

Developing Resilience - The Danger and Opportunity of Covid-19 for International School Educators (Part 2)

19 March 2020

By Suzanne M. Anderson, DPST

Westerners have often oversimplified the Chinese symbol for "crisis" to mean danger and opportunity, when in fact, it means "danger at an incipient moment" (Zimmer, 2007). Linguists argue whether "the moment" is neutral or has a positive inflection in its original language. A crisis is an incipient moment--a moment when change begins and has the potential for harm and growth. Part I addressed the danger, the emotional and social impact of the Covid-19 and can be found [here](#). Part II discusses the opportunity for building resilience while coping with the effects of Covid-19.



How is stress like carrying a glass of water?

A psychologist walked around a room while teaching stress management to an audience. As she raised a glass of water, everyone expected they'd be asked the "half empty or half full" question. Instead, with a smile on her face, she inquired: "How heavy is this glass of water?" Answers called out ranged from 8 oz. to 20 oz. She replied, "The absolute weight doesn't matter. It depends on how long I hold it. If I hold it for a minute, it's not a problem. If I hold it for an hour, I'll have an ache in my arm. If I hold it for a day, my arm will feel numb and paralyzed. In each case, the weight of the glass doesn't change, but the longer I hold it, the heavier it becomes." She continued, "The stresses and worries in life are like that glass of water. Think about them for a while, and nothing happens. Think about them a bit longer and they begin to hurt. And if you think about them all day long, you will feel paralyzed – incapable of doing anything." It's important to remember to let go of your stresses. As early in the evening as you can, put all your burdens down. Don't carry them through the evening and into the night. Remember to put the glass down! (Source unknown)

What is resilience?

Resilience is the ability to bounce back when things get tough. When a crisis happens, we often talk about being the victim of the event. Resilience is moving from victim to survivor to thriver. When a crisis happens, we will not return to pre-crisis normal; we will need to create a new normal. Our goal must be to grow in response to the trauma. It doesn't mean we would have chosen to go through the crisis event. It means that having had no choice, we come through it and like who we are better than who we were before the incident. Perhaps our priorities are redefined. Perhaps we realize we have a new sensitivity and understanding of what others go through that gives us a greater sense of connection. Maybe we clarify our values and realign how we live in line with our values.

As with anything that challenges us, we have the opportunity to learn more about ourselves and even to develop ourselves. The reality is that many of the things we can do to strengthen our resilience we already know. However, when crisis arises--especially protracted ones--we can spend so much time

coping with the effects of the crisis that we forget to take care of ourselves in some of the most basic ways.

Resilience is not a characteristic that we have or don't have. It is a capacity we can choose to foster and develop. Resilience can become a lifestyle.

Social support

We are hardwired for connection. Scientist Matthew Lieberman argues that our need to connect is as essential as our need for food and water (Cook, 2013). We connect better when we are face-to-face in the same room with each other. For educators in countries that have closed schools, there is limited opportunity for face-to-face connection. Educators in China have shared a feeling of withdrawal, a sense of sensory deprivation.

While we are socially distant from our wider circles, we often face separate challenges from the social "support" of being cooped up with family members 24/7 day-after-day with little opportunity to get out. In this case, it may be that we have to find ways to structure some autonomy and independence. Perhaps an overnight in a guest bedroom for children who share a room, or even spouses. Perhaps creating an agreed-upon do-not-disturb time frame in which we can think our own thoughts and do our own things, knowing that we will be undisturbed.

There are several ways to address our needs for social support. Find time to be with people who bring you a feeling of joy. Plan what you are going to do with family and friends when you can get out and travel again. Remember that anticipation is a significant part of the fun. Talk with friends or a counselor to reduce isolation, clarify thinking, get feedback, or hear some new ideas or perspectives that may be helpful. Ask for help. We often say we don't want to burden others by asking them to do something for us, but the fact is we are depriving others of a "helper's high" when we don't ask.

Share vulnerabilities. We tend to isolate ourselves when we are not feeling emotionally well. We hide how we are feeling, and think that we are the only person feeling the strong emotions or struggling in the way that we are. So, we keep them to ourselves and may become shrouded in a feeling of shame and be isolated. Brené Brown (2017) has taught us that the antidote to shame is vulnerability. And that empathy (not sympathy) drives our connection. Find people to talk to who can be with you empathetically.

And, as the people around you open up with their vulnerabilities and needs, support them. Give help when asked.

Physical/health abilities

Physical health is put under significant strain when our body is more stressed and exhausted from dealing with all the change, and sometimes accompanying fear that comes with crisis. We know that stress and exhaustion lower our immunity. Think about how our immunity is affected by how we take care of ourselves.

There are no surprises here. Remember to eat well (avoid sugar); drink water; get good rest; move and exercise (but don't over-train); take time to breathe deeply; practice progressive muscle relaxation (a favorite recording is by Beth Salcedo); and set an alarm or timer to take short rest breaks to move from sitting and give our eyes a rest from the computer screen. There are a great variety of routines on the Internet that can be followed in your home (a favorite is <https://darebee.com> with 1,300 workouts).

Emotional capacities

[Part 1](#) of this article provided a review of the emotional reactions that are commonly experienced in

crisis. It is essential that we don't stuff our feelings. That is like trying to hold a beach ball under the water with one hand. When we get distracted, our emotions, like the beachball, are going to come popping out. Find ways to express your feelings: talking, writing, or physical activity. Identify and name your feelings. That simple step can move us from reacting from the emotional center of our brain to responding from the cognitive center, allowing us to connect with more resources for analyzing and problem-solving.

Laughing and crying both exercise our muscles, bring more oxygen into the body, and provide a release of emotions. Like exhaling takes unwanted gases out of our body, tears carry away chemicals that build up in our body in times of stress. Give yourself an excuse to cry by watching a good tear-jerker movie or creating an "angst playlist" that will help you release those tears when you want to. Laughter can reduce stress and thus help strengthen our immunity. There are many ways to find an excuse to laugh, such as good comedy videos or, if you dare, do an Internet or social media search on "Covid-19 Memes."

Fear can be a significant and natural part of our reaction to Covid-19. We can use this as an opportunity for growth, to expand our capacity to cope with fear. Doing something outside our comfort zone every day (while being physically and emotionally safe), reduces the number of things that create fear in us, and puts us in touch with how bold, brave, and capable we can be.

Anxiety and panic are significant features of the unseen threat of the virus. For some of us, it can feel like nervous energy, with limited ability to move around to discharge it. Find ways to soothe yourself with calm music, a warm bath, mindfulness, or a moderate exercise routine.

Use worry and anger properly. When we use our emotions well, they serve a purpose. They get us what we need by moving us to action or getting others to move to action for us. When we worry or get angry, they are responses -- something has happened that has hurt us, or we think that something in the future could hurt us. Figure out what that dangerous thing is. And if you can do something about it, take action. If it is something outside of your control, let it go. Sometimes we might need our social support, our family and friends, or maybe a counselor, to get clarity on the problem, to sort out our power, what we can change and what we can let go.

Can you channel your emotions into creativity? Can you create art? Write music, short stories, poetry, novels? When we are out of our regular routine, we might have new eyes for seeing ourselves. Instagramer Amber Rae recommends journaling about what is coming up for you as an excellent way to channel this potential for learning and growing.

Spirituality

David Elkins, Ph.D. in a Psychology Today article, tells us that "The word spirituality comes from the Latin root spiritus, which means 'breath'--referring to the breath of life." Susan Santucci, in Pathways to the Spirit, shares that people in every country and language search for the unquantifiable spirit that nourishes the most profound part within us and brings joy into even some of the life's darkest moments. Trauma victims and survivors teach us that for our search for the spirit to be nourishing; we need to find what speaks to us individually, not what others tell us. One person's imposition of their spiritual practice on another can often be unhelpful or harmful.

For some, spirituality can mean a religious practice. However, during this time, many houses of worship have been closed or are harder to access. For others, it may be making a practice of gratitude by keeping a journal, compiling an A to Z list of gratitude, reading inspirational writings, spending time in prayer, mindfulness or meditation, or spending time in nature. During this time of being indoors in the winter, it may seem hard to find nature. "Forest bathing" expert Dr. Qing Li describes a sixth sense that he says connects us with the world beyond ourselves. He suggests that we can bring the forest indoors with

indoor plants, by bringing the essential smells of the outdoors in with aromatic oils, and bringing the sounds of nature indoors. He shares how essential oils have been used in Taiwan to reduce the stress of primary-school teachers.

Cognitive abilities

The hallmark of crisis is chaos. Chaos means that we lose our routines, the usual, predictable pace and cadence of our days, our weeks, and in the case of Covid-19 it seems months. For many educators, that has meant learning how to teach class on-line and learning how to use each of the tools needed to do that. Not only are educators engaged in teaching each day (an already exhausting task), but they have to do it in new ways.

Each time we step out of routine, we have to create new patterns that require new decisions. These multiple changes can lead to decision fatigue, which is not as easily recognizable as physical fatigue. Making decisions about things that were otherwise mundane that we have not encountered before can require a lot of energy, and can sap us of the capacity we have previously allotted for the things that are most important to us.

While it might seem trite to say "our thoughts become our reality," it is fair to say that "our thoughts become our perception of reality." This is based in our biology. The thoughts we think the most, will cement themselves as neuropathways in our brain that fire faster and more often. Limit our media to the barrage of news and social media about this crisis so panic and fear don't become seared into our brains. Pick a couple of good sources and let the rest fall to the side.

Some of us who are staying indoors day-after-day may feel like the days begin to bleed together. Find a way to mark the days, to distinguish one from another: literally mark the days off of the calendar, have a different routine for weekdays and weekends, schedule specific things on certain days of the week.

We also want to normalize and create new habits around socially responsible behaviors. Create new routines around washing hands when coming into the home, when touching buttons out in the community, before touching our face. Pick a new greeting to replace the handshake. Our new greeting may be an elbow bump, the tapping of feet (affectionately called the Wuhan Shake), or a greeting with palms together in front of our chest and a smile as the Hindus greet each other.

Education/experience

The cliché "information is power" has been used by many survivors of crisis and trauma. Crisis and trauma--by their very essence of being sudden, random, and arbitrary--take away our control and leave us with a feeling of helplessness. For some, learning as much about the situation they are in serves to lessen feelings of helplessness. If we follow the path we teach our students, and find reliable sources, there is much to learn about this epidemic--people's reactions to them, the impact of confinement, the effect of internet communication on the effectiveness of mirroring neurons, the sequencing of genomes, how seasonal temperatures might affect the spread of the virus, the list is endless.

What have you learned about yourself and others? How has this situation changed you? How has it changed your values or priorities? Has this crisis helped you to clarify your perspectives on where you live, your employment, friends, and family? Is there anything that you have learned from teaching classes on-line that will inform the work you do when you return to the classroom? Will you return to the classroom?

Self-esteem

Self-esteem is about valuing ourselves and what we can do. We can engage in activities that increase our sense of value and worth, either because we have made ourselves a priority or because we have

something that is of importance to others.

For many, in the busyness of work-life we have given up things we like to do or are for which we are skilled. Now is the time to find some time to return to those things. Perhaps you can do them for a few minutes while you are taking the mini-breaks recommended in the Physical/Health Abilities section. The confinement of having to stay at home may mean we are not able to get out to do some of the things we enjoy. Still, we can make plans about what we would like to do in the future, or we can enjoy the memories of past adventures through photos or videos, or create a vivid memory to relive the enjoyment you have had doing those things in the past using all of our senses.

As you work on maintaining your social support network, described earlier, don't forget to spend time with people who admire you--the people who when you leave them, leave you feeling stronger, more capable, more creative, and knowing that you have a lot to offer the world.

Value yourself enough to make time for fun and to celebrate your successes and life events such as birthdays and anniversaries. Perhaps every night becomes "Friday night" until you can return to your routine. Maybe you find a place where you can go outside and play a game without a mask for a short time. Have a camp out under sheets in the living room. As expatriates, we so often live for the magic of travel, but in these times, we may need to find a way to create magic at home! And remember, we are living through times and situations we never thought we would have to. We are still working, caring for our children, caring for ourselves. Our coping and surviving are worth celebrating.

Personality

The goal of this discussion was to provide a buffet of options for developing and strengthening our resilience. Some items in this article may even be in contradiction with each other. What we need, what works, is different for each of us. What helps us to feel rejuvenated? What brings us joy? What reduces our stress? What helps us to be the best version of ourselves? We need to listen to ourselves and do, unapologetically, what is best for our own coping and resiliency development.

Developing a resiliency plan

Having read through this list, I hope that you have recognized things that you are already doing (Well done!), things you have done in the past (and will easily be reinstated), and some things that are new that you think might be helpful. Don't try to take on too much. Remember, change -- even good change -- is stressful. Done too fast and our "slow-changing, stable brains" will resist (Guise, 2013). Aim for "Progress, not Perfection."

Psychiatrist and neurologist Viktor Frankl, who survived three concentration camps in World War II reminds us *"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."* I hope these ideas help you to find a resilient way through these difficult times.

The framework for this article is based on the concepts of resilience outlined in the Community Crisis Response Team Training Manual (NOVA, 2019). The content is a compilation of ideas generated by members Singapore-based crisis response team that the educators of the Jakarta Intercultural School in September 2014 found useful and ideas of educators currently based in central and eastern China. Thank you to long-time friend Pam Schuur for once again performing her editing wizardry.

Reference

- Brown, B. (2017, 20 November). Daring Greatly.
- Cook, G. (2013, 22 October). Why we are wired to connect. Scientific American.

- Dossey, L. (2018) The Helper's High. *Explore* November/December 2018; 14:393-399.
- Guise, S. (2013). Mini habits: Smaller habits, bigger results.
- NOVA. (2009). The community crisis response team training manual: Edition 4.0. Washington, DC: National Organization for Victim Assistance.