

Living in Perpetual Crisis:
How Do Global Events Shape Our Anxiety and Resilience?

Siyuan Bao

August 21, 2025

Abstract

In a world increasingly defined by perpetual crises such as wars, pandemics, and climate disasters, individuals are continuously exposed to an atmosphere of uncertainty. This paper examines how global events influence experiences of anxiety and the development of resilience. Rather than occurring as isolated incidents, such crises contribute to a state of chronic psychological tension. Over time, anxiety evolves from a temporary reaction into a normal part of everyday life. Drawing on psychological concepts including vicarious trauma, chronic anxiety, and hypervigilance, this paper explains why individuals may remain in a state of heightened alertness even in the absence of immediate threat. However, anxiety is not solely harmful. It also motivates people to seek collective identities that offer meaning and stability. Social Identity Theory and Uncertainty-Identity Theory demonstrate how group membership can alleviate distress by providing clarity and a sense of belonging during threatening circumstances. Empirical evidence from clinical, social, and organizational contexts confirms that shared identity consistently enhances resilience. Belonging to a group turns feelings of vulnerability into strength, and helps us see anxiety not just as a threat, but as a signal that we need to adapt and connect with others. Ultimately, this paper argues that anxiety and resilience are not opposing phenomena, but interconnected responses. Living in a perpetual state of crisis necessitates learning to confront uncertainty collectively, and to rebuild not by eliminating anxiety, but by discovering resilience through it and within community.

Keywords: Anxiety, collective identity, resilience

Ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, extreme heatwaves throughout Europe, and repeated global pandemics like COVID-19 and mpox illustrate how global events increasingly define everyday reality. Though often geographically distant, these crises have wide-reaching psychological and social impacts, reshaping how people understand uncertainty and vulnerability. As these events continue to occur, individuals face not only physical uncertainty but also profound psychological dislocation. Globally, the number of people with anxiety disorders has gone up sharply, and the once-stable baseline of human resilience appears to be under siege. This demands a deeper inquiry into how people make sense of and cope with crisis. In this era defined by persistent global crises, psychologists are increasingly asking: In what ways do such events reshape our experience of anxiety, and reshape—or even redefine—our psychological capacity for resilience, forcing us to reconsider what it means to be mentally well in a world that may never return to stability. This paper takes up that challenge by arguing that global events simultaneously strain and stimulate psychological adaptation, reshaping both how individuals experience anxiety and how they construct resilience, and making the two interdependent responses in a world of perpetual crisis.

In an age of continuous crisis, anxiety is no longer just a short-term emotional reaction; it has become a lasting emotional climate shaped by global events. One way to understand this shift is through the concept of vicarious trauma, originally used to describe the unique, negative, and accumulative changes that can occur to clinicians who engage in an empathetic relationship with clients (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Today, in an era when the media is so advanced, this concept helps explain how media exposure to distant disasters allows ordinary people to emotionally absorb trauma from afar. As these exposures persist, anxiety gradually detaches from any specific event and becomes part of the emotional background of daily life.

Psychologists refer to this state as chronic anxiety: a state where anxiety is no longer driven by what is, but by what might be (Kerr, 1988). Unlike short-term stress, this form of anxiety can persist for a very long time and may not go away completely (Gupta, 2023). Because the next disaster always seems possible, the body and mind rarely return to calm. This persistent readiness fuels anticipatory anxiety, where people feel anxious not about the present, but the future, which is similar to chronic anxiety to some degree. As Dr. Stephanie Sarkis explains, this form of anxiety can take over day-to-day functioning (Huff, 2025), even in routine situations (Goodwin et al., 2023). This persistent anxiety can be partly explained by hypervigilance, which is a state of increased attention to perceived threat in one's environment (Grupe & Nitschke, 2013). In their study, Grupe and Nitschke found that under uncertainty, people with chronic or anticipatory anxiety display overactivation in the amygdala and anterior cingulate. This hypervigilance means that even small cues are treated as threats, keeping the brain on constant alert. In times of global crisis, such neural overactivation helps explain why individuals often remain emotionally tense, constantly expecting something to go wrong even when everything appears stable. Together, these processes form what Ben Anderson calls an affective atmosphere: a diffuse, background feeling that gradually shapes people's thought, emotion, and behavior (Anderson, 2009; Böhme, 2006).

But this emotional climate created by global events doesn't just heighten anxiety; it also reshapes how people understand and build resilience. When traditional coping strategies start to feel insufficient, individuals naturally look for new sources of emotional support.

One powerful way people have responded to emotional pressure is by turning to collective identities, which help reduce isolation and enhance a sense of control during uncertainty. Many studies have shown that during times of global crisis, especially when

triggered by major global events, people tend to feel a stronger sense of group belonging. One recent example comes from a large panel study in England, which tracked how people's social identities changed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Stevens et al., 2023). Surveying over 5,000 people, the study found that nearly all identities increased in importance, with national identities such as "Britishness" and "Englishness" showing the strongest growth. This shows that in moments of threat and uncertainty, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, people actively seek collective identities not only to manage fear and anxiety but also to restore meaning. The fact that many different identities rose together simultaneously suggests a deeper emotional need: a general increase in what is called "groupiness" (Stenner, 2005), which is the psychological need to connect with others through a shared identity to cope with anxiety.

According to Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory, people join groups to enhance or protect their self-image, particularly under uncertainty or threat, as individuals strive to achieve or to maintain positive social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 2004)—a concept rooted in the emotional significance of group membership. When anxiety becomes a background emotion, people are drawn to groups because they offer clarity and shared meaning.

Building on this theoretical foundation, experimental evidence makes the buffering role of group identification even more convincing. Hogg et al. (2007) conducted two studies that directly tested how self-uncertainty affects group attachment. Both studies experimentally manipulated self-uncertainty (high vs. low) and either measured the perceived entitativity of participants' political party or manipulated the perceived entitativity of their ad hoc lab group. In both cases, participants identified significantly more strongly when they were uncertain and their group was highly entitative. This suggests that individuals under emotional pressure are drawn to groups that offer order and clarity, because these groups help them manage their feelings of

unpredictability. In fact, later studies also found that uncertainty can even increase how cohesive people perceive their group to be, especially if they are already a member (Sherman et al., 2009). Collectively, these experiments confirm that uncertainty motivates individuals to seek cohesive groups for emotional stability—a core principle of Uncertainty-Identity Theory (Hogg, 2000, 2007a, 2012).

Therefore, in an age of chronic anxiety, collective identification is not just about connection—it's about stability. Once internalized, it not only soothes but also strengthens, reshaping how people respond to future stress and providing both short-term relief and long-term resilience. Evidence across clinical, social, and organizational settings shows that shared identity consistently builds resilience, enabling people to withstand crises and adapt over time.

In clinical contexts, Cruwys et al. (2014) demonstrated that group-based interventions for depression worked best when participants strongly identified with their community or therapy groups, reducing symptoms like social withdrawal and loss of meaning—clear signs of enhanced long-term resilience. Beyond therapy, even everyday reminders matter: Jones and Jetten (2011) found that simply reminding people of group memberships boosted stress-handling and pain-tolerance abilities, showing that group bonds build lasting inner strength. Together with this, Sippel et al. (2015) found that social support tied to group identification buffered the long-term effects of trauma. For veterans, high social support lowers PTSD risk after severe trauma (Boscarino, 1995; Pietrzak & Cook, 2013), highlighting long-term protection from strong group ties. In wider social settings, group belonging also proves crucial: in mass emergencies, it provides recovery-crucial solidarity and coordinated action (Drury et al., 2009). The same principle extends into organizational life, where strong identification with one's workplace helps employees better manage stress, reduce strain, and boost resilience (van Dick et al., 2008).

Finally, identity-based protection also appears in the rebuilding of meaning after disruption: after trauma, group membership offers continuity and purpose. War survivors reconnecting with group values aid healing (Kellezi et al., 2008), and care-home elders forming new group identities through shared activities gain well-being and resilience (Haslam et al., 2010). Across these diverse contexts, shared identity emerges as a consistent source of resilience, showing how group bonds help people adapt in a world of perpetual crisis.

In conclusion, living in a time of ongoing crises means we can no longer treat anxiety and resilience as completely separate things. Global events, from wars to pandemics, have turned anxiety into a kind of constant background feeling that affects how we deal with uncertainty. But these challenges also encourage people to look for connection and shared identity, changing anxiety from just a feeling of fear into a signal that we need each other. As this paper has discussed, being part of a group helps people turn emotional stress into stability and even personal growth. This shows that being resilient does not mean having no anxiety—it means learning to live with it and still function. In today's world, adapting well doesn't require getting rid of fear entirely, but rather finding ways to manage it, and even drawing strength from it when moving forward together. Ultimately, resilience is not only built inside oneself but also built through communities and culture, reminding us that in a world that doesn't seem to calm down, mental well-being is not about having no anxiety, but about our collective ability to keep going and adjust together.

References

- Anderson, B. (2009). Affective atmospheres. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 2(2), 77–81.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2009.08.005>
- Boscarino, J. A. (1995). Post-Traumatic stress and associated disorders among Vietnam veterans: The significance of combat exposure and social support. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 8(2), 317–336. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.2490080211>
- Böhme, Gernot. (2006). Atmosphere as the subject matter of architecture. In *Herzog & de Meuron: Natural history* (pp. 398–407). essay, Lars Muller.
- Cruwys, T., Alexander Haslam, S., Dingle, G. A., Jetten, J., Hornsey, M. J., Desdemona Chong, E. M., & Oei, T. P. S. (2014). Feeling connected again: Interventions that increase social identification reduce depression symptoms in community and clinical settings. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 159, 139–146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2014.02.019>
- Drury, J., Cocking, C., Reicher, S., Burton, A., Schofield, D., Hardwick, A., Graham, D., & Langston, P. (2009). Cooperation versus competition in a mass emergency evacuation: A new laboratory simulation and a new theoretical model. *Behavior Research Methods*, 41(3), 957–970. <https://doi.org/10.3758/brm.41.3.957>
- Goodwin, B., Anderson, L., Collins, K., Sanjida, S., Riba, M., Singh, G. K., Campbell, K. M., Green, H., Ishaque, S., Kwok, A., Opozda, M. J., Pearn, A., Shaw, J., Sansom-Daly, U. M., Tsirgiotis, J. M., Janda, M., & Grech, L. (2023). Anticipatory anxiety and participation in cancer screening. A systematic review. *Psycho-Oncology*, 32(12), 1773–1786. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pon.6238>

Grupe, D. W., & Nitschke, J. B. (2013). Uncertainty and anticipation in anxiety: An integrated neurobiological and psychological perspective. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, *14*(7), 488–501. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn3524>

Gupta, S. (2023, November 30). *What is chronic anxiety?*. Verywell Mind.
<https://www.verywellmind.com/chronic-anxiety-symptoms-causes-and-treatment-5272111>

Haslam, C., Haslam, S. A., Jetten, J., Bevens, A., Ravenscroft, S., & Tonks, J. (2010). The social treatment: The benefits of group interventions in residential care settings. *Psychology and Aging*, *25*(1), 157–167. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018256>

Hogg, M. A. (2000). Subjective uncertainty reduction through self-categorization: A motivational theory of social identity processes. *European Review of Social Psychology*, *11*(1), 223–255. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14792772043000040>

Hogg, M. A. (2007). Uncertainty–identity theory. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 69–126. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0065-2601\(06\)39002-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0065-2601(06)39002-8)

Hogg, M. A. (2012). Uncertainty-identity theory. In P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of social psychology* (pp. 62–80). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. doi: 10.4135/9781446249222

Hogg, M. A., Sherman, D. K., Dierselhuis, J., Maitner, A. T., & Moffitt, G. (2007). Uncertainty, entitativity, and group identification. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *43*(1), 135–142. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2005.12.008>

- Huff, C. (2025, June 1). *Understanding anticipatory anxiety during key life transitions*. Monitor on psychology. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2025/06/anticipatory-anxiety>
- Jones, J. M., & Jetten, J. (2011). Recovering from strain and enduring pain. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2(3), 239–244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550610386806>
- Kellezi, B., Reicher, S., & Cassidy, C. (2008). Surviving the Kosovo Conflict: A Study of social identity, appraisal of extreme events, and mental well-being. *Applied Psychology*, 58(1), 59–83. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.2008.00382.x>
- Kerr, M. E. (1988). *Chronic anxiety and defining a self*. Kerr, Michael E.
- McCann, I. L., & Pearlman, L. A. (1990). Vicarious traumatization: A framework for understanding the psychological effects of working with victims. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 3(1), 131–149. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00975140>
- Pietrzak, R. H., & Cook, J. M. (2013). Psychological resilience in older U.S. veterans: Results from the National Health and Resilience in veterans study. *Depression and Anxiety*, 30(5), 432–443. <https://doi.org/10.1002/da.22083>
- Sherman, D. K., Hogg, M. A., & Maitner, A. T. (2009). Perceived polarization: Reconciling ingroup and intergroup perceptions under uncertainty. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 12(1), 95–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430208098779>
- Sippel, L. M., Pietrzak, R. H., Charney, D. S., Mayes, L. C., & Southwick, S. M. (2015). How does social support enhance resilience in the trauma-exposed individual? *Ecology and Society*, 20(4). <https://doi.org/10.5751/es-07832-200410>

Stenner, K. (2005). *The authoritarian dynamic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511614712>

Stevens, D., Banducci, S., & Horvath, L. (2023). Identities in flux? national and other changing identities during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 5.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2023.1268573>

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (2004). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. *Political Psychology*, 276–293. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203505984-16>

van Dick, R., van Knippenberg, D., Kerschreiter, R., Hertel, G., & Wieseke, J. (2008).

Interactive effects of Work Group and organizational identification on job satisfaction and extra-role behavior. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 72(3), 388–399.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2007.11.009>