

Living in a perpetual crisis: How global disasters shape our anxiety and resilience

Abstract

Crisis is often imagined as sudden, extraordinary events that immediately spark conversations worldwide. However, not all global crises arrive with breaking news banners. The quieter ones are often overlooked in the fabric of our daily lives. This essay argues that the slow-burning crises of digital misinformation and economic uncertainty generate a unique form of chronic anxiety, exhaustion of cognitive resources and rising senses of helplessness. Drawing on psychological frameworks, this essay identifies two global crises: first, the “crisis of truth” exploits cognitive biases and erodes our perception of reality; second, economic precarity triggers anticipatory anxiety and learned helplessness. After “diagnosing” the crisis, this essay proposes and analyzes “adaptive resilience” as possible “solutions”: collective coping through online communities, problem- and emotion-focused strategies in the face of financial instability, and the gradual inoculation that comes from enduring stress over time. Ultimately, to live in perpetual, insidious crisis means to constantly recalibrate one's mind between fear and adaptation, forging a new psychology of endurance.

Introduction

Amid pandemics and climate catastrophes that capture the attention of the world, the psychologically most defining two crises of our time are silent: first, the erosion of objective reality in a digital world where falsehoods spread more quickly than truth; second, a pervasive economic insecurity fueled by job insecurity, unaffordable housing, and taxation. These ongoing crises are no less massive than the disasters (like pandemic and wild fires) that come with loud bangs and sudden sounds of sirens: they are creating a murmur of existential uncertainty that habituates itself in its chronic shaping of our mental weather. Such crises bear consequences for our psychological well-being in ways both insidious and accumulative: As a reactionary

to misinformation, people endure cognitive dissonance and intolerance of uncertainty; in the face of financial precarious, on the other hand, people internalize anticipatory anxiety and learned helplessness.

On a brighter note, amidst these pressures, we are also developing cognitive and emotional coping strategies. This essay contends that chronic crises necessitate a unique adjustment in behavior that would ultimately reshape our resilience. Through collective sense-making, improved digital literacies, and a strategic turn towards emotion-focused coping, we are reassured that we have the tools to manage our anxiety and fully reposition ourselves to navigate these increasingly unstable worlds.

The Architecture of Anxiety: Cognitive Toll of a Perpetual Crisis

The Crisis of Truth and Cognitive Exhaustion

The digital ecosystem has developed and evolved drastically throughout the years, and although it has brought us more convenience, it has also instigated a “crisis of truth.” Especially with AI-generated content becoming more prominent, the bar of creating and spreading misinformation has lowered extensively. This environment functions as a persistent stressor, relentlessly taxing our mental resources. The first immediate consequence of this “crisis of truth” concerns the psychological concept of **cognitive load**, which states that our working memory has a finite capacity (Sweller, 1988): when it becomes harder to ensure the credibility of information, we put more burdens on our cognitive loads to harness extra vigilance and attention towards data evaluation; the cognitive exhaustion that comes as a result would eventually impair our decision making abilities (Pennycook & Rand, 2021). Another immediate consequence of this exhaustion is **attentional bias**, the innate human tendency to bypass critical reasoning and prioritize threatening information. It is precisely by taking advantage of this bias, that ill-intentioned people would spread misinformation, using eye-catching headlines, proactive imagery and conflict-inducing titles. As our

cognitive loads and attentional bias come to be over-exploited under this digital ecosystem, a vicious cycle between misinformation and anxiety would arise.

In the long run, false information may continue to affect the brain even after proven false or uncertain. According to the **continued influence effect**, outdated and incorrect information affects a person's beliefs despite correction, because it is already encoded in memory and prone to reactivation (Lewandowski et al., 2012).

This creates a lingering sense of doubt and uncertainty, making it difficult to establish a stable understanding of information. In modern days, AI-generated media that generates increasingly convincing claims and fake evidence presents an even bigger threat by attacking **reality monitoring**, the cognitive process of distinguishing memories of real events from imagined ones (Johnson et al., 1993). When fabricated videos and audios become indistinguishable from reality, the difficulty to trust in any media would eventually undermine the very foundation of our shared online experience.

The Crisis of Economic Precarity and Anticipatory Anxiety

If misinformation unsettles our senses of reality in the present, economic insecurity unsettles our senses of the future. In a world governed by economic circumstances, we face multiple challenges, ranging from unaffordable housing to increasingly competitive job markets that favor automation over human labor. The psychological impact of this environment is often less about immediate hardships and more about the constant dread of collapse in the future – a state known as **anticipatory anxiety** (Grupe & Nitschke, 2013). This is the anxiety of "what ifs": what if my work is replaced by a machine? What if I cannot afford housing and have to move from one place to another? This chronic tension keeps the body's stress response system subtly but persistently activated, leading to long-term stress and adverse health outcomes (McEwen, 1998).

The sense of powerless against vast, inscrutable economic forces can lead to the development of an **external locus of control**, a psychological belief that one's life events and outcomes are determined by external factors – chance, algorithms and patterns – instead of personal efforts and decisions. If this mindset continues in the long term, it can shape **learned helplessness**, where individuals begin believing their actions and efforts are futile and hence cease trying for better circumstances all together (Seligman, 1972). Learned helplessness is known to be directly associated with mental illnesses such as depression, leading people down spiraling pits of mental illness (Maier & Seligman, 1976).

On the flip side, society often imposes a narrative that “success is solely the product of individual merit.” When people's experienced reality of life barriers and economic fluctuation conflicts with the meritocracy and individualism in grand narratives, people experience mental discomfort known as “**cognitive dissonance**,” generating intense internal shame, stress and anxiety.

The Narrative of Resilience: Adapting to the Unending

Cognitive Adaptations: Building Mental Immunity

In response to the relentless onslaught of online misinformation, individuals and communities are not passive victims. Instead, we are developing the skillset to go into “combat.” The adaptation is evident in the rise of **digital literacy**: the ability to critically evaluate digital media, identify biases and dig deep into the motives and algorithms behind content to better see through fabricated information (Buckingham, 2019). This is a prime demonstration of **problem-focused coping**, a form of coping that involves directly addressing the stressor itself in a situation and actively taking action to eliminate that stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). By increasing digital

literacy, individuals are essentially training themselves to debunk misinformation and reduce the likelihood to be affected thereby. The rise of digital literacy is not a solitary effort—in recent years, dedicated online communities (e.g. “debunker” groups on social platforms) demonstrate collective efforts, where people collaborate to analyze and contextualize information and rebuilt a safe, evidence-based reality (Weick, 1995). These efforts represent growth and resilience, where adversity leads to new strengths and a renewed appreciation for critical thinking and verification (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Socio-Emotional Adaptations: The Shift to Community

Since systemic economic issues cannot be solved by individual action, we built resilience by making a strategic shift in coping strategies. When problem-focused coping is ineffective or practically impossible, **emotion-focused coping** becomes essential for managing emotional distress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This is not a sign of defeat, but that of context-based adaptability. We see demonstrations of emotion-focused coping in the growth of online and offline mutual aid networks, where communities invest resources to address material needs like food and housing, mitigating feelings of isolation and helplessness (Spade, 2020). Furthermore, cultural movements that challenge the core narrative of the crisis—such as “quiet quitting” or “anti-hustle culture”—represent a powerful form of resilience. By rejecting the forceful link between personal worth and productive labor, by redefining success around well-being and community, individuals reconstruct and reconceptualize reality, reducing the cognitive dissonance and anxiety generated by economic precarity (Hoffman, 2021).

Conclusion

The recurring crises of misinformation and economic precarity are not temporary conditions, but the silent waves beneath the surface of the present day, forging a psychological landscape of cognitive exhaustion and anticipatory anxiety. However,

the human response can only be that of a living, growing system, and of a resistance in refusing to be defeated. Such resilience does not necessarily signify the end to these crises, but in making ourselves tough enough to endure them, sharp enough to distinguish them, and supported enough to recover from them, we are building up our “cognitive immune system” with our minds, gaining agency in our communities, and revaluing our own worth. We will continue negotiating between anxiety and adjustment, and in the Time of Endless Global Crisis, the capacity to learn, connect, and cope is not just present. It is improving.

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