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Lovelyn Medina | 123rf

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Maxim Usik | Ikon Images

Cover story: A year of cascading, complex crises
Cover image: Miles Cole

comment

This edition's front cover depicts some of the events that have occurred in 2020, which has most certainly been one of the most challenging and tumultuous years any of us will have experienced. We may be overworking the Pandora's box (or jar) analogy, but these last 12 months truly exemplify the myth of 'great and unexpected troubles'. Of course, many of these had been foreseen, or were heralded by clear precursors and signs. But unheeded warnings notwithstanding, these events have certainly combined to strain individual, professional, community, business, national and international resilience as never before. Twelve months ago, *CRJ*'s front cover warned leaders that: "All eyes are on you." In today's landscape of repeated shockwaves, cascading crises and, "instant systemic contamination that piles up challenges on multiple fronts," leadership across all disciplines – political, business, governance and institutional – is being scrutinised as never before. Sadly, reactions and responses to the pandemic have been, to put it politely, erratic in many areas. Worryingly, we know that more shocks are on the way – wishful thinking will not magically sweep away the harsh onslaught of climate-related events. The "toxic polarisation, anti-scientific mindsets and retreats into alternative realities" mentioned on p14 are symptoms, not the cause of today's lack of coherence and solidarity in the face of global threats. Yet, as with Pandora's box, there are glimmers of hope. Human innovation, creativity, business and science have combined to develop vaccines and deliver other life-saving products and services in record time. Stories of self-sacrifice, dedication and love abound. People are still caring for others. All of us in society, but particularly our leaders and those responsible for the safety and security of communities, must not let the next wave of crises come to pass in a wilful paroxysm of inattentional blindness. And here's hoping that 'deceptive expectation', which is the alternative interpretation of 'hope' in the Pandora myth, does not hold true.





Take a deep breath...

Everyone is fatigued and stressed after the prolonged effects of coping with the Covid-19 pandemic, and none more so than those tasked with governance, continuity, resilience and emergency response. Responders and planners are accumulating signs of anxiety, emotional exhaustion, depression, PTSD and – in extreme cases – suicidal behaviour, according to **Lyzi G Cota**. But she offers a few techniques that can help

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Research published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* found that women, young adults, socially disadvantaged people and those with pre-existing mental health conditions reported the worst mental health outcomes in the initial six weeks of national lockdown and that rates of suicidal thoughts had increased, especially among young adults.

It is daunting and difficult to believe that as crisis and emergency managers, as disaster and first responders, we have learned how to prepare, plan, protect and recover material possessions, communities, finances, public infrastructure and physical integrity – but we don't address mental health with the same dedication and standards.

Sadly, little is focused on protecting our minds, emotions and response to depression, stress, anxiety and mental trauma.

Science teaches us that humans have three brain regions: the first and the oldest of all of them is the reptilian brain or primal brain (basal ganglia), the second is the Paleomammalian or emotional brain (limbic system) and the third is the Neomammalian or rational brain (neocortex). However, it is the reptilian brain that experiences more activity during a crisis or disaster response, since it is involved with the body's vital functions, such as heart rate, breathing, balance, body temperature and primitive drives associated with hunger, thirst, sexuality and territoriality.

Fight or flight

What activates the fight or flight response? This physiological reaction occurs when we are in the presence of something we perceive as physically or mentally terrifying.

The body's sympathetic nervous system is activated by the sudden release of hormones and stimulates the adrenal glands, triggering the release of catecholamines (adrenaline and noradrenaline included). This sequence of hormonal activity increases heart and breathing rates, as well as blood pressure. When we perceive the threat to be over, it takes between 20 to 60 minutes for the body to return to its pre-arousal levels.

According to the WHO, a disaster is an occurrence disrupting the normal conditions of existence and causing a level of suffering that exceeds the capacity of adjustment of the affected community.

So a crisis could, therefore, be defined as a personal, domestic or international situation in which there is a threat to priority values, interests, physical or mental integrity and goals of an individual, community, country, several nations or the entire world.

It is essential to remember that when we talk about crisis or disaster recovery, we have to include a mental health component, not only for the communities affected, but for frontline workers.

First responders, crisis managers and emergency managers plan and respond, but many people rarely stop to think about the personal risk this implies, not just to themselves, but to their families as collateral damage.

For those planning at high levels, it is normal to assume that the people on the front lines will respond rapidly, fearlessly, without exhaustion or objection. But, will they? Or, as a result of a careless civic response and responsibility, will they be motivated to think of their interests first? Are they being pushed to their limits? And how can the burden be eased, not only during the

Covid-19 crisis, but pre, and hopefully post, pandemic?

A new analysis by Amnesty International reveals that around the world at least 7,000 health workers have died from Covid-19. The highest known figures for any country start with Mexico at 1,320. This is followed by: USA – 1,077; Brazil – 634; India – 573; UK – 540; and South Africa – 240.

At the time of writing, it was reported that 30,000 to 40,000 National Health Service (NHS) staff were off sick or self-isolating amid the second wave.

In words of Steve Cockburn, Head of Economic and Social Justice at Amnesty International: "Every health worker has the right to be safe at work, and it is a scandal that so many are paying the ultimate price."

Another essential, but often overlooked aspect is that members of the military are not crisis or emergency managers, neither are they considered to be first responders in the same way as law enforcement officers, paramedics, firefighters and emergency medical technicians; yet they also respond to crisis and disasters and this implies the need for a tremendous amount of mental and physical strength.

We know a little about the mental health support provided to the military during deployment. NATO countries operating in Afghanistan deployed a mental health support team comprising a range of mental health staff, including psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, mental health nurses and chaplains to support the troops. During the Covid-19 responses, mental health support is also a must.

Troops also suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), depression and suicidal thoughts. The *Annual Warrior Survey* in June, 2020, has a section on Covid-19, indicating that 52 per cent of military personnel mentioned their mental health has been worse since socially distancing themselves.

PTSD, which I prefer to term post traumatic stress defence, involves a series of defence mechanisms from our body and mind that are developed after experiencing or witnessing trauma, and they can have:

- **Behavioural implications:** Hostility, irritability, hypervigilance, self-destructive behaviour, emotional detachment, social isolation or intrusive thought;
- **Psychological:** depression, fear, flashback, anxiety, mistrust;
- **Sleep:** insomnia or nightmares; and
- **Mood:** loss of interest or pleasure in activities, guilt, or loneliness.

Not all symptoms are present all the time, are of the same intensity and not all have to be present in a person.

TBI is a brain disruption that can be caused by an outside force – usually a violent blow to the head, an explosion, a car accident or a brain trauma. TBI has three levels – low, mild and severe. Many emergency response workers are more susceptible to TBI owing to dangers inherent in their working environments and the incidents that they respond to.

TBIs are treatable by a medical professional, but can cause other adverse mental health effects such as anger, anxiety, depression or post-traumatic seizure. Overall, TBI affects several areas of the affected person's life, including cognitive, behavioural, mood, vision, speech, visual, gastrointestinal and muscular systems.

Suicidal thoughts can start to be generated when a

person isolates physically and emotionally at such a level that he or she perceives there is no one else to understand and assist them against hopelessness and despair.

The WHO indicates that each year there are approximately 800,000 deaths worldwide attributed to suicide.

Depression is often over-diagnosed and over-medicated; we must distinguish between being saddened by the loss of something tangible or intangible, to be afraid and cry and to be a sensitive person, because this is all quite different from being clinically depressed.

Sadness is necessary and can be likened a period of internal hibernation until a person is ready to wake up again, developing a state of peace and connection with the present, consciously deciding with what attitude to face the day, regardless of confusions, stress and challenges.

Some highly effective techniques are available to help people cope with PTSD, the effects of TBI and the trauma of experiences during crisis, disaster or emergency management activities. A few are outlined below.

Combat tactical breathing is a powerful and effective technique used by Navy Seals to regain calm and control. It starts by expelling all of the air from the lungs and keeping them empty for four seconds; inhaling through the nose for four seconds; holding the lungs full of air for four seconds; and exhaling for four seconds. This technique can be repeated for 10 to 20 minutes.

Cycle breathing – created by John D Byrnes, DHum, former Navy Veteran and current CEO of the Centre for Aggression Management, which works with Fortune 200 companies – is another highly effective technique to manage stress and regain judgment. The purpose of this technique is to stop the adrenaline rush, which

Don't discount soothing techniques, such as sitting with your pet, visualising your favourite place or practising self-kindness

causes a significant loss of quality of judgment. Byrnes says that cycle breathing is more favourable for those who may not be in the extraordinary physical condition of Navy Seals. His suggestion is to: Inhale to the count of four; hold to the count of two; exhale to the count of four; hold to the count of two; and repeat.

Here Byrnes adds a bonus. By focusing on the heart region during the first cycle, the cadence should be at a person's typical heart rate.

However, during the second and subsequent cycles, the person should consciously slow their cadence, thus slowing their heart rate. This additional action not only prevents further escalation from an adrenaline rush, but it also helps to regain any lost quality of judgment, enhancing a person's ability to be creative, innovative and thoughtful.

Grounding techniques help people move through distress and allow them to cope with anxiety, PTSD and traumatic memories. They involve the



use of our five senses or tangible objects and the techniques can be physical, mental and soothing. Rolffimages | 123rf

Physical techniques involve breathing exercises, rubbing one's hands and feeling the tingling effect between them; sand running through fingers; savouring food or drink; enjoying a scent; taking a short run or walk; working in the garden; moving the body and stretching; and listening to your surroundings.

A new study reveals how a basic programme of lifts, squats, lunges and crunches also eases anxiety levels, while other mental techniques include counting backwards from ten, playing a memory game or visualising an enjoyable daily task. And do not discount soothing techniques, such as sitting with your pet, visualising your favourite place or simply practising self-kindness.

This year is about to end, and 2021 can provide more positive and fewer traumatic experiences if we pay attention to mental wellness, even if we are still dealing with the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The world in general needs to be united and prepared to safeguard mental wellness, and to work on a common effort to support frontline and other key workers.

Emerging from this pandemic will require civic responsibility, co-operation, patience, understanding and collaborative efforts in order to avoid professional burn-out.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that we must preserve our humanity, wellness, sanity, integrity and harmony.

Above all, however, it is imperative to remember that when we discuss crisis and disaster recovery strategies, we must also include mental health and wellbeing components in our plans and procedures.

Author



LYZI G COTA is Founder and CEO of Lions Group Global and Global Mental Wealth and a Strategic and Principal Partner of AOCI & GEC; advising Defence, Aerospace, Mental Health, Crisis & Emergency Management organisations internationally



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