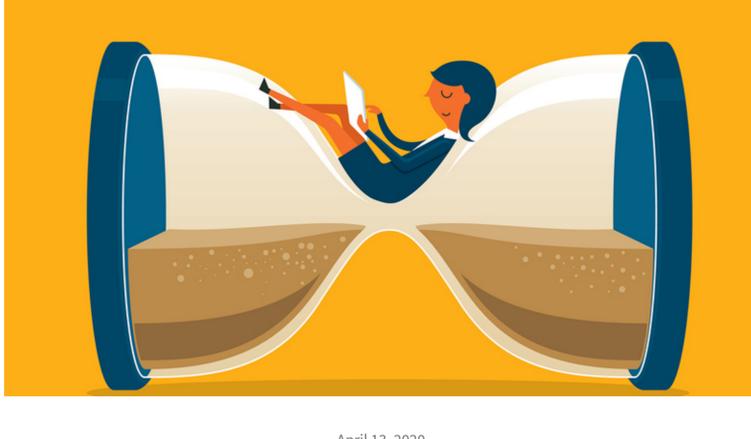


Productivity and Happiness Under Sustained Disaster Conditions



April 13, 2020

Image: iStock

By Aisha S. Ahmad

By now, many people are slowly coming to terms with the idea that the Covid-19 crisis may continue for months and create a radically changed world. That realization is understandably distressing, given the prospect of prolonged physical distancing, rising death tolls, and serious economic decline. As the denial fades, fear and anger take its place, which can result in emotional and intellectual paralysis.

The prospect of an enduring crisis is frightening. But as someone who has lived and worked in disaster conditions in other contexts, I can assure those of you new to crises that this initial wave of acute distress is temporary. How you feel today is not how you will feel in a month, or a year — even if the crisis continues. At this early stage, all we can see are the walls, the restrictions, the losses. But there is light between those walls.

In fact, it is entirely possible to be peaceful, productive, and even happy under sustained disaster conditions. For newcomers to systemwide crises, I will share some of my insights here, building on [the essay I wrote last month](#). As always, take what is beneficial to you, and leave the rest.

Crisis adaptation takes time. Academics and other high-performance professionals are accustomed to having their brains make magic on command. We just flip the switch and optimize our operations and outputs. Yet, all of a sudden, that switch seems to have stopped working. Many of my colleagues have expressed distress that their ability to produce top-tier research has been affected by the crisis, even though they seem to have more time to write than ever under lockdown.

This reaction is perfectly normal and appropriate. Your magnificent brain is currently very busy trying to figure out how your family can adapt and survive in a rapidly evolving and lethal global disaster. Thank your brain for working overtime to keep you safe. Stop demanding that it heed your every beck and call.

Making superfluous demands on your brain at this stage will only reduce productivity and wellness in the long run. Equally so, it is unreasonable to expect your students to perform high-level intellectual labor in the early stages of this crisis. Powering ahead with research and teaching as per normal is a symptom of denial, which not only derails survival adaptation, but may also harm students in the process.

As I noted in my [previous essay](#), right now the sane and responsible course of action is to prioritize the physical and psychological security of yourself and your family. Front-end all of that work. Grant all of your students, colleagues, and staff the mental space to do the same. Right priorities at the outset of this disaster will result in faster adaptation and better productivity in the long run.

Embrace radical acceptance. For the foreseeable future, we will all have to learn to live in the world as it is. Embracing this fact with humility, open-mindedness, and good cheer will serve us much better than going kicking and screaming down the path of denial. This is the first step in looking past the walls, and seeing the opportunities and hope that are available to us right now.

While everyone must find their own way, this transformative process is not optional. This pandemic has thrust all of us into an alternate universe — one with a deadly threat and strange new restrictions. The way we did things two months ago is not going to serve us today or tomorrow. Of course, it is natural to want to create a bubble of familiarity so that your daily life feels connected to your existence before Covid-19. By all means, take a Zoom yoga class and join your weekly spiritual community online. Let novels and Netflix transport you. Skype with friends and cook an old family recipe. These things provide an essential foundation of psychological relief and stability.

However, it would be a mistake to try to hide in that bubble and wait for the crisis to end. The projected timeline of this global disaster is simply too long for this strategy to work. Alone, it will prove insufficient and bleak, and you will run out of juice well before the crisis is over.

Rather than cling to illusions of normalcy and control, let the alternate universe teach you all-new ways to be and do. The world is different. So let's be different, too. For this strange period in our lives, we have the opportunity to learn entirely new approaches to productivity, knowledge, connection, community, and happiness. There is a new space opening up between the walls and restrictions of this pandemic. Approach this new space as a visiting student, learning the ropes. Try to embrace this opportunity with curiosity and willingness.

Protect your mental health and emotional resilience. I know from experience how draining it can be to try to remain hopeful and teachable in the face of prolonged disaster conditions. A few simple tools can help prevent a downward spiral and facilitate a successful personal transformation.

To start, it is toxic to compare your situation to anyone else's, particularly to those who you think are better off. If you're stuck in a tiny city apartment, you might feel envious of people with backyards. If you live alone, you may feel hurt to see families enjoying social time. If your spouse is an emergency worker, you may scoff at couples who have the luxury of being together all day. If your full days are spent caring for small children or elderly relatives, you might snap at someone who boasts that a pandemic is a great time to write 10 papers and learn a new language.

Watch for these reactions, and try to notice if your anger is coming from a place of envy or self-pity. Don't judge yourself — just take note of it as an important clue to your own daily mental wellness. If you find yourself fixating on what someone else has, change the channel. Wish everyone well. Then close the door. A little mental discipline in this area will pay dividends.

Actively shift your focus to gratitude. This is a practical and effective tool for remaining mentally resilient under sustained disaster conditions. If you're new to this practice, make it a formal exercise with a small team of people who face comparable conditions and challenges. Every morning, write down 10 things you are grateful for in the here and now. Don't include the things that you miss, or the things you can't wait to do when the pandemic is over. Focus only on the light and relief you can find *right now*. Dig deep. Get a little sappy. Then share your list with your team to start your day. A regular practice of gratitude can help keep you in good humor, even under prolonged disaster conditions.

Of course, none of these exercises can be done perfectly. If you lose a day because you fought with your spouse, got into a Twitter war, watched 10 hours of cable news, and ate a bag of Cheetos, just let it go. Who cares? Nobody is going to get an A-plus in cheerful pandemic living, so cut yourself and everyone else some slack. Take this pandemic one day at a time.

Trust that your distress will not only settle, but that you will also soon get bored with it. Our new alternate universe will start to feel normal. At that point, your system will reboot, your creative and intellectual engine will rev, and you'll find it easier to complete projects and start new ones.

Most important, don't wait for this crisis to be over to find your happiness. There is always hope amid hardship. Look for the light between the walls, right now, right here. You may find that there is still plenty of serenity, connection, and freedom all around us.

Aisha S. Ahmad is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Toronto and the author of the award-winning book Jihad & Co: Black Markets and Islamist Power (Oxford University Press, 2017).

As the coronavirus crisis deepens, The Chronicle is providing free access to our breaking-news updates on its impact on higher education. It's your support that makes our work possible. [Please consider subscribing today.](#)

MORE NEWS & ADVICE

6 Steps to Prepare for an Online Fall Semester

April 13, 2020

The possibility is becoming more likely. Colleges should have a plan.

Graduate Advising in the Time of Covid-19

Leonard Cassuto, April 20, 2020

Amid the uncertainties created by the global pandemic, what our doctoral students may need more than usual is structure.

Join the Conversation



Log In or Sign Up to leave a comment.

