

COVID (PSYCHO) LOGICAL IMPACT

What element is common in the films *'Born on the 4th of July'* (1989), *'Coming Home'* (1978), *'Twelve O'Clock High'* (1948), or more recently, *'Thank you for your service'* (2017) ?

The answer - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD is often connected to war and combat situations due to symptoms felt by soldiers and war veterans as a result of witnessing and experiencing the traumatic events that unfold. Historically speaking, the term also emerged for the first time during the Great War in the medical journal, 'The Lancet', in February 1915. However, this term only leapt to public consciousness when the American Psychiatric Association added the health issue to its diagnostic manual of mental disorders in the 1980's.

Pertinently, it is now widely accepted that people can develop PTSD for many different reasons, not just from combat situations. Wide ranging symptoms can be triggered by experiencing, or witnessing, any terrifying event(s) such as sexual assault, traumatic loss of life, terrible accident – which may lead to PTSD. There is still, however, very little consideration of the non-physical repercussions of a global or personal crisis, for example emotional distress, lack of concentration, avoidance, and many more. This lack of consideration results from the fact that we need evidence-based life-threatening events to justify PTSD.

However, being resilient and overcoming trauma can emerge differently, whether from a global crisis (Climate Change, Covid-19, and 2008 Financial Crisis) or a personal crisis (e.g., matrimonial problem, bankruptcy, family distancing, freedom restriction, loss). The trials of life define our own battlefield, and the way we cope with it depends immensely on the complex equation of being human and the environment in which we find ourselves.

Related to trauma and struggles, this article explores the Covid-19 psychological effects and how; as crisis leaders, we can minimize or anticipate the side effects on the teams.



Covid-19 opens Pandora's Box

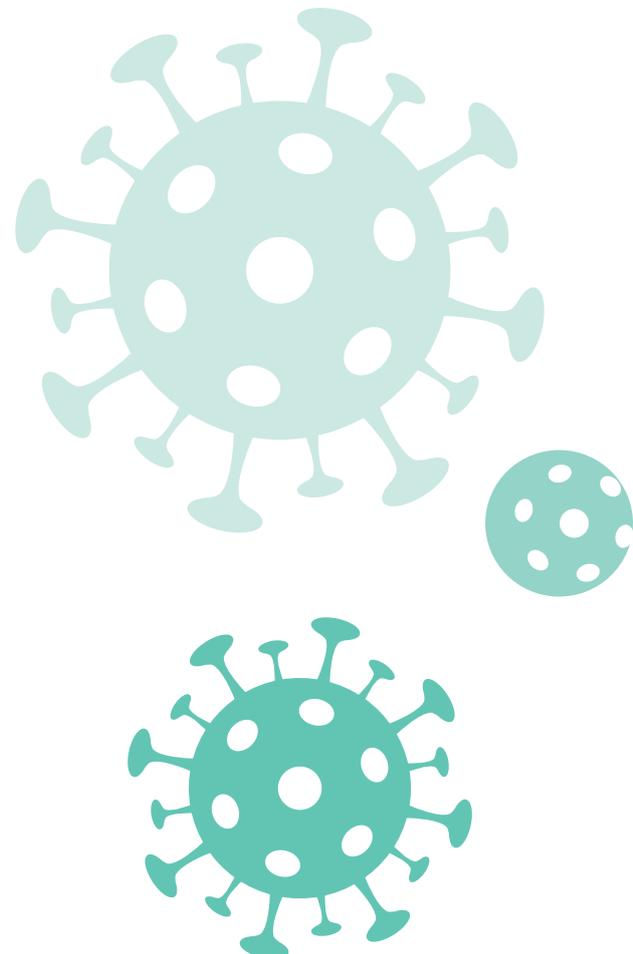
After the SARS outbreak in 2003, many healthcare workers and self-quarantined people exhibited symptoms of PTSD. The extraneous effects of Covid-19 will not be exempt. Instead, Covid-19 opens Pandora's Box to all of us, amplifying our mental health pre-condition and hitting us with an ugly truth. Many of us took our lives and fortunate situations for granted. In fact, Covid-19 has made us realize that many aspects of our lives are more fragile than we had previously thought and that we, as human beings, have been forced to alter our way of life and be heavily restricted. As a species, we are uncomfortable with change and we resent enforced restriction of liberties. We are especially uncomfortable with enforced change. Luana Marques, clinical psychologist and associate professor in the department of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and president of the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, stated:

As observed in Asian and European countries consequent physical events, such as the dephasing of lockdown, has affected the mental well-being of citizens and created a psychological impact. This situation has added an additional hurdle for companies in their desire to get their businesses back on track.

In terms of the work-life balance, the lockdown has become a catalyst for a series of extreme situations and mental disruptions:

- The exhaustion of parenting and educating full-time whilst working remotely.
- The disillusion of a non-functioning marriage or relationship resulting in separation or divorce.
- The unsafe environment in which people can be in, fearing domestic violence, the denunciation policy, substance abuse and addiction.
- The anxiety of not working and feeling overwhelmed with purposeless days.
- The loss of employment, collapse of business, reduction of income, and the threat of socio-economic vulnerability.
- The ban or restriction of assisting or attending the last moments of loved ones, lacking closure, bereavement.
- The stress required to overcome the medical or organizational distress in our working environment.
- The often contradicting and volatile news of Covid-19, non-stop exposure of topic polluting our mind.
- The mandatory self-distancing from our relatives, our social life, our leisure, and our freedom.
- The question around the origin and abrupt rise of the virus leading to many uncertainties and preventing the projection of a stable future world.

“When we think about traumatic events, it’s not just what the event is, it’s really your interpretation and what the event causes for you.”



Healthy management goes with symptoms awareness

One of the most common concerns for leaders is to keep the business healthy. To do so, businesses, companies and organisations need accurate financial records and regular checks on how the budget is doing with income and outcome analysis. Whenever a deregulation is flagged proactive companies take the necessary actions to ensure a healthy 'profit and loss' management and perpetuate prosperity to safeguard quality of service and reputation.

The approach is similar and just as essential when it comes to the healthy mental and physical state of everyone in an organization or company.

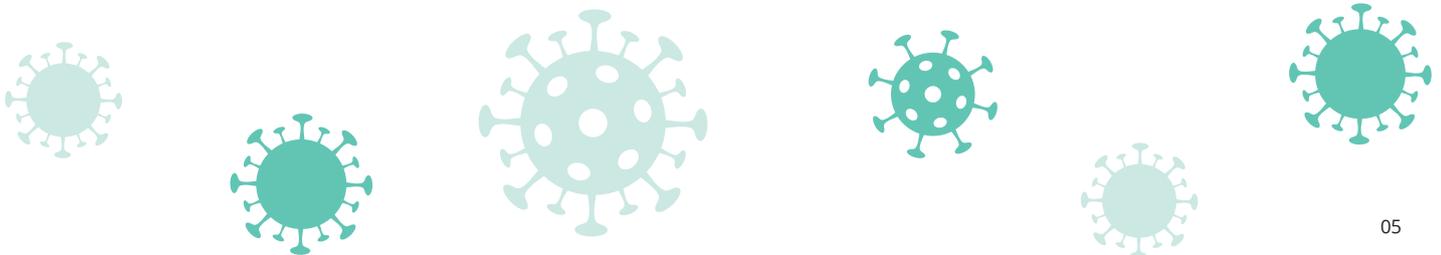
Evidence shows that people who achieve good standards of well-being at work are likely to be more creative, more loyal, more productive, and provide better customer satisfaction than individuals with poor levels of well-being at work. Business depends on it. Leading when it matters most starts with acknowledging that, due to the Covid-19 crisis, there could be long-term repercussions on the mental well-being of staff.

It will take varying amounts of time, up to months or longer, for the full mental effects of Covid-19 to manifest. It is crucial that we raise our awareness of the potential mental health and well-being fallout. The symptoms of PTSD typically fall into three categories: re-experience, avoidance and hyper-arousal.

Re-experiencing	Avoidance	Hyper-arousal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intrusive thoughts • Waking flashbacks • Recurrent nightmares • Intense emotional distress • Rapid heart-beat • Sweating • Hyperventilation • Muscle tension • Dizziness • Crying • Shaking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoidance of sounds, sights and even objects that remind the person of the trauma • Avoidance of people that trigger a memory of the traumatic event • Loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities • Emotional numbness or detachment from people and social situations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability to focus • Inability to stay asleep • Angry outbursts • Easily startled • Constant fear • Overly vigilant for danger

The Hollywood film industry has helped shed light on PTSD symptoms, some in a more subtle way than others, plotting a variety of scenarios. In Hunger Games, two of the main characters are affected with recurring nightmares, associated with derealisation. Persistent avoidance was noticed in Iron Man 3. The movie I, Tonya about a former figure ice-skating champion is remarkably played highlighting depersonalization trouble. Dan and Jenny in Forrest Gump were both suffering with PTSD and irritability patterns. Tangle tells the story of manipulation and emotional abuse that led to negative beliefs and expectations of oneself.

Ultimately, it does not really matter whether the storyline ticks the boxes of traumatic events, PTSD can hit anybody and it can erupt from events, which threaten us. Covid-19 has inextricably done so. What matters is how you are going to tackle the mental degradation, post-lockdown.



As a leader, you are the one!

Nurture empathy

Leaders, therefore, should focus on nurturing a culture of openness and empathy, not only through their own actions but also via the actions of the managers under their guidance. Providing appropriate training for managers in recognizing and addressing mental health issues is a step in the right direction. Leaders need to integrate empathy into all of their decisions, especially in policies – from extending sick pay to those caring for family members to simple directives, such as encouraging employees to spend more time outside or to reconnect and energize with sanctioned side-activities. Moreover, leaders should include themselves in the whole process of self-care, openness and resilience. Leading by example, both in design and by default, is at the heart of a healthy enterprise culture.

Stay in touch

It is highly important to maintain communication and promote social interaction, even if part of the staff is off work due to economical or operational restriction. The interaction should focus on keeping everybody in the loop, businesswise, but also launching conversations or initiatives that are not work-orientated, nor crisis-talk related: virtual raffle, social responsibility actions, staying fit, virtual team activities are a starting point. Reinforcing the social web will prevent loneliness and depression. Have a way to monitor your staff members that do not show up – they will appreciate the individual care and feel noticed and valued.

Surveys and questionnaires are great tools to allow your staff to respond anonymously on their well-being, daily management, and resilience in the situation.

Create opportunity

People often fear change due to its' negative connotation. When change is the only constant leaders and their teams should alter their perspective on the change and search for the opportunities within and develop the ability to quickly anticipate and adapt. It is always relevant to engage your staff in collective intelligence and turn challenges into opportunities. Virtual hackathon or design thinking can help accelerate transformations by bringing creativity upstage.

Raise awareness of resources

Your organization should be transparent about the resources, which it has available to provide support its staff. Communication on the availability of, and access to, such resources should be open and proactive, whilst the initiation, set-up and provision of support to individuals should remain confidential.

Lead the communication

Anticipate questions from your team and create a dedicated page with questions and answers (FAQs). Communicate often and apply the golden rule of Simon Synek - answer the question of the 'Why' first. (more detail: <https://simonsinek.com/find-your-why/?ref=mainNav>). Provide your employee a tempo of the communication release; consistency is one of the key elements to improving certainty in an unstable situation.

Drive to the knowns¹

In a crisis, the objective is building and executing a disciplined, intentional process that drives you and others toward what is knowable. Prior to this process, it is necessary to distinguish what is known and what is unknown, allowing you to scan your position and the complexity of the situation.

There are four categories for any crisis situation:

- The known knowns: You are aware of what you know, the tangible facts that you are in possession of and that you use in your leadership thinking. The more you know, the better your strategy, decisions and actions.
- The known unknowns: you are aware of you what you do not know, the questions to ask, and of whom to ask them. This is accessible knowledge and information that you assemble.
- The unknown knowns: Unaware of additional information that is available that may be hidden and outside your current sphere of knowledge. Seeking this knowledge is vital; without it, you could unexpectedly stumble.
- The unknown unknowns: You may not even think about these abstract factors. Imagination is required to explore possibilities. Unknown unknowns could include critical knowledge that has bearing on the situation.

Use crisis management tools

The key to overcoming the chaos of a crisis is to systematically decode patterns, anticipate decisions and plan actions. Using the POP DOC Loop² tool (or similarly the IBOBBO model developed by Bruelemans, Bruggemans & Van Mechelen - 2015 die Keure) from 'Thinking Steps' (Perceive, Orient, Predict) to 'Action Steps' (Decide Operationalize and Communicate), enables and fosters cohesion. It also mitigates risk and increases the capacity to address multiple problems simultaneously.

¹ Marcus Leonard J., McNulty Eric J., Handerson Joseph M., Dorn Barry C. – PublicAffairs – Crisis, Change, and How to lead When it Matters Most You're It – Chapter Complexity is

² Marcus Leonard J., McNulty Eric J., Handerson Joseph M., Dorn Barry C. – PublicAffairs – Crisis, Change, and How to lead When it Matters Most You're It – Chapter Dimension Two

Conclusion

The simple fact is that a crisis never occurs alone, as a single event - other crises emerge. These aftershocks can be minimized if, as a leader, you are taking steps to eliminate the brackets of Covid-19 (psycho) logical impact. Eliminating these brackets means acknowledging the existence of the psychological impact of crises, whether they are minor or severe, whether they are Covid-19 related or not, embracing this truth, and taking action.

Whilst you, as a leader in a crisis, can make the difference, you are not meant to be superhuman, and you can feel vulnerable. Leading a crisis well requires letting yourself recharge.

Related to this topic – please check out the latest report by Deloitte UK on mental health and employers; addressing key elements on the cost of poor mental health, the return on investment, the trend in the past few years, and what action to take.

<https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/consulting/articles/mental-health-and-employers-refreshing-the-case-for-investment.html>

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