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

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Abstract

The 21st century is marked by recurring global crises that challenge psychological adaptation. While human neurobiology evolved to manage acute threats, constant exposure to large-scale events, intensified by digital media, creates persistent states of anxiety. Drawing on Lazarus’ Cognitive Appraisal Theory, this paper examines how imbalances between perceived threats and coping resources produce distress, often manifesting as learned helplessness or vicarious trauma. At the same time, crises also activate resilience: studies of post-traumatic growth reveal multiple adaptation trajectories, influenced by cultural and biological factors. Neuroscientific research further shows that autonomic plasticity allows stress responses to be recalibrated through mindfulness, controlled breathing, and biofeedback. Practical strategies—including the 4-7-8 breathing technique, moderated media use, and lifestyle habits like exercise and nature engagement—offer ways to reduce anxiety and enhance resilience. Ultimately, cultivating balanced awareness of crises is essential for maintaining mental health and enabling societies to adapt constructively in an era of uncertainty.

*Introduction*

The 21st century is increasingly described as an “age of perpetual crisis.” From the COVID-19 pandemic and wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, to escalating climate disasters and economic uncertainty, humanity faces challenges that are interconnected and global in scale. These overlapping disruptions have created not only material risks but also psychological burdens. Unlike in the past, when many crises were localized, today’s rapid communication technologies allow people across the globe to witness events in real time. This interconnectedness has dramatically reshaped the way humans experience crisis.

Yet, while technology has accelerated awareness, the human brain has not significantly changed from its evolutionary wiring. This mismatch between the nature of modern crises and the evolutionary design of the nervous system leaves many people struggling with anxiety, helplessness, and stress-related disorders (“The Psychology of Panic Buying”). This paper aims to examine how global crises generate anxiety, analyze how resilience is shaped and sustained in the face of such events, and explore strategies individuals and societies can employ to alleviate the mental toll of crisis-driven life.

*How Global Events Cause Anxiety*

Global crises affect psychological well-being in diverse ways. Richard Lazarus’s Cognitive Appraisal Theory is central to understanding these effects. According to Lazarus, emotions are not directly caused by external events but rather by how individuals interpret those events. Anxiety arises when there is an imbalance between primary appraisal—how threatening an event is perceived to be—and secondary appraisal—how well a person believes they can cope with it (Murphy). When the perceived threat exceeds the perceived ability to cope, anxiety manifests.

This framework helps explain why events such as climate change can generate high levels of distress, even among individuals not immediately impacted. If climate change is cognitively appraised as an uncontrollable threat, it can lead to learned helplessness, where individuals believe no action will make a difference. Lau et al. note that among young people worldwide, exposure to catastrophic climate narratives correlates strongly with increased psychological distress and reduced motivation to engage in constructive action (e370). In this sense, anxiety is not only an individual emotional response but also a barrier to collective problem-solving.

Pandemics provide another example. During the COVID-19 crisis, many individuals felt acute uncertainty regarding health and social stability. Daily reports of infection rates and deaths, amplified through digital media, triggered widespread fear. However, people who perceived themselves as capable of adopting protective measures—such as wearing masks, practicing hygiene, or receiving vaccinations—reported lower levels of anxiety than those who felt powerless. This supports Lazarus’ emphasis on balancing threat appraisal and coping resources.

Armed conflicts and terrorism add a further layer of psychological strain. Even for individuals thousands of miles away, media exposure to images of war can activate the fight-or-flight response. The Cleveland Clinic explains that this response, controlled by the sympathetic nervous system, primes the body for immediate action by increasing heart rate, releasing adrenaline, and sharpening focus (“What Happens during Fight or Flight Response”). However, in situations where no immediate action can be taken—such as watching war coverage—this state of hyperarousal becomes maladaptive, producing anxiety, sleep disturbances, and a sense of persistent dread.

This process is known as vicarious trauma. It occurs when individuals internalize the suffering of others through repeated exposure to traumatic stories or images. The brain responds as though the threat is personal, activating memory pathways associated with survival. Over time, this sympathetic identification can cause chronic anxiety and intrusive thoughts. The experience of vicarious trauma demonstrates how global events, even those not directly affecting one’s life, can trigger profound psychological consequences simply through mediated exposure.

*The Shaping of Individual Resilience by Global Events*

While crises unquestionably provoke anxiety, they also stimulate the human capacity for adaptation. Once thought of as a fixed trait, resilience is now widely understood as a dynamic process that evolves through exposure to stress. Studies of the Post-Traumatic Growth Trajectory Model illustrate this complexity. Bonanno identifies four major patterns: the majority (55–65%) of individuals display resilience-dominant responses, maintaining stability through emotional regulation strategies; 15–20% show recovery responses, improving gradually after an initial period of distress; 10–15% suffer from chronic dysfunction, remaining in a state of psychological impairment; and 5–8% experience delayed trauma, initially appearing stable but later developing distress (Bonanno, Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience 22).

Cultural differences play an important role in shaping these trajectories. Bonanno’s later work shows that East Asian populations have higher rates of delayed-response adaptation, reaching nearly 20% compared to lower rates in Western populations (“Resilience to Potential Trauma” 668). This difference is partially explained by collectivist cultural norms that discourage immediate emotional expression, delaying the outward manifestation of distress. From an evolutionary standpoint, such suppression may serve as a buffer, allowing time for individuals to process uncertainty without destabilizing social cohesion. However, the cost is often a delayed emergence of trauma symptoms.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided real-world evidence of these adaptation trajectories. While some individuals quickly developed resilience by establishing new routines, engaging in digital socialization, or practicing mindfulness, others struggled with prolonged isolation and uncertainty. In collectivist cultures, outward expressions of distress were minimized, yet later surveys revealed higher rates of delayed psychological symptoms, such as anxiety and depression. These findings underscore the need to view resilience as a fluid, culturally mediated process rather than a uniform human capacity.

At the biological level, resilience is closely tied to the theory of autonomic plasticity. This theory suggests that the autonomic nervous system, which regulates responses to stress, is not static but can be strengthened and refined through intentional practices. Porges’ polyvagal theory demonstrates that increasing vagal tone through mindfulness, breathing techniques, or biofeedback can shift stress responses from indiscriminate fear reactions to more nuanced threat recognition (Porges 120). In other words, the primitive “fight-or-flight” system can be “upgraded” into a more sophisticated mechanism of stress regulation, akin to turning a basic alarm system into a smart security device.

*Easing the Emotional Impact of Global Events*

Given the inevitability of global crises, the challenge lies not in preventing exposure but in managing its emotional impact. Psychological and behavioral strategies offer practical pathways for individuals and communities.

One effective tool is the 4-7-8 breathing method. By inhaling for four seconds, holding the breath for seven, and exhaling for eight, individuals can slow their heart rate, increase vagal activation, and shift regulation from the amygdala to the prefrontal cortex, fostering calm and cognitive clarity (Gotter). Simple as it is, this practice offers a physiological counterbalance to chronic anxiety.

Mindfulness and meditation also provide powerful buffers. By training their attention to remain in the present, individuals reduce ruminations about hypothetical crises. Studies show that mindfulness enhances emotional regulation, lowers cortisol levels, and strengthens parasympathetic responses, making it a highly effective resilience practice during times of uncertainty.

Media consumption habits play an equally critical role. Research by Lau et al. demonstrates that individuals who consume excessive crisis-related media are more likely to develop vicarious trauma and anxiety symptoms (e370). Limiting exposure to catastrophic reporting, while intentionally seeking solution-oriented content, can reduce distress. For example, news outlets that pair coverage of climate disasters with discussions of renewable energy adoption help shift appraisal from uncontrollable threat to manageable challenge.

Beyond individual practices, community and institutional responses are crucial. Schools can integrate resilience training into curricula, teaching students stress management techniques alongside academic content. Workplaces can normalize mental health days and provide access to counseling services. Governments can invest in public awareness campaigns that frame crises as dangers and opportunities for collective action. These systemic measures expand coping resources, making secondary appraisals more favorable and reducing the gap between threat and perceived control.

Lifestyle strategies also contribute significantly. Exercise, hiking, music, and creative activities activate reward pathways in the brain, offsetting anxiety and fostering positive emotions. Social connectedness is another decisive protective factor: communities emphasizing solidarity and mutual support tend to recover more quickly from crises. Combining individual coping techniques and social support structures creates a multi-layered resilience framework capable of withstanding repeated stressors.

*Conclusion*

The modern era confronts humanity with crises of unprecedented scope and frequency. These crises profoundly affect psychological well-being, challenging a nervous system that evolved for short-term dangers rather than continuous global threats. Frameworks such as Cognitive Appraisal Theory make it clear how global events, amplified by the media, generate anxiety and helplessness. Yet resilience research demonstrates that individuals and communities are not passive crisis victims. Human beings can grow even in adversity through neural recalibration, cultural adaptation, and intentional practices.

Ultimately, the key lies in balance. Awareness of global events is necessary for informed citizenship and collective action, yet unmoderated exposure can erode mental health. Individuals, communities, and institutions must adopt strategies that cultivate resilience without diminishing engagement. Society can navigate an uncertain future with clarity and strength by strengthening coping resources, regulating stress responses, and reframing crises as threats and opportunities. The task of the present generation is not merely to survive crises but to adapt in ways that preserve both mental health and collective progress.

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