

Resilience in crisis

As I write this, the COVID-19 pandemic is spreading across the globe. People everywhere are feeling fear, shock, and sadness. Many of us are sheltering at home, unable to see loved ones. Many have lost their jobs or worry they're about to. And many are sick or will be. It's a scary time.

Some have observed that this feeling we're carrying around right now is more than anxiety—it's grief. Some of us are grieving the loss of loved ones. Even more of us are grieving the loss of normalcy. The pandemic has shattered our illusion of invulnerability. It has reminded us of the fragility of both our lives and of life as we know it. It is understandable that so many people are feeling deeply down.

Five years ago, I lost my husband Dave suddenly. In the depths of my grief, looking for insights about how to get my children and myself through it, I turned to my friend Adam Grant, a psychologist at Wharton. Together, we started studying how people can recover and rebound from life-shattering experiences. Eventually we wrote the book *Option B* to share what we learned about resilience. Since many of those lessons are relevant to the current crisis, we've decided to make some key excerpts openly available, with the hope that they may be useful to people trying to get through this painful time.

After spending decades studying how people deal with setbacks and challenges, psychologists have [found](#) that three P's can stunt recovery: (1) personalization—the belief that we are at fault; (2) permanence—the belief that the aftershocks of the event will last forever; and (3) pervasiveness—the belief that an event will affect all areas of our life.

Personalization is happening all around us. Some people are blaming themselves for not doing enough to protect their friends and family, or feeling guilty for doing too little to help strangers. Others are beating themselves up for feeling lonely or unproductive. Instead of self-blame, psychologists recommend self-compassion: showing ourselves the same kindness we would extend to someone close to us. This is not our fault. We are only human. We may feel lonely, but we are not alone in that feeling.

It can be hard to shake the impression of permanence too. When we're suffering, we tend to project it out indefinitely. There's a lot of uncertainty around how long this pandemic will last, which makes the sense of unyielding doom and gloom particularly daunting. It helps to remember that all pain is temporary. Although we don't know when this crisis will end, we know that it *will* end.

Another big lesson is to reject the sense of pervasiveness. During a tragedy, when things are so much worse than usual, it's easy to get caught up in the feeling that everything is awful. But in reality, not everything is. Utilities are still operating. We still have books and board games and movies to enjoy at home. We can still reach out to loved ones by phone or through the internet. In some cases, being far apart physically is bringing us closer together emotionally. With separation comes a renewed sense of appreciation.

Research has shown that gratitude can lift our spirits even when we're at our lowest. I learned this firsthand after Dave died. Even in the depths of grief, there are still blessings worth counting. I wanted this to become a daily habit for my family, so each night at dinner, my children and I go around the table to discuss what we're grateful for. Since we have been quarantining, our lists have changed. *They are starting school later so I can sleep in. I don't have to wonder where my teenage kids are at night. I got to work in pajamas today . . . or at least pajama bottoms.* Gratitude doesn't just make us happier; it can make us stronger as well.

Rejecting personalization, permanence, and pervasiveness means shifting our mindset. When the future is difficult to imagine, we can find strength by looking to the past. We have all faced personal hardships—from loss, injury, and illness to divorce and rejection, from professional failure to personal disappointment. We have faced collective hardships too—from wars and terrorist attacks to natural disasters and financial crises. By reflecting on how we have confronted adversity before, we can remind ourselves that we have the will and the way to endure this hardship.

Resilience doesn't mean rejecting unpleasant emotions. And letting emotions in doesn't give them power over us; rather, it gives them room to move through us. Sometimes voicing fear gives us some control over it. Psychologists find that worrying is productive because it helps us anticipate and prepare for the worst. It becomes counterproductive when it turns into rumination—when our mental playlist is stuck on a loop of the same thoughts and feelings, without prompting us to plan or act.

With so many life events being disrupted or canceled, for many of us, that mental loop is stuck on our own feelings of despair or disappointment. Ultimately, what helps us most is looking for ways to help others. When people are counting on us, we find strength we didn't know we had. In his research, Adam has [found](#) that we often go to greater lengths to wash our hands and maintain physical distance for others than for ourselves. Taking care of family, friends, or our community can distract us from our grief. It can give us a sense that we matter—that we're noticed and appreciated, that we

make a difference. I have taught my children that when they feel lonely and are missing their friends, they can call their grandparents and help them feel less alone.

In times of tragedy, Mister Rogers advised children, “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.” We do not have to look far. To develop and test vaccines, scientists are collaborating at a pace and on a scale unprecedented in human history. To care for the sick, health-care professionals are risking their lives. To provide communities with the resources and supplies many once took for granted, people are showing up to work in warehouses, grocery stores, and pharmacies. To help the elderly, strangers are picking up food and medications and delivering them to their homes. We have the chance to not just look for the helpers, but to be the helpers ourselves.

This crisis has demonstrated once again the indomitability and ingenuity of the human spirit. In Italy, people are finding harmony in hibernation by opening their windows to sing together. In London, people are finding connection in isolation by holding daily dance parties on their driveways. In Brazil, people are staying active by pouring dish-washing soap on their kitchen floors, turning them into makeshift treadmills. In New York, some landlords are waiving rent for tenants. They remind us that post-traumatic stress is not the only option; it is possible to experience post-traumatic growth. We can do more than just bounce back—we can bounce forward.

This pandemic has brought tragedy and chaos to our lives. Throughout history, we have seen that crises like this do not just test our resolve. They can also build our resilience.