

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

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## **Abstract**

A perpetual crisis has plagued the entire world, inducing varying degrees of anxiety in populations across the globe. Strengthening psychological resilience is evident and necessary in this endless state of crisis. By drawing on psychological theories, this essay highlights how anxiety and resilience are shaped through the experience of crises. It demonstrates how critical situations result in hypervigilance, hopelessness and uncertainty, which fuel anxiety. It also suggests that facing challenging crises can both shape and strengthen our resilience, while simultaneously eroding it. The discussion highlights the importance of examining the psychological effects of crises on individuals to develop effective coping mechanisms and resilience-building strategies.

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

Since time immemorial, epidemics and wars have been characterized by an epidemic of fear and war on mental health. We live in an era of perpetual crisis, but humankind's adaptability has never been inferior to the unceasing trials and tribulations that existence throws at it.

Perpetual crisis for our generation is not short of specifications. The term is popularly associated with climate change, terrorism, political and economic instability, violent crimes, wars, and pandemics, but is not limited to these issues. According to Luthar et al. (2000), resilience is a dynamic process involving adaptation in the face of adversity. Due to the uncertain and disruptive character of change, it is perceived as a threat by the human mind, and resilience-building relies on it. As the cognitive dissonance theory by Festinger (1957) suggests, when a change forces an individual to reevaluate their beliefs, it leads to discomfort and, consequently, resistance to the change. Whereas uncertainty results in the loss of a sense of control, forcing people to uncover ways to reduce it. This essay will examine how an incessant global crisis impacts the human mind, encompassing the crisis's tendency to heighten anxiety and to foster psychological resilience.

According to the American Psychological Association (n.d.), "Anxiety is an emotion characterized by apprehension and somatic symptoms of tension in which an individual anticipates impending danger, catastrophe, or misfortune." It is considered to be one of the most widespread and universal emotions. Crisis strikes anxiety and insecurity in people all around the world, even when the concentration of the predicament is in a limited area. Those directly affected by the crisis are undeniably the most prone to surges of anxiety. Individuals and communities feel hopeless, lost, and anxious during pandemics (Levin, 2019). Crises often result in mass psychological trauma, which interferes with the working of the three higher-order functional networks of our brain. It leads to an overactive salience network (SN) and the inability of the default mode network (DMN) to regulate the overactivity (Williams et

al., 2006; Felmingham et al., 2007; Admon et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2013; Rabellino et al., 2018). This triggers hypervigilance. Hypervigilance is described as being “carefully watchful for possible danger or difficulties to an excessive degree,” leading to “a lack of normal integration of thoughts, feelings, and experiences into the stream of consciousness and memory” (Bernstein and Putnam, 1986, p. 727). People affected by hypervigilance are constantly in high anxiety and become apprehensive of things they once believed to be safe. Their mental tolerance narrows, and they are easily forced into the fight, flight, or freeze mode (Corrigan et al., 2011).

Even if there is potential for a crisis to improve, anxiety remains widely prevalent. This can be explained by the appraisal theory proposed by Lazarus and Smith (1991), which outlines that humans commonly appraise situations negatively, as the brain detects threats and prioritizes survival over disregarding danger and pursuing potential benefits. “Learned helplessness is a phenomenon in which repeated exposure to uncontrollable stressors results in individuals failing to use any control options that may later become available. Essentially, individuals are said to learn that they lack behavioural control over environmental events, which, in turn, undermines the motivation to make changes or attempt to alter situations” (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Encountering situations beyond their control, like pandemics or wars, individuals begin to feel helpless and anxious. Learned helplessness is a major contributor to Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD).

The mental impact of a crisis is large-scale; even individuals who are indirectly affected or not affected at all suffer from increased levels of anxiety. Consuming news about the situation constantly leads to anxiety and uncertainty about the future. Due to the negativity bias and appraisal theory, people tend to give more weight to distressing information and prospective negative outcomes. Vicarious and secondary traumatization is also predominant during crises around the globe, as emergency responders and health workers are indirectly

exposed to trauma. This can also be seen in people who are not involved in the situation but are mere witnesses from across the world, and is known as media-induced secondary trauma (Castro, Dias, & Madeira, 2024).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, one study from 194 cities in China in January and February 2020 revealed that more than half (54%) of the respondents rated the psychological impact of the COVID-19 outbreak as moderate or severe; 29% reported moderate to severe anxiety symptoms; and the remaining 17% reported moderate to severe depressive symptoms (Wang et al., 2020). The pandemic resulted in insecurities linked to racism as accusations were made against people of Asian descent (Malta et al. 2020). Another important study is the psychological impact of climate change. “Even some Americans who have not been directly affected by a climate disaster are experiencing climate anxiety—an overwhelming sense of fear, sadness, and dread in the face of a warming planet or anxiety and worry about climate change and its effects. A 2020 APA survey found that 56% of U.S. adults said climate change is the most important issue facing the world today. Nearly half of young adults ages 18 to 34 said they felt stress over climate change in their daily lives” (American Psychological Association, 2023, para. 3, bullet 5). As evident in the study, a large number of young adults experience uncertainty and nervousness due to the deteriorating climate's impact on humanity, highlighting the concept of intolerance to uncertainty. Wars have been one of the most prevalent global crises, including the Russo-Ukrainian war. A survey done in March 2022 of 801 Ukrainian adults revealed that 54.1 % of participants were suffering from anxiety (Xu et al., 2023). After Russia’s invasion, moderate to high levels of anxiety (34%) were reported by Czech university students (Riad et al., 2022), and severe anxiety was reported by Germans (9.73 %) (Gottschick et al., 2023). This shows that the impact of the war on mental health was not limited to the immediate battlefield.

Resilience increases our ability to adapt to drastic changes in our environment. Adaptive neuroplasticity is a key mechanism behind resilience. When faced with adversities, the brain alters itself to adapt to and overcome these situations. Adaptive neuroplasticity results in the strengthening of neural pathways through past experiences, which enables the brain to prepare itself for similar future challenges (Siegle, 2024). Posttraumatic growth (PTG) highlights the positive changes that manifest as a result of enduring distressing life crises (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Collazo-Castiñeira et al. (2022) observed that approximately 20% of respondents from the Spanish population exhibited moderate to high levels of PTG resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. A study of samples from Ukraine and five other nearby countries during the war in Ukraine showed that “the Ukrainian sample reported the highest level of societal and community resilience, as well as the highest level of hope” (Kimhi et al., 2023). This shows how highly challenging situations shape our resilience.

Resilience is also negatively impacted in the face of critical situations. Constantly facing crises can erode our resilience due to burnout and compassion fatigue. Resilience can also lead to false hope syndrome (Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021). As humans often rely on past experiences to predict future outcomes, overcoming a difficulty once or more may give them false hope, without evidence, to overcome the same difficulty efficiently again. So, at times, resilience can be maladaptive rather than adaptive.

Due to specific individual circumstances, there is a need to examine resilience and anxiety in individuals during crises to provide appropriate and effective help. Governments should equally focus on the mental health and resilience building of individuals, as well as on physical well-being at times of catastrophe, and prioritize vulnerable groups. Efficient coping mechanisms should be introduced to facilitate neuroplasticity and prevent maladaptive resilience. Anxiety should be addressed at a community level to collectively build resilience

and avoid loneliness, as mutual support within communities is crucial in mitigating anxiety during crises (Hobfoll et al., 2007).

In conclusion, global events directly influence our anxiety levels and resilience. This perpetual crisis reveals two sides of the same coin; it has resulted in heightened anxiety but also strengthened resilience among many individuals around the world. The case studies on COVID-19, climate change and the Russo-Ukrainian war demonstrate the psychological impact of crises on humans. Examining this impact will contribute to developing effective coping mechanisms and resilience-building for future crises.

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