

Flattening the psychological curve - the aviation dilemma

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South Africa is due to enter Covid-19 alert Level 3. In the face of pressing, unpredictable and severe global problems and challenges, survival requires that we move to a new type of thinking and that of doing things - and doing them differently.



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The catastrophic impact of Covid-19 pandemic on aviation is devastating to everyone involved in this sector, and by the looks of things, that will be the case beyond. What makes it more worrying is the knowledge that none of us can be spared from this ailment. Ordinarily, as human beings, our natural and first response when we are faced with threats and adversity, is to escape and dissociate.

We either try to find comfort by positioning our mindset into the past or fast-forwarding it to a future state of being. It is at this point that the threat and or the discomfort we are faced with, triggers other psychological distress.

Rumination, anxiety, obsession, depression and confusion are some of the forms of uncontrollable stressful conditions that takes charge as we struggle to make sense of what is happening. We become preoccupied with the thought of trying to get rid of or fix the distress and in the process, get caught up in the circle of extreme anxiety.

The habitual pattern of the mind to escape the discomfort is bound to be there for quite some time if not attended to. Our capacity to be resilient is therefore undermined. Reality is that we find ourselves in the middle of a pandemic that is threatening our very livelihoods. We need to do something to alleviate its impact.

Be realistically optimistic

It is a fact – everyone wishes the current situation to end abruptly. It is a fact - the aviation sector has been brought to its knees. Many have come to love and built careers in this environment. For some, it has become a way of life. For many, it feels as if an integral part of their very existence has been forcefully taken away from them. At this point, it seems to be no end in sight. The future looks uncertain.

As the call to 'flatten the curve' reaches a crescendo, it is also important that we find ways to flatten our own psychological curve, to starve off a potentially damaging mental health disaster. One of the first things we can do is to focus our attention on things that we can control that is, to be realistic about our current situation and or challenges without falling into despair. We are reminded of one Navy fighter pilot, James Stockdale, who was imprisoned for many years after his aircraft was shot down during the Vietnamese war, circa in 1965.

During his incarceration, he came to a telling realisation that he was going to spend many years as a war prisoner before any truce could be reached. He devised ways to keep his morale high by sticking to a simple yet well-defined routine. Jim Collins (Good to Great), in his discussion with Stockdale after his release from prison, asked him whether he knew of anyone "who did not make it out of those systematic circumstances as you had". His answer related to what he called "The optimists".

"There were prisoners who set fictional timelines and dates pertaining to their release. Those dates came and passed. Some died during their incarceration because of frustrations and despair." We are currently facing the same dilemma. We are torn between hope and reality. Jim Collins calls this phenomenon - 'The Stockdale Paradox'. We need to balance optimism with reality.

Truth be told - we are all but hoping for this pandemic to go away, for us to go back to the way we did things. And carry on with our lives, before we were rudely interrupted. The reality is - things will never go back to where they were. There is going to be what is now known as the "new normal". The biggest challenge we are facing now are the "uncertainties". Essentially, it is considered a human need for one to be in control of own circumstances. Once that is lost, we try to find ways to bring it back.

Frustration sets in and an end seems to become just a fallacy. Unfortunately, it is at this very point that some may adopt unhealthy coping behaviours, that has the potential to exacerbate the already difficult situation. This calls for one to build resilience. There is a greater probability of thriving in the face of challenges. Those life-related or otherwise.

Build your resilience

Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress, such as family or relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors. It means bouncing back from difficult experiences. All of us have some level of resilience but we differ drastically on how to (individually) apply such in our lives. Resilience can be learnt. As life coaches and psychologists, we are able to walk someone through this journey.

When faced with adversity, one is confronted with issues that may disrupt their internal and external human sense of balance. To restore such requires action. We use different ways assist those affected to achieve that "fit". Whilst others become successful, others fail. One way of dealing with adversity is to address the CORE of what you as an individual can handle. CORE stand for control, ownership, reach and endurance.

Control – Recognise your own power in a situation you are faced with. Given the current scenario (Covid-19) - what is it that you have control over? Are there situations in your life that you can influence? Identify those that cannot be immediately influenced. Do not spend too much energy here until the situation changes and you are able to influence. Being able to control events encourages adaptive preparedness and the ability to exert influence over adversity.

Specific perceived control over adversity is a major source of action because people who believe certain outcomes can be attained have the incentive to act.

Ownership – what part of the problem do you take responsibility for? When faced with hardships – even if it is not your own doing - we tend to despair. We give up and believe absolutely nothing can be done. On the contrary, there are things that we can do to deal with challenges we are faced with. We can take care of our wellbeing (mental, physical, spiritual, etc.), without fear of failure.

Reach – do not catastrophise or let adversity affect other parts of your life. We have some level of control in determining how adversity can affect us. The ability to manage the “reach” of adversity and successfully quarantine adversity ultimately rest with us. We need resilience to do that.

Endurance – do not let adversity to pin you down for long. It might happen that we may be overwhelmed by what is happening to and around us. What is important is not to let the situation escalate to the point where it swallows us. We know from the attribution theory that there is a big difference between people who attribute adversity to something temporary versus something more permanent or enduring. Applying this theory, those who see their ability as the cause of failure (stable cause) are less likely to continue than people who attribute failure to their own effort (a temporary cause). We need to act. And act now.

This will enable us to build resilience to deal with adversity. In whatever form possible.

We fly again

We now know that adversity is not permanent and that the current situation will at some point - come to a halt. While we remain realistically optimistic that one day we will fly again, we need to continue to flatten our psychological curve to alleviate the mental health strain caused by Covid-19.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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