/day
- level 3: \$16-\$32/day
- level 4: \$32+/day

Most of us are at level 4, but the proportion of persons at level 1 has diminished greatly as global poverty recedes.

We have a negativity instinct and tend to see problems, in turn expecting that bad situations will only get worse. And yet, a host of things have actually improved over time: deaths due to plane crashes, the ozone layer, pediatric mortality, oil spills, deaths from natural disasters, and so on.

A third instinct that impairs our thinking is the straight-line instinct. When we hear of troubling events, like robberies, traffic deaths or drownings, we expect that things will only increase on a straight-line basis. But we need to identify the curve we're on. World population, for example, increased from 1 billion in 1800 to 6 billion in 2000, but this is moderating and will crest at 11 or 12 billion near the end of this century.

Our fear instinct mars our cognition, likely on an evolutionary basis. Polls show that most of us are afraid of snakes, spiders, heights and being trapped in small places. The primal nature of such fears renders discussions of childhood vaccinations, nuclear power, chemical agents such as DDT, and terrorism deaths as inordinately daunting. The risk of death from drunk driving, for instance, is 50-fold higher than the risk of death by terrorist.

An allied instinct that flaws our thinking is the size instinct. Large or small numbers are inherently misleading unless we can put them in proportion or develop another basis to determine their significance. We generalize when we speak of Africa or African problems, failing to recognize that the huge continent has 54 countries and over a billion people. Categories can be misleading.

We suffer from something like inertia with our destiny instinct, believing that things are as they are for ineluctable, inescapable reasons and that they never change. Slow change, as with small but continuing progress, is hard to see but can indeed be cumulative. Childhood mortality, for instance, continues to diminish in Asian countries, where child deaths have dropped from 242 deaths per 1,000 to 35 per 1,000 over the past 33 years. There are, in fact, no countries in which childhood mortality has increased.

We labor, mistakenly, with a single perspective instinct. Experts, for example, are experts in particular fields but can be expected to be as ignorant and as error-prone as anyone else beyond their area of proficiency. Think dietary advice from movie stars or citizens' blinkered view that the American health care system is superior to others. There are, in fact, 39 countries whose life expectancy exceeds that of the US.

We carry what Rosling calls the blame instinct, or our predilection to find a clear, simple reason when bad things happen. We commonly decry the plight of immigrants to Europe in inflatable boats, blaming greedy smugglers. This is at best a partial truth. Legitimate means of transport from the Middle East to Europe can cost as little as 50 euros, but a European Council directive requires such carriers to pay all the costs of returning refugees to their country of origin, and, as well, airlines won't let anyone board without a visa. On a further front, it is EU policy to confiscate refugee crafts on arrival, so that they are, in effect, single use. Scapegoating or looking for a single bad guy is often wrong in complex circumstances.

A final hurdle Rosling identifies is our urgency instinct, a phenomenon we've come to particularly with salespersons: "Buy this car/house/appliance, or you'll lose out!" We're hard wired to act pronto in the face of perceived threats, a utility likely more helpful in our hunter-gatherer pasts. Most often, matters aren't that urgent, and we're better off to consider an array of possibilities.

Rosling has a final admonition: "Be humble, yet be curious," adding that the world cannot be understood without numbers, and it can't be understood with numbers alone. Rosling maintains that clearer, fact-based thinking will change one's world view, and, to the extent that things are not as bad as they seem, it will seem a better place.

I enjoyed *Factfulness* and believe it changed my worldview for the better. There's less misery than I had come to expect. I've come across another recent text, by Harvard professor Steven Pinker (*Enlightenment Now*, 2018), that is equally reassuring that in general and over time, we've become safer, healthier and wealthier.

I'm glad to find supporting evidence, but, alas, my private angst – and, I'm sure, that of the fellow next to me and those both behind and in front of me – is only modestly relieved. The unassailable truth, I think, is that our aggregate circumstances may be cause for some celebration, but we live our lives individually, faced with dilemmas (opioids, climate change, renascent totalitarianism, etc.) that have so far been impermeable to rosy thinking and to reassurance.

I wish there were a more direct correspondence between the received good news, however derived, and a reduction in the fretfulness and the apprehension that would seem to be my lot and that of my colleagues and fellow travellers. But there is not, and the capricious nature of our existence looms large. Perhaps the best that can be said of *Factfulness* is that it provides a better tool box to deal with present and developing dangers as they command our attention.

That tool box, that rationality, will have to suffice. But thanks, Hans Rosling, son Ola, and daughter-in-law, Anna. Thanks anyway.

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