

## **An Emotional Roller Coaster Ride**

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Many of us have experienced a roller coaster ride filled with different emotions since the emergence of the coronavirus. The ride has seemed even more precipitous since I wrote my last article in mid-June. An air of optimism appeared in the United States in late June and early July, occasioned by the increasing number of people getting vaccinated and the decrease of new COVID cases, hospitalizations, and deaths. However, even in the midst of this brighter outlook, the issue of many people remaining “vaccine hesitant” or “vaccine resistant” remained.

COVID restrictions began to ease, much to the relief of many. Some cautioned it was occurring too soon. In most cities masks were no longer required in stores and restaurants. Sporting venues moved from limited capacity to full capacity. Events and vacations postponed since March, 2020 were re-scheduled to specific dates in the fall. On a personal note, I gave my first in-person presentation at the beginning of August. It was held in New Hampshire and felt very safe—a small group of school administrators in a relatively large room, all of whom had been vaccinated. At the beginning of that talk, I jokingly called attention to my new dress shoes, noting that I bought them just a few days prior to the outbreak of the pandemic and this was the first time I was wearing them.

I was looking forward to two in-person presentations for larger groups in New England scheduled for the last week of August and first week of September. The surge of the Delta variant turned both into virtual events. COVID cases and hospitalizations increased significantly, including in children and teens. The ongoing divisiveness about vaccines intensified. Several governors issued decrees that schools could not mandate the wearing of masks, even in elementary schools where students were too young to be vaccinated. ICU beds reached capacity in several states, requiring non-COVID patients to seek treatment hundreds of miles from home.

Vaccine hesitancy was frequently reinforced by misinformation promulgated on social media. We’ve all heard different varieties of this misinformation—the vaccine contains chips that allow the government to follow you; the vaccine causes infertility; the vaccine rather than the virus is the prevalent cause of illnesses and deaths. The data

indicated that an overwhelming percentage of individuals who now required hospitalization for COVID had not been vaccinated. Several of those individuals offered brief interviews on TV in which they voiced regret that they had not received the vaccine, if not for themselves then for their children and other family members. There were reports of seriously ill patients, some close to death, asking nurses and doctors if they could receive the vaccine now. Healthcare providers, overwhelmed by stress and burnout, expressed frustration and anger at the increase in COVID hospitalizations—a situation they viewed as rooted in a refusal of many people to get a vaccine.

### **When Optimism Is Dashed**

As uncertainty, anger, and frustration have become more evident, the questions I have been receiving have shifted since the beginning of the summer. Added to the ongoing concerns about the long-term emotional effects of the coronavirus on both children and adults as well as the impact on children's progress in school, I am now asked, "How do you cope when your optimism about the future has been dashed, when you allowed yourself to become more hopeful and that hope has been diminished?" As one person commented, "When will this ever end? Just as I felt we were emerging from this long COVID nightmare, the Delta variant arrived. Just as I was becoming hopeful that some of the divisiveness about vaccines and wearing facemasks would be in our rearview mirror, these issues seem more prominent and politicized than ever before. I feel more depressed now than a year ago. I wish I knew where all of this is heading."

In reflecting upon the question of how to cope when optimism is dashed, I thought about an article I wrote in [October, 2020 that highlighted the "Stockdale Paradox."](#) For those not familiar with this Paradox, it became well known when described by Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great*. Admiral James Stockdale was a Prisoner of War in Vietnam for more than seven years and endured repeated torture. In preparing to interview Stockdale, Collins read his memoir and wondered, "If it feels depressing to me, how on earth did he survive when he was actually there and did not know the end of the story?"

Stockdale's answer contained many insights about coping in the face of terrible adversity. He observed, "I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience

into a defining event of my life, which, in retrospect I would not trade.” Stockdale noted that the prisoners who were confronted with the greatest struggles and often failed to make it out of the camps were the “optimists”—in my October, 2020 column I expressed that based on Stockdale’s descriptions, I would label them the “unrealistic optimists” since his asserting that he never questioned that at some point he would get out represented an outlook of hope and optimism.

Stockdale described the “unrealistic” optimists in the following way: “They were the ones who said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.”

Stockdale’s description of the different outlooks of POWs in Vietnam has relevance for the ways in which we cope with the challenges of the coronavirus. The current roller coaster ride has buffeted us between feelings of optimism and pessimism, has filled us with hope only to see that hope diminished, and has elicited emotions of anxiety and depression, and, at times, provoked a sense of helplessness. In articles written since the emergence of the pandemic, I have focused on strategies that can help us to manage these negative feelings and thoughts. These strategies were not born during the pandemic but rather are ones I have advocated for decades. However, their application may have greater urgency at this time given the surveys that clearly indicate the rise in mental health issues in all age groups since the pandemic began.

### **The Impact of Personal Control**

Most of my readers know that I believe a key foundation of the strength-based, resilience approach I advocate is “personal control.” Some have rightfully commented that it is similar to the “serenity prayer.” Resilient people focus their time and energy on situations over which they have some influence rather than attempting to change things over which they have little, if any, control. As psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl so eloquently expressed in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, while those in the concentration camps had little, if any, control over what transpired in that brutal environment, there were some who displayed a heightened sense of caring and compassion by giving away their last morsels of food to those who were hungrier than

they were. Frankl asserted that they demonstrated the Nazis could take anything away from you but the last of the human freedoms, to “choose” your attitude and response in any given set of circumstances.

I have highlighted the importance of personal control in many of my articles since March, 2020. I have shared suggestions of actions to initiate that have the goal of nurturing resilience in ourselves and our children/students. In the months ahead it is likely that I will continue to detail different strategies to strengthen resilience. In this article I have selected one such strategy to highlight that based on research findings is very promising and within our control to implement.

### **The Effectiveness of “Reappraisal” Strategies**

The study, conducted by researchers from several different countries including those from the United States at Harvard, Northwestern, and Stanford Universities, was cited in an article by [James Smith and posted online by the Harvard Kennedy School](#). Smith stated that the presence of the coronavirus has contributed to negative emotions and mental health problems on a global level, prompting researchers to assess what interventions could be applied to lessen negative emotions, increase positive emotions, and buttress resilience and successful ways of coping.

The international researchers studied the efficacy of what have been labeled “reappraisal” strategies, an intervention that seeks to modify how we think about or perceive any situation. For those wishing to read the study in its entirety, it was [published in the journal \*Nature Human Behaviour\*](#). Suffice it to say that this was a comprehensive undertaking with more than 21,000 participants of different ages from 87 countries.

Two reappraisal techniques were used: “reconstructual” and “repurposing.” As the study authors explain, reconstructual involves changing how a situation or event is interpreted in a way that modifies the emotional response to that situation. They offer as examples developing the following mindset: “Washing hands, avoiding touching my face, keeping safe distance. These are simple and effective things I can do to protect myself and my loved ones from getting sick and to stop the spread of the virus” and “I know from world history that keeping calm and carrying on gets us through tough times.”

In contrast, repurposing involves focusing on possible positive outcomes that might arise from the current situation that serve to modify one's emotional response to it. Examples offered in terms of COVID include: "This situation is helping us realize the importance of meaningful social connections, and helping us understand who the most important people in our lives are" and "Medical systems are now learning to deal with amazing challenges, which will make them much more resilient in the future." Stockdale captured this strategy when he asserted that he would "turn the experience into a defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade."

When I have used reappraisal (or reframing) techniques, my goal is not to have people deny the challenges or adversity they face but rather to cast these challenges in a new light, which allows them to confront these situations more successfully. One can view reappraisal as an intervention to modify mindsets and produce positive emotions. Research has shown that the presence of positive emotions promotes more effective problem-solving and decision-making skills.

The results of the study indicated little difference between the two reappraisal techniques, both of which had a noticeable positive impact on participants. The researchers wrote, "Both approaches significantly decreased negative emotional responses and significantly increased positive emotional responses." They added, "For policymakers, the primary takeaway is the broader conclusion that reappraisal interventions work—and are worth investing in where resilience is important for public welfare. . . . Essential workers, nurses and doctors, students, patients, and many other populations whose work and life are highly affected by the pandemic could potentially benefit from reappraisal interventions. Because these interventions are inexpensive, brief, and scalable, they could be implemented through a variety of media and communication mechanisms, such as advertising campaigns, speeches, courses, apps and mobile games."

Given all of the variables involved with the course of COVID and its variants, it is difficult to predict what lies ahead. Very few of us would have guessed in March, 2020 that in September, 2021 the virus would still be causing so many hospitalizations and deaths, that we would be approaching 700,000 fatalities in the United States and more than 4,500,000 worldwide.

**Concluding Comment**

I believe we should strive to adopt James Stockdale's attitude as a POW, namely, that we "never lose faith in the end of the story." I appreciate for those who have directly experienced personal loss of loved ones and financial hardships during the pandemic, such a view may be difficult to assume. Also, to more effectively confront the consequences of the coronavirus, a more optimistic attitude must be accompanied by actions that are within our control to initiate. In addition to being vaccinated, there are measures I have described in previous articles (e.g., exercising regularly, expressing gratitude, mediating, and contributing to the well-being of others) that are linked to lessening stress and reinforcing resilience. The use of reappraisal techniques is yet another tool we have available as we attempt to minimize the emotional roller coaster ride that has pervaded many of our lives during the past 18 months.

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