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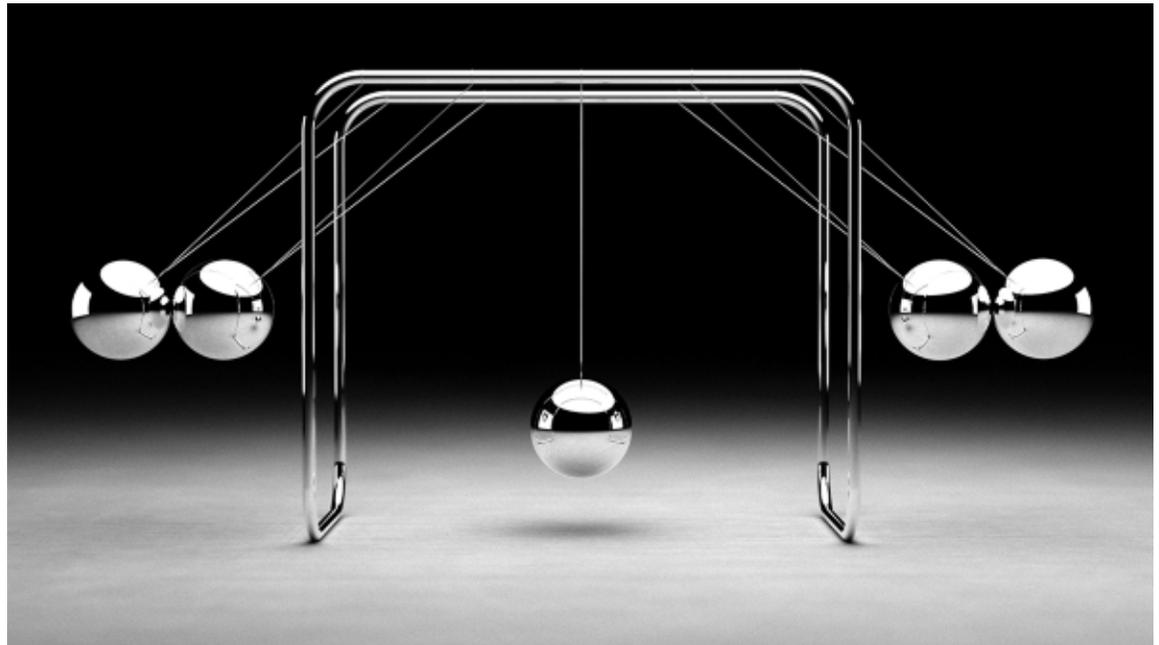
Build Your Resilience in the Face of a Crisis

*by Rasmus Hougaard, Jacqueline Carter and Moses
Mohan*

MANAGING YOURSELF

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CHAD BAKER/GETTY IMAGES

We've made our [coronavirus coverage](#) free for all readers.

As the spread and far-reaching impacts of Covid-19 dominate the world news, we have all been witnessing and experiencing the parallel spread of worry, anxiety, and instability. Indeed, in a crisis, our mental state often seems only to exacerbate an already extremely challenging situation, becoming a major obstacle in itself. Why is this and how can we change it? As the CEO of a firm that brings mindfulness to companies to unlock new ways of thinking and working, let me share a bit about how the mind responds to crises, like the threat of a pandemic.

Even without a constant barrage of bad or worrisome news, your mind's natural tendency is to get distracted. Our most recent study found that 58% of employees reported an inability to regulate their attention at work. As the mind wanders, research has shown that it easily gets trapped into patterns and [negative thinking](#). During times of crisis — such as those we are living through now — this tendency is exacerbated, and the mind can become even more hooked by obsessive thinking, as well as feelings of fear and helplessness. It's why we find ourselves reading story after horrible story of quarantined passengers on a cruise ship, even though we've never stepped foot on a cruise ship, nor do we plan to.

When your mind gets stuck in this state, a chain reaction begins. Fear begins to narrow your field of vision, and it becomes harder to see the bigger picture and the positive, creative possibilities in front of you. As perspective shrinks, so too does our tendency to connect with others. Right now, the realities of how the coronavirus spreads can play into our worst fears about others and increase our feelings of isolation, which only adds fuel to our worries.

Watching the past month's turmoil unfold, I have been reminded of the old Buddhist parable of the second arrow. The Buddha once asked a student: "If a person is struck by an arrow, is it painful? If the person is struck by a second arrow, is it even more painful?" He then went on to explain, "In life, we cannot always control the first arrow. However, the second arrow is our reaction to the first. And with this second arrow comes the possibility of choice."

We are all experiencing the first arrow of the coronavirus these days. We are impacted by travel restrictions, plummeting stock prices, supply shortages etc. But the second arrow — anxiety about getting the virus ourselves, worry that our loved ones will get it, worries about financial implications and all the other dark scenarios flooding the news and social media — is to a large extent of our own making. In short, the first arrow causes unavoidable pain, and our resistance to it creates fertile ground for all the second arrows.

It's important to remember that these second arrows — our emotional and psychological response to crises — are natural and very human. But the truth is they often bring us more suffering by narrowing and cluttering our mind and keeping us from seeing clearly the best course of action.

The way to overcome this natural tendency is to build our mental resilience through mindfulness. Mental resilience, especially in challenging times like the present, means managing our minds in a way that increases our ability to face the first arrow and to break the second before it strikes us. Resilience is the skill of noticing our own thoughts, unhooking from the non-constructive ones, and rebalancing quickly. This skill can be nurtured and trained. Here are three effective strategies:

First, calm the mind.

When you focus on calming and clearing your mind, you can pay attention to what is really going on around you and what is coming up within you. You can observe and manage your thoughts and catch them when they start to run away towards doomsday scenarios. You can hold your focus on

what you choose (e.g. “Isn’t it a gift to be able to work from home!”) versus what pulls at you with each ping of a breaking news notification (e.g. “Oh no...the stock market has dropped again.”).

This calm and present state is crucial. Right away, it helps keep the mind from wandering and getting hooked, and it reduces the pits of stress and worry that we can easily get stuck in. Even more importantly, the continued practice of unhooking and focusing our minds builds a muscle of resilience that will serve us time and time again. When we practice bringing ourselves back to the present moment, we deepen our capacity to cope and weather all sorts of crises, whether global or personal. (Fortunately, there are a number of [free apps](#) available to help calm your mind and increase your own mindfulness.)

Look out the window.

Despair and fear can lead to overreactions. Often, it feels better to be doing something ... anything ... rather than sitting with uncomfortable emotions. In the past few weeks, I have felt disappointment and frustration with important business initiatives that have been adversely impacted by Covid-19. But I have been trying to meet this frustration with reflection versus immediate reaction. I know my mind has needed space to unhook from the swirl of bad news and to settle into a more stable position from which good planning and leadership can emerge. So, I have been trying to work less and to spend more time looking out my window and reflecting. In doing so, I have been able to find clearer answers about how best to move forward, both personally and as a leader.

Connect with others through compassion.

Unfortunately, many of the circles of community that provide support in times of stress are now closed off to us as cities and governments work to contain the spread of the virus. Schools are shut down, events are cancelled, and businesses have enacted work-from-home policies and travel bans. The natural byproduct of this is a growing sense of isolation and separation from the people and groups who can best quell our fears and anxieties.

The present climate of fear can also create stigmas and judgments about who is to blame and who is to be avoided, along with a dark, survivalist “every person for him/herself” mindset and behaviors. We can easily forget our shared vulnerability and interdependence.

But meaningful connection can occur even from the recommended six feet of social distance between you and your neighbor — and it begins with compassion. Compassion is the intention to be of benefit to others and it starts in the mind. Practically speaking, compassion starts by asking yourself one question as you go about your day and connect — virtually and in person — with others: How can I help this person to have a better day?

With that simple question, amazing things begin to happen. The mind expands, the eyes open to who and what is really in front of us, and we see possibilities for ourselves and others that are rich with hope and ripe with opportunity.

Rasmus Hougaard is the founder and managing director of [Potential Project](#), a global leadership and organizational development firm serving Microsoft, Accenture, Cisco and hundreds of other organizations. He is publishing his second book [The Mind of the Leader – How to Lead Yourself, Your People and Your Organization for Extraordinary Results](#) with HBR Press in March 2018.

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