

A Survival Guide to Emerging from COVID-19



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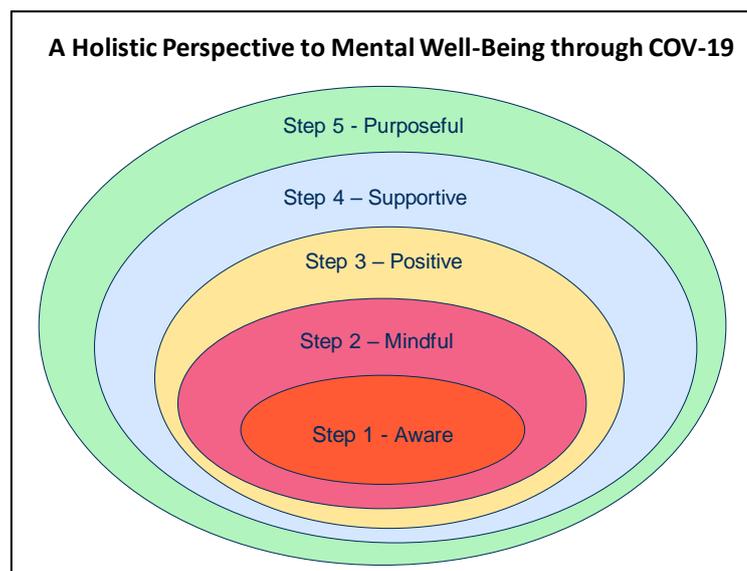
Learning and Development



A Survival Guide to Emerging from COVID-19

Everyone experiences shocks and setbacks from time to time, whether at work, or health, family, friends and finances but never has the whole world suffered such a shock at the same time across so many aspects of our lives. The approaches to cope with this pandemic will be reported for many years to come.

There is a tidal wave of advice to keep calm and carry on, to exercise, to eat well, to sleep, to connect with our family and friends. It can feel confusing. This article aims to integrate some of the suggestions into a holistic perspective which is helpful for COVID-19 but will prepare us all for future life challenges in the post COVID-19 world. It starts with short-term actions and progresses through to a philosophy of purpose and meaning in the long term to sustain us through the day to day setbacks that we all experience on the journey.



The last month has been a rollercoaster for many of us. There is a barrage of 24 hour news around statistics, global trends and personal stories of courage and tragedy. While there are positive signs of “flattening the curve”, there is little doubt that the post COVID-19 world will be different to before and we need to prepare ourselves for adjustments. There is uncertainty at so many levels of our life all at the same time, health, family, relationships, work and financial.

Most of us are confined at home in the “lockdown” and might feel isolated right now with lack of answers to these questions. There is a potential risk that we can all spend a lot of time of thinking and worrying about the future for ourselves and our families. One negative thought leads to another and we start to catastrophise. This is natural, but this article aims to help us avoid this and develop positive mental habits.

The more we understand about the human brain and how it connects and interacts with the body and our physiology, the more we can notice how we spend our waking hours potentially over-reacting to the fear across the media or finding ways to help ourselves and others.

The article is divided into two sections, firstly helping to understand our mind and body connections in a crisis and uncertainty in order to stay safe ; secondly, helping us to build our mental resilience through adversity to stay strong.

1. Understanding Our Mind and Body Connection in Crisis

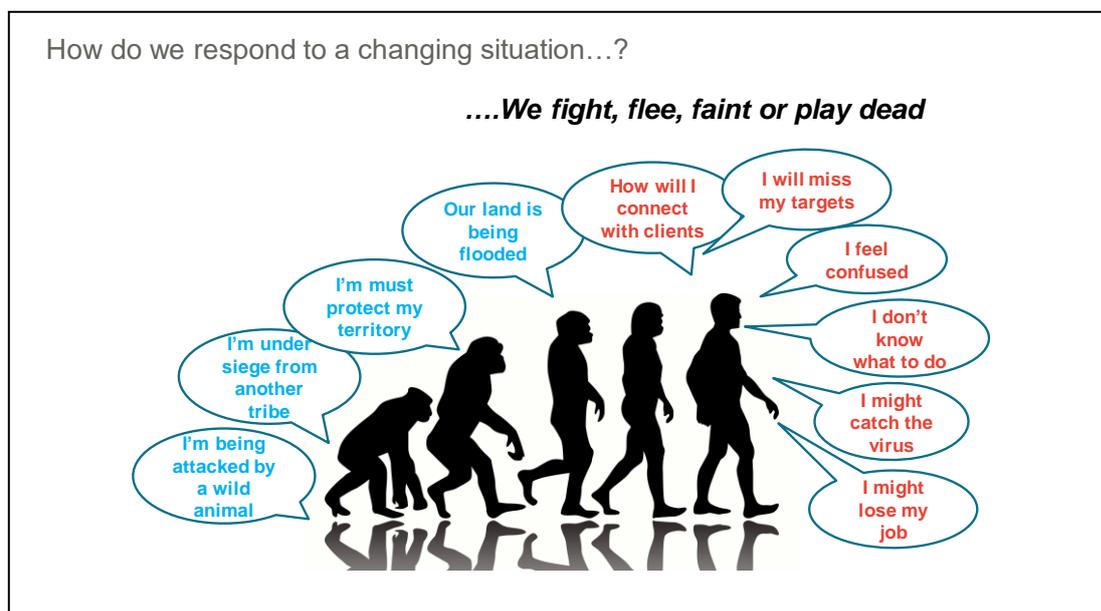
We all know the advisories around washing hands and social distancing by now and while these are all valid and critical for our health, little has been highlighted around why and how we minimise our emotional stress and anxiety. Of course, we are all worried but we need to all find ways to balance this with hope and a brighter future as we emerge from “lockdown”.

There is some inevitable risk to all us when we go shopping or venture outside and it is important to remind ourselves that worry reduces our immunity and increases the risk to catch it. We all need to find ways of managing this natural anxiety, that is only human and totally justified, so that we stay safe and healthy.

Step 1 – Staying Strong – Staying Aware

The problem many of us have in a crisis is that we allow our thoughts and emotions in the moment to drive our behaviour and actions, we all need to learn to let these thoughts and emotions pass until we rediscover our balance and poise.

Being human means that our brain has evolved to be both instinct driven as well as more rational driven. These can be in conflict. We should recognise that our human brains are wired to respond to shocks and threats in the same way – fight or flight. It is inherited from our ancestors, principally dealing with the basic challenges of survival. This could include sudden reactions to a threat such as sabre-toothed tiger or attack from another tribe.

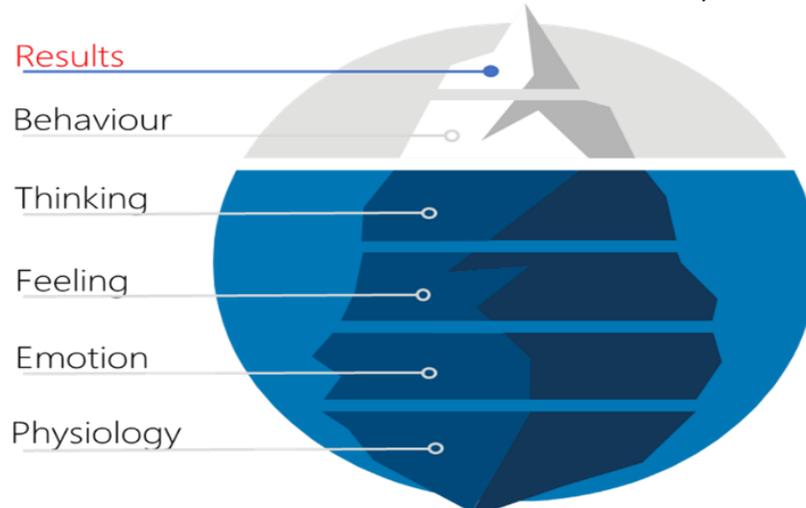


Right now it is the pandemic and the shock to our daily lives. This is a medical phenomenon known as the amygdala hijack and is part of the science behind the way we deal with uncertainty at an emotional level. We can relate to this as the “rabbit in headlights” moment when we freeze under pressure and cannot think clearly such as in an important presentation or meeting at work. We really can get stuck. This can go on for days, even weeks, if we are not careful.

Did you know we effectively have two brains – a fast intuitive one and a slower more rational one.

The more rational brain is a more recent evolution and is often suppressed under anxiety and uncertainty and our challenge is to “turn this brain back on” when anxiety and fear starts to get the better of us such with the pandemic thoughts and anxieties. The challenging is for us to not over-react to fear – hard when you are stuck with your primitive brain in over-drive.

It is worth highlighting that our brain normally operates “above the water line” as in the graphic below of the iceberg. We think about what we are doing in the moment, our behaviour and the results we want to achieve. This is our rational brain mainly in action.



When we experience shock, uncertainty or anxiety, our rational brain cannot “solve the problem” and our primitive emotional brain kicks in and generates a whole host of physiological symptoms, which we can observe such as a headache, tight chest, dry mouth etc. This can also lead to odd cravings, many unhealthy such as eating, drinking, etc..

Commonly, we do not even notice these symptoms before we are aware of our emotions and feelings about an event as we are still trying to rationalise or “solve” the situation. The risk is that we react to the physiological symptoms in a negative cycle that leads to greater confusion and potentially panic and more serious physiological symptoms. This is Catastrophisation, where our anxieties begin to run away with negative scenarios.

Being trapped in our homes with COVID-19 means that we might develop unusual coping behaviours which we can allow to become new habits that are hard to change once they become embedded. The challenge is to notice our thinking and emotions far more than in the past “to nip these bad habits in the bud”.

Step 1 Summary - Staying Strong – Staying Aware

- Start to notice your patterns of energy, appetites and desires through the day
- Are there some shifts from your previous routine when you worked in the office

For example, do you find that after watching the news about the latest coronavirus numbers around the world, you become more hungry and start to snack or maybe feel like a beer or something stronger ! Do you find yourself finding it hard to concentrate on work as you check the latest news update on social media or news feeds.

2. Building our Mental Resilience for Adversity

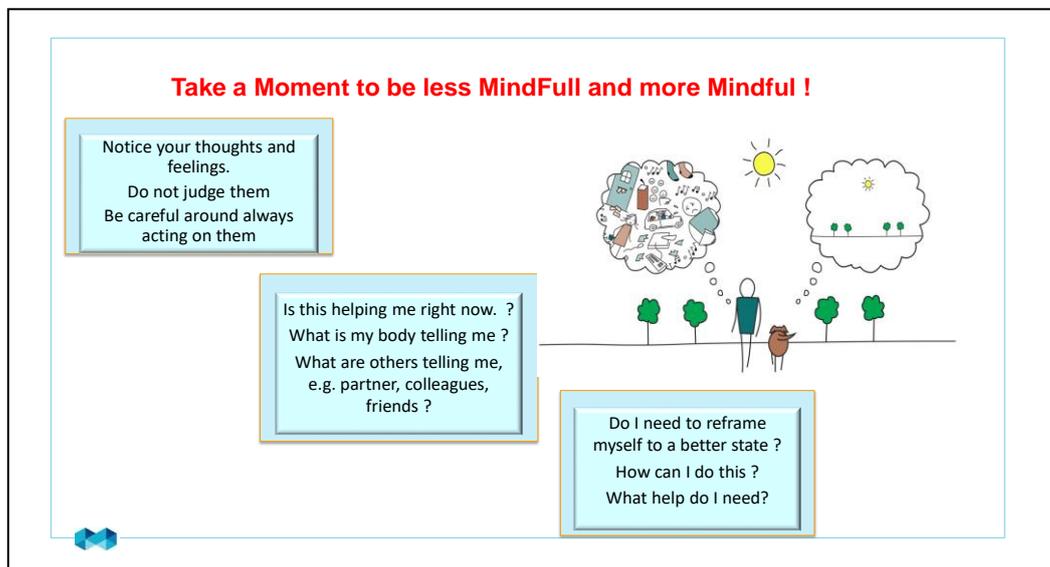
This section presents a holistic progression of building sustainable resilience through COVID-19 that can be applied to any major life event or unexpected event. It starts with short-term actions and progresses through to a philosophy of purpose and meaning in the long term to sustain us through the day to day setbacks that we all experience on the journey.

Step 2 - Staying Strong – Staying Mindful - Manage your Physiology

The newsfeeds are relentless, there seems to be hourly broadcasts from presidents, prime ministers and chief scientists all predicting the doom-laden scenario that we all face across the world for the months ahead. It is very easy to try to absorb more data in the belief that the more I know, the more I will be able to control and influence my future. It is a natural rational brain response.

However, staying mentally healthy requires us to notice our thoughts and emotions rather than acting on them and the best way to achieve this is to take enforced breaks, particularly when working from home, where there are often less distractions than the office. Ideally, taking a short walk outside and noticing nature or our environment around us can be a powerful way of stepping off the superhighway of thoughts. It can allow us to notice how our thinking might be becoming negative and how we can start to emotionally catastrophize without even realising it in terms of taking a negative perspective on events.

The more we create the discipline of mindful breaks during our days combined with sensible choices around lifestyle in terms of diet, exercise and sleep, the better we protect ourselves from the toxic thinking that can generate underlying stress from the uncertainty surrounding coronavirus.



While having breaks and noticing our thoughts are helpful, a proven method of helping to calm our minds is rhythmic breathing which involves finding a quiet place where we can focus on our breath for about 10 cycles over a few minutes, ideally with our eyes closed. This has proven benefits in reducing blood pressure, lowering cortisol and boosting serotonin if combined with positive visualisation where we imagine a calm, beautiful place where we feel most relaxed such as a location in holiday.

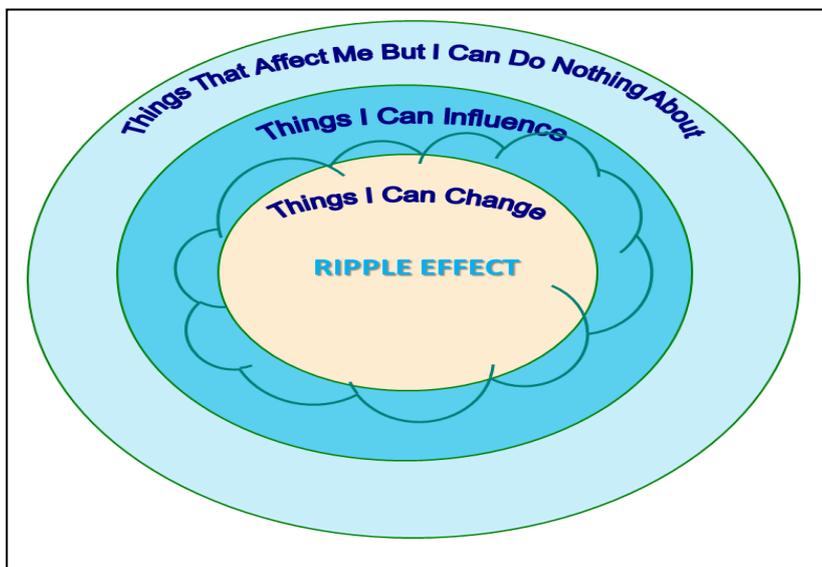
This may sound rather a stretch but now more than ever, we need to remind ourselves that coronavirus will not last forever and we will overcome it, despite all the current uncertainties. By developing habits to slow our thinking down, we can help manage our health and resilience in the short term and create greater mental toughness in the longer term.

Step 2 Summary - Staying Strong – Staying Mindful

- Take personal control of thinking during the day through use of mindfulness
- Practise the technique of rhythmic breathing when you notice yourself feeling frustrated and notice the physical effects of lower blood pressure, and be aware of the positive hormonal changes in your body.

Step 3 - Staying Strong – Staying Positive - Adopting a Growth Mindset

There are clearly frustrations for all of us in not being able connect personally with colleagues and clients during this period. It is easy to spend time frustrated at this new reality and exhaust energy and time staying updated on the increasing number of fatalities, the lack of ventilators and the possibility that hospitals will not be able to treat me if I fall seriously ill. However, this is an example of a fixed mind-set and feeding our anxieties. We can do little about this personally. It is far healthier to adopt a growth mind-set and focus our thoughts on what we control. A helpful exercise is to reflect on the topics on our mind currently and make a list of what we can control vs. what is outside our control.

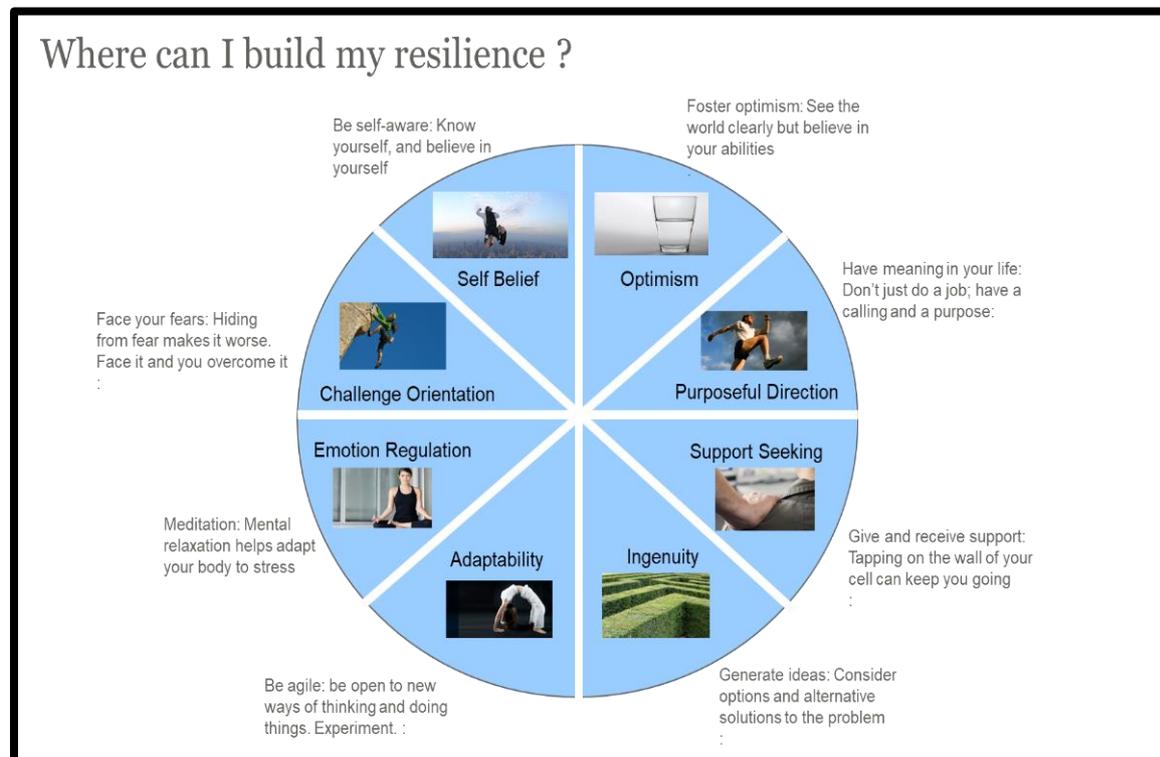


This can be helpful in reminding us to generate positive energy on the things within our control.

We will all eventually emerge from this pandemic and the world will be different. Extreme events change cultures, the first world war changed society and relationships between the rich and poor, and there is no doubt that the world will behave differently after this crisis. It may be that physical contact and connections directly between people will change but it is possible that the importance of personal relationships and empathy between people across all cultures and wealth brackets will change.

These ideas around mindfulness and growth mind-set are fine when we are in balanced state but when we find out a friend has become ill with coronavirus or we have to self-isolate ourselves or help a member of our family self-isolate, this can test our mental toughness and tip us into anxiety.

There are a few tips below that help us maintain our resilience through this challenging period ahead. Research has identified a number of different elements that can help build resilience.



As this pandemic plays out in the months ahead, there will be bumps along the way, there will be setbacks. We know much about soldiers in the world war and survivors of Auschwitz who overcame physical horror while maintaining their morality and belief in the human spirit and what made them different from those that were unable to cope.

While our situation is not so extreme, developing long-term mental toughness, or grit, as it is often known, is important to retain our optimism and positivity through this period. If we can identify our values and vision that gives us energy, hope and meaning in our lives, we can better tolerate the discomforts and frustrations of the next few months that we must endure. This is tough but can make a massive difference in our capacity to sustain ourselves through this uncertain time.

Step 3 - Summary - Staying Strong - Staying Positive

- Make a list of all the things you have been thinking about in the past 24 hours. Ask yourself to what degree you can control these.
- Reflect on all the things that have now changed in your life with COVID-19. This could include being at home, being more with your children and partner. Having more time from not commuting etc.
- How could you reframe the new reality to use the time differently such as an interest etc. that you would never had an opportunity in the past.

Step 4 - Staying Strong – Stay Supportive - Going Beyond yourself

We have all seen it in movies, but it really is true that helping others can help yourself. This crisis actually provides an opportunity to build closer relationships in many ways given the powerful emotions and anxieties that everyone will be experiencing around their colleagues, friends and families. We have the opportunity to ask people how they are feeling and support them the best we can. This will be a period in our lives we will look back around how we stood up to help friends, family and others in our community.

In many ways, one of the best ways to reduce our anxiety, boost our mental health is to consider and help others such as delivering food to the elderly who are unable to get out to the shops. There are risks in such selfless acts but provided we employ social distancing, they are minimal and acceptable.

The additional time that we now find ourselves can be used for new activities, reading, hobbies that we never have sufficient time to enjoy.

Of course, the lack of social contact with others is a significant issue for many, such as parents and friends with greater reliance on social media. However, we know that coronavirus is temporary. While several months seems a long time at present, once we accept this new reality and adjust to it, new opportunities and activities become available once we recognise what is within our control.

Step 4 - Summary - Staying Strong – Staying Supportive - Going Beyond yourself

- Think of others who need help and support rather than dwelling on your worries alone. This time more than ever is around looking to contribute to the community where you can.
- Reflect on stories of Italians singing from their balconies to help spread hope and energy, of 99 year old war veteran walking for many hours to raise millions of £ for the NHS. What can you do to contribute to others wellbeing ? This will actually help you with your mental health, especially when you are constrained being self-isolated to some degree at home.

Step 5 - Staying Strong – Staying Purposeful – Go Beyond your Limits

This will be a period that people may look back upon in years and decades to come and while it is natural and understandable to look inwards into our own mental and physical cave, this will not sustain our mental wellbeing or physical health. We need to have courage, to step outside ourselves, accept the uncertainty, embrace it as a new reality and not look backwards to the past we have now lost.

Your colleagues, clients and family will value your connection and your caring for their wellbeing and will remember this when finally we emerge from this dark period and into a brighter future that will eventually appear on the horizon. This is our moment to be the best version of ourselves.

This thought piece has been developed by Will Mitchell, Marsh & McLennan. It is part of a series developed by the author to help employees and managers foster resilience and is the personal views of the author.