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**Andrew Yang: We Asian Americans are not the virus, but we can be part of the cure**

(Salwan Georges/The Washington Post )

By **Andrew Yang**

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*Andrew Yang was a Democratic candidate for president and is founder of Humanity Forward.*

Last week I was shopping for groceries and preparing to hole up at home with my wife, Evelyn, and our two boys. There was an eerie, peculiar aura in the parking lot in upstate New York as night fell and shoppers wheeled out essentials and snacks.

Three middle-aged men in hoodies and sweatshirts stood outside the entrance of the grocery store. They huddled together talking. One looked up at me and frowned. There was something accusatory in his eyes. And then, for the first time in years, I felt it.

I felt self-conscious — even a bit ashamed — of being Asian.

[*Full coverage of the coronavirus pandemic*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/coronavirus/?tid=lk_interstitial_manual_6&itid=lk_interstitial_manual_6)

It had been years since I felt that way. I grew up with semi-regular visitations of that sense of racially tinged self-consciousness. It didn’t help that I was an awkward kid. But after adulthood, marriage, a career, parenthood, positions of leadership and even a presidential run, that feeling had disappeared — I thought.

My place in this country felt assured. I have it better than the vast majority of Americans of any background. When comedian Shane Gillis slurred me by name, I did not think he deserved to lose his job. It barely registered when a teenager yelled “Chink” at me from the window of his car in New Hampshire a number of months ago. My only reaction was to think, “Well, I’m glad that neither of my sons was around because then I might have to explain to them what that word means.”

[*Sign up for our Coronavirus Updates newsletter to track the outbreak. All stories linked in the newsletter are free to access.*](https://subscribe.washingtonpost.com/newsletters/#/bundle/health?method=SURL&location=ART_IS&tid=lk_interstitial_manual_11&itid=lk_interstitial_manual_11)

But things have changed.

In the past few weeks, the number of reported physical and verbal attacks on Asian Americans [has increased dramatically](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/us/chinese-coronavirus-racist-attacks.html). The percentage of Asians who use the not-for-profit [Crisis Text Line](https://www.crisistextline.org/data/bobs-notes-on-covid-19-mental-health-data-on-the-pandemic/) to speak with a counselor has shot up from 5 percent of callers — about in line with our share of the population — to 13 percent, an increase of 160 percent. Some level of background disdain or alienation has grown into outright hostility and even aggression.

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And we all know why. The [coronavirus](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/02/28/what-you-need-know-about-coronavirus/?tid=lk_inline_manual_16&itid=lk_inline_manual_16) is devastating communities and lives. People’s livelihoods and families are being destroyed. And people are looking for someone to blame.

Before covid-19, too many Americans were already living paycheck to paycheck, working long hours just to get by. Now, we all are even more fearful for the future, worried about our parents, grandparents and children. We are anxious about our jobs, bills and next month’s rent or mortgage payment.

In early February, when I was still running for president, someone asked me, “How do we keep the coronavirus from inciting hostility toward Asians in this country?”

I responded, “The truth is that people are wired to make attributions based on appearance, including race. The best thing that could happen for Asians would be to get this virus under control so it isn’t a problem anymore. Then any racism would likely fade.” This was weeks before “Chinese Virus” became a thing.

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Now it is, and we have to figure out how to combat that, too. I’m an entrepreneur. In general, negative responses don’t work. I obviously think that being racist is not a good thing. But saying “Don’t be racist toward Asians” won’t work.

I have been thinking about ways to improve that encounter at the grocery store. People are hurting. They look up and see someone who is different from them, whom they wrongly associate with the upheaval of their way of life.

[Natalie Chou](https://www.espn.com/espnw/voices/story/_/id/28955666/ucla-natalie-chou-stand-anti-asian-racism-related-coronavirus), a UCLA basketball player, said that she felt better when she [wore her UCLA gear](https://www.bakersfield.com/ap/sports/ucla-s-natalie-chou-talks-about-racism-and-being-associated/article_218c1f90-d16c-573c-a0aa-4309da95bcf2.html), in part because the association reminded people that she was an American.

During World War II, Japanese Americans volunteered for military duty at the highest possible levels to demonstrate that they were Americans. Now many in the Asian American community are stepping up, trying to demonstrate that we can be part of the solution. Some 17 percent of U.S. doctors are Asian and rushing to the front lines.

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[*The Opinions section is looking for stories of how the coronavirus has affected people of all walks of life. Write to us.*](https://hosted-washpost.submissionplatform.com/sub/hosted/5e6a41e2f32ca20034c25f1d)

We Asian Americans need to embrace and show our American-ness in ways we never have before. We need to step up, help our neighbors, donate gear, vote, wear red white and blue, volunteer, fund aid organizations, and do everything in our power to accelerate the end of this crisis. We should show without a shadow of a doubt that we are Americans who will do our part for our country in this time of need.

Demonstrate that we are part of the solution. We are not the virus, but we can be part of the cure.