

Living in Perpetual Crisis: The Numbing of Anxiety and the Illusion of Resilience

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Abstract

The condition of perpetual crisis has redefined how societies experience anxiety and resilience. In a world where climate disasters, wars, and algorithm-driven outrage no longer interrupt normal life but constitute it, human psychology adapts in ways that blur the line between protection and surrender. This essay explores how constant exposure to crisis reshapes emotional habits: anxiety becomes background noise, compassion thins into a rationed response, and resilience is recast as individual tolerance rather than collective strength. Social media accelerates these shifts by widening the gap between emotional expression and structural consequence, leaving individuals overstimulated yet powerless. Case studies from climate discourse and geopolitical conflict reveal how outrage, humor, and ritual become coping mechanisms that regulate feeling without altering conditions. The essay argues that recovery requires reframing resilience as a collective practice grounded in institutions, strategy, and shared rituals of grief that convert emotion into leverage. By building structures that reduce baseline stress and channel feeling into action, societies can move beyond coping toward genuine repair, reclaiming both imagination and agency in the face of perpetual crisis.

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We no longer live in a world where crises interrupt the ordinary, because they are the ordinary. Climate disasters, wars streamed in real time, and the daily churn of algorithmic outrage create what Robert Jay Lifton called continuous precariousness. (*Freedom from Undue Influence*) Anxiety, once a helpful signal that something demanded attention, becomes a low hum that never shuts off. What we have been taught to celebrate as resilience now often functions as a mask for surrender. Under these conditions, our minds adapt in ways that feel like failure, a quiet slide from alarm to numbness, from grit to compliance, until what once felt urgent begins to feel inevitable.

Human neurobiology is built for short, sharp threats. (Grogans et al.) When danger arrives, arousal rises, and we mobilize. When the event ends, the system resets. Perpetual crisis denies us that reset. Repeated exposure to emergency signals produces habituation in the brain's alarm circuits. The result is not apathy but conservation. The mind protects itself by quieting its own alarms. That protective quiet is what people mistake for indifference when they notice themselves scrolling from scenes of bombardment to a pet video. Psychologists sometimes call this compassion collapse: the tendency to act less compassionately for multiple suffering victims (*Cameron 261*). It is not that the feeling is gone. It is rationed because the system is overdrawn.

Social media platforms amplify this problem. They translate moral shock into units that software can count. Every clip that spikes our pulse is also a lever for attention and a data point for advertisers. The interface favors immediacy, novelty, and repetition, which means the most distressing images travel the farthest. This economy rewards expression over endurance. We post,

repost, like, and share, each action accompanied by a tiny sense of relief. Variable rewards keep us returning, even when nothing in the world has changed. Over time, a gap opens between what we express and what we can affect. This can be understood as the agency gap. (*Fahlén 34*) On one side sits an archive of posts and petitions; on the other side lie policy, budget, and law. As the gap widens, the collective psyche copes by trimming hope to match experience. The emotion remains, but belief in consequence thins out.

The global response to the Israel–Gaza conflict shows how this cycle ritualizes itself. Each escalation cues the same sequence: a surge of atrocity images, thread-length histories, calls for boycotts or donations, then a drift back to the ordinary. The ritual provides a place to put terror and grief. It also creates the *feeling* of contributing to change. Yet when the structural drivers, such as militarized nationalism, unequal sovereignty, and the industry that profits from endless security remain, expression alone cannot move the hinges of power. The outrage becomes a form of emotional regulation. It helps us survive the news without making the news different. As Han writes in *The Burnout Society*, “Depression—which often culminates in burnout—follows from overexcited, overdriven, excessive self-reference that has assumed destructive traits”. (*Han*)

This exhaustion creates fertile ground for the modern rhetoric of resilience, once a measure of collective strength, now framed as an individual burden. In its original sense, resilience referred to a community’s capacity to withstand shock while protecting what it values. (*Mentges*) In practice, especially in corporate and educational settings, resilience has been recast as an individual virtue. Learn to breathe through it. Download an app. Adjust your mindset. None of these are bad. They are simply insufficient, and under conditions of perpetual crisis, they often redirect attention away from causes and toward personal tolerance. Chronic stress, a

consistent sense of feeling pressured and overwhelmed over a long period of time (“*Chronic Stress*”), then feeds learned helplessness, the expectation that effort will not alter outcomes. People still care, but they care with a ceiling. They donate while doubting that peace is possible. They recycle while assuming their city’s landfill will swallow the gesture. Resilience becomes the art of carrying on without the hope of repair.

The climate sphere displays the same pattern through tragic absurdism. Dark humor and collapse memes cushion dread and make it shareable. One meme, for example, shows a smiling woman posing in front of a burning tree, overlaid with the text “the worst thing that ever happened to me” and “me turning it into my best material.” In climate discourse, similar formats are repurposed to joke about wildfires or extreme heat waves, reframing disaster as a punchline. Humor is a wise coping tool, but here it has a side effect. By making catastrophe familiar, it lowers its status from emergency to ambience. When the end of the world becomes a style, urgency starts to feel unseemly. It is another version of the agency gap: feeling plenty, changing little.

If the problem is not simply that we feel too much, but that we feel without leverage, then the exit cannot be more self-control or more stoicism. The exit is to rebuild forms of collective action that convert emotion into consequence. That begins with shared meaning. Societies have always needed rituals to metabolize loss into commitment. Iceland’s funerals for glaciers are one example (Agence France-Presse). They mark what has vanished and publicly bind grief to responsibility. Similar practices could exist for neighborhoods lost to fire, for schools turned into shelters, for cease-fires that falter. Grief that is spoken together has a political afterlife, because it names what must no longer be normal.

Next comes scale. Individual action is not useless, but without institutions, it is lonely. Unions, mutual aid networks, city councils, campus coalitions, faith communities, and local media can narrow the agency gap because they hold resources and can negotiate with power. They also teach time. A petition is a day. A campaign is a year. A policy is a decade. Moving from expression to institution is slow work, which is why it rarely goes viral. It is also the only kind that reliably changes conditions.

Finally comes strategy. Outrage wants to do everything everywhere. Strategy only does a few things where they matter. In the context of Gaza, that might mean channeling support into coordinated legal challenges, targeted divestment, or pressure on specific procurement contracts rather than diffuse boycotts that burn energy without moving policy. In the context of climate, it might mean focusing on insurance regulation, public-utility oversight, and the liability of carbon majors rather than treating personal virtue as the main lever. Strategy is not the opposite of feeling. It is feeling with a map.

Reframing resilience follows naturally from this shift. Instead of praising the ability to withstand harm, we can prize the ability to reduce exposure to harm in the first place. That reframing moves resilience from private grit to public design. It asks less of the nervous system and more of the systems that make people nervous. When a city invests in shade, clean air, and reliable transit, it reduces the baseline stress that makes every new crisis unbearable. When a school teaches deliberation and organizing alongside mindfulness, it offers students a way to pair regulation with agency. The goal is not tougher citizens, but a kinder environment that requires less toughness.

Perpetual crisis has taken away more than a sense of safety. It has begun to shrink the imagination of safety itself. We can relearn it, but only if we refuse the false choices that have

kept us stuck: numb or hysterical, cynical or naive, grind through or give up. There is another path. Grieve together so that the pain has somewhere to go. Build institutions that can carry our weight. Aim our effort where levers exist. None of this is quick. But it is the opposite of resignation, a steady reclamation of our capacity to shape outcomes.

If we do not attempt this recovery, the social media feed and the 24-hour news cycles will keep training us to endure the unendurable. We will meet each new horror with a practiced spiral of expression, then return to a life arranged around coping. If we do attempt it, we give our emotions tasks they can complete. Anxiety becomes a compass rather than a fog. Resilience becomes the quiet confidence that comes from changing the conditions that once kept us braced. Only then does the background noise fade, not because we have stopped caring, but because the world has become less noisy.

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