

Recovering From Crisis Fatigue

It's been one hell of a year

Our bodies and minds are generally well-equipped to handle tough situations. We have hormones for that! Notably, our bodies produce cortisol and adrenaline to help us survive dangerous moments. Cortisol, the “stress hormone,” helps by controlling fear, motivation and mood. Adrenaline, on the other hand, is the more physical cousin that drives faster physical responses by causing the heart to beat faster, increasing blood flow to the brain and muscles. Together, the two work as a dynamic duo in fight-or-flight situations, catalyzing emotional and physical responses that are helpful in dangerous moments.

But what happens when dangerous moments keep going? And going. And going.

Welcome to 2020. Remember murder hornets? Turns out they would be the least of our problems. As autumn rolls around, most of us have experienced an extended mix of global crises: COVID-19, economic devastation and widespread social unrest due to racial injustice. These crises have spawned additional stressors like working from home, schooling from home and, well, doing just about everything from home. And the most challenging part about it? We don't really know when any of this is going to end.



Crisis fatigue

The unrelenting stress of our current environment is taking a tremendous physical and mental toll.

Cortisol and adrenaline are now our constant bodily companions, and the chronic wear and tear on our bodies, minds and emotions has led to what scientists call “allostatic overload,” or the point at which demand on our internal resources exceeds our capacity to cope. In other words, we are experiencing crisis fatigue. Our overly-long exposure to existential stressors has left many of us feeling stressed out, burned out and downright depressed. This steady state of heightened anxiety (with seemingly new reasons to worry everyday) also manifests in poor decision making, loss of productivity and strained relationships. And for many workers (and the companies they work for), that has the potential to make a bad situation worse by compounding economic woes with poor performance.

The stages of crisis fatigue

Does this sound familiar? In the first weeks of the pandemic, many were surprised by a newfound well of energy and purpose. Unencumbered by “business as usual,” priorities were suddenly crystal clear and people seemed to rally around common goals in a way most had not experienced in years. Things were getting done faster and the things that were getting done seemed to matter more than they had in a pre-pandemic world. Over the next couple of months, a strong sense of community emerged in companies around the world, as people set aside mundane matters to focus on a collective vision. But as the pandemic dragged on, the economy worsened and social unrest grew, resolve melted into disillusionment and despair. Everything seemed harder. Challenges felt more daunting. Human energy was depleted. For many, the work day felt like wading through a tar pit in cement boots.

Psychologists are not surprised by this progression of human emotion and energy (though that hasn't lessened the sting). Crisis fatigue is a three-act play, and they've seen it before in people who have experienced prolonged exposure to existential stress in scenarios like war, poverty and famine. Generally speaking, the three stages of crisis

fatigue may be described as emergency, regression and recovery. In the emergency phase, the danger we face becomes clear. In response, humans tap deep wells of reserve energy to boost performance in an effort to overcome the collective threat. Spirits are lifted by progress in the face of danger, and a deep sense of purpose and comradery emerges. But when the threat doesn't dissipate, that deep sense of purpose does. This is the regression phase.

During regression, people can become exhausted, despondent and detached. Mistakes are made, performance decreases and progress feels fleeting. Painfully, the regression phase is often accompanied by a decrease in healthy habits like exercise and socialization and an increase in harmful ones like problem drinking and substance abuse, overeating and even compulsive buying. These harmful habits can have a negative impact on sleep, nutrition, personal finances, relationships and other facets of well-being. “Regression is one of the mind's ways to defend itself from confusion and insecurity by retreating to an emotional comfort zone.” Unfortunately, regression only serves to make the crises worse for individuals, families and businesses. In the worst case scenario, crisis fatigue can threaten the survival of all three.





Leadership & well-being

The good news is that the phases of crisis fatigue are clearly understood and well-documented. And the final phase is recovery. As leaders, it's important to accept that fact that regression during a crisis (much less multiple crises) is inevitable and that the business has a shared responsibility to help people on the path to recovery. It's the right thing to do and it's good for the business.

The best place to start is at the root of the challenge: well-being.

Simply put, we have to be well to do well. When we are stuck in the regression phase of crisis fatigue, we aren't helping ourselves, our families or the company. If there once was a question about whether or not companies share responsibility for the mental and physical health of their employees, 2020 has provided us an emphatic answer. And that's something to be thankful for.

Now and in the future, partial approaches to well-being will not be enough to propel individual and company performance. Only a holistic approach that addresses all aspects of well-being is sufficient for creating a resilient culture that can survive acute crises and flourish in good times and bad. Your company's well-being strategy simply must address all six aspects of life:

- Resilience and mindset
- Purpose and contribution
- Lifestyle and health
- Relationships and community
- Development and growth
- Money and prosperity

Meditation is great. Deep breathing and mindfulness are proven to reduce cortisol levels in the bloodstream and thus reduce stress. But buying a meditation app for employees and calling it a day does not come close to fulfilling the newly-illuminated responsibility that companies have for the well-being of their employees. And neither does offering discounts on health insurance for participating in a steps challenge. A true commitment to well-being sweeps up all the interrelated dimensions of people's lives and a true solution for well-being offers an array of resources for each dimension, from coaching and learning resources to screening and coordination with healthcare providers. And yes, good software is an important delivery mechanism for these resources.



Aduro is here to help

In times like these, we at Aduro feel an elevated sense of urgency to provide solutions to companies and people in need. Crisis fatigue is real and recovery is essential for the health and prosperity of both individuals and enterprises. But as these crises fade, the focus on a holistic approach to well-being must not fade with it. One defining characteristic of a crisis is our innate human desire and ability to not only rebuild, but to innovate. So we call on businesses and leaders to examine the role of employee well-being in the current environment, but also as a pillar of future innovation, resilience and prosperity. And we humbly offer our support and guidance on the path to crisis fatigue recovery and a more resilient future.

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