

Crisis Mindsets

May 18, 2022 By <u>Venkatesh Rao</u>

I'm writing this post in stolen moments of calm in what's turning out to be one of those rough, stormy simmering-crisis weeks. A major pet emergency is coinciding with a minor but urgent medical thing with one household member, and a bunch of routine long-scheduled medical care for another. Fortunately my wife and I have completely flexible schedules, and at least for the moment, we are financially comfortable enough, despite inflation and crashing markets, that money isn't a bottleneck. So the crisis is, for the moment, within our ability to deal with. Throwing both time and money at problems, up to a point, is an available option.

So far, this week is well within my personal crisis-management bandwidth (though it has some potential for snowballing out of control). Objectively, it clocks in at about a Magnitude 4, and I've dealt with at least half a dozen Magnitude 6 and 7 weeks in my life so far. I expect at least a few 8s and 9s in my future that will force me to expand my range. And of course, like the rest of you, there's at least one 10+ week in my future that will be the end of me, and rate an 8 or 9 for people around me.

As the world has gotten more crisis prone at all levels from personal to geopolitical in the last few years, the importance of consciously cultivating a more effective crisis mindset has been increasingly sinking in for me.

I used to think I was not much good in a crisis, but over the years, I have realized there is no such thing as being *individually* good or bad in a crisis. Humans either deal with crises in effective groups, or not at all. Your crisis mindset is the set of cultivated strengths and known, managed weaknesses that you might bring to a typical crisis-response group.

I am about average. My wife is probably significantly above average. I'll never be the fast-responding thin-slicing fireman type, but I doubt I'll be the blubbering mess type in most situations either. I bring some strengths, some weaknesses, and some liabilities to any crisis situation, and over the years I've gotten slowly better at casting myself in the right role so as to be a part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

Besides the obvious benefits of a group bringing a mix of strengths, skills, and sheer divide-and-conquer bandwidth (not to be underestimated) to bear on a shared crisis, there is a more subtle benefit — facing a crisis in a group incorporates a continuous reminder of what you're fighting for. To a first approximation, who you are fighting *alongside* is also who you are fighting *for*. And who you are fighting for is usually an embodiment of *what* you're fighting for.

On the flip side, having to face a crisis alone, besides all the obvious practical downsides, has a corresponding subtle downside — wondering why you're bothering fighting at all. Robinson Crusoe was on the verge of giving up when he met Friday, not because he was failing at basic survival challenges, but because without another person to face them with, he was losing sight of why the challenges were worth tackling at all.

In a truly acute crisis, survival is the only thing, and only the unsubtle benefits and downsides of being in a group or alone matter. But in a sustained, chronic crisis where you need to establish some sort of homeostatic equilibrium in relation to the adverse circumstances, who you're navigating the crisis with matters.

The wrong group will slowly drain your will to persist, even if it has the right configuration of skills and resources to survive the situation. You will gradually lose sight of the point of the struggle, and your willingness to participate in it.

The right group will not only increase the odds of all individuals through a practical alchemy of capabilities, it will deeply intensify and enhance your sense of what is at stake in the struggle. For many, a time of crisis can be so rich with

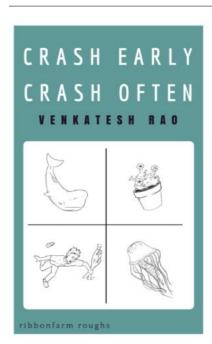
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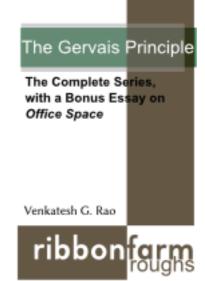
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significance and meaning, when normalcy returns, it can seem impoverished.

These effects can be so intense that it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that meaning lies entirely in the ongoing experience of overcoming basic survival challenges with a group of people you care for. You could call this the survivaland-intersubjectivity school of meaning-making. People who subscribe to this school of thought, at their most extreme, try to arrange their lives as a single extended crisis, faced from within a single, cohesive group. A great many classic narrative templates rely on this script.

But life is about more than the periods of crisis that punctuate and eventually terminate it. There is more to meaning-making than intersubjectivity and survival challenges. This becomes especially apparent in extended, chronic crisis situations. Mere survival is not enough. Merely having a band of trusted survival-comrades is not enough.

This is why, even under the most objectively terrible of circumstances that you'd think would completely exhaust people's resources, they seem to seek out more. Even if they can't enjoy uninterrupted, idyllic, peaceful, crisis-free lives with no horizon, they can seek out sublime moments within lousy days, sublime hours within lousy weeks, and sublime days within lousy months. If they can't work on Great Novels, they work on small poems. If they can't work on space programs, they make origami cranes.

Five contemplative minutes with a cup of tea in the middle of a week camped out by an ICU. Scoring a box of chocolates to enjoy in an underground shelter between periods of having bombs dropped on you in a war zone. Musicians playing for people in hospice care. Inmates of concentration camps teaching each other mathematics. Social workers handing out care packages that include small toys to young new arrivals at refugee camps. Long-term prisoners making pets of mice. A military unit chilling playing cards between missions.

There is a reason these moments of connection to the more sublime reasons for living, beyond survival and camaraderie, make for great human interest stories. They provide small but significant signs that even in the harshest conditions, we can ride small transient surpluses of life energy to reach for more. Crises are overall about scarcity and privation, but include surprising bits of slack and surplus. Perhaps it is a blessing in disguise that crisis response behaviors are rarely very resource-efficient. The slop is a feature, not a bug.

But the bigger the crisis, the rarer the surpluses. And the rarer the surpluses, the more it matters what you do with them when you get them.

Like many of my generation, my life to date has unfolded in peaceful, stable places, and has largely comprised generous expanses of uninterrupted crisis-free time. Even Covid hasn't significantly deranged it. At any random moment, the last personal crisis is usually settled memory for me, and the next crisis is usually beyond the temporal horizon of whatever I'm focused on.

Like most of you, most of the time, I live in projects-and-routines time, punctuated by the occasional, exceptional crisis. Unlike the protagonists of stories I enjoy consuming on TV, I almost never live in crisis time.

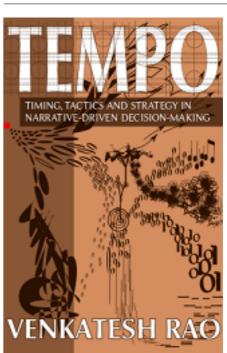
These conditions induce what might be called a flourishing mindset, focused on personal fulfilment and accomplishment. Friends and family are normally a source of pleasure, not responsibilities or comrades in a crisis. It is a pleasant and fulfilling mindset to inhabit, even if it makes for dull stories. Life presents mostly as a blank canvas on which you must create, on pain of angst and anomie.

For at least a reasonable fraction of humanity, this is the default. Maybe it's even a majority.

A normal life is one where the periods of personal crisis slowly increase in intensity, frequency, and duration, building up your capacity to weather them at a reasonable rate as you age, and hopefully preparing you to fail your final crisis with some dignity. In a normal life, your ability to deal with crises improves in some areas as you age (experience, emotional self-regulation, resources), and degrades in others (physical energy and health, imagination, boldness).

An abnormal life is one where the crises pile up faster than your psyche can

Tempo



strengthen and adapt, leading to increasing fragility, plummeting ability to regulate responses (which compounds the severity of crises, via many pathways), and eventually a particular crisis defeating you in a particularly painful way.

If you're a kid in Ukraine or other extended-crisis zone today, a flourishing mindset is something you will only get momentary glimpses of for the foreseeable future. You're navigating a string of Magnitude 9 weeks at an impossibly young age. The kind people growing up in normal times and places only experience towards the end of their lives, as infirmity and ill-health close in. And even the best that adult caregivers can do for you will not be very good. If you manage to stay alive, you will not be able to entirely protect your psyche. You're going to grow up with a crisis mindset as the default: rooted in scarcity and short horizons; in a world of constant stress and survival pressures, circumstantially forced communality with people you may not choose in better times, and insufficient connection to the sublime to sustain a fulfilling life.

On the other hand, if you're an older adult in a place that was peaceful through much of your life, but is unraveling into a generalized crisis in your old age, you face a different problem — though your crisis bandwidth has expanded with age, it is not up to the challenge the times are throwing at you in your old age. You will be overwhelmed.

We seem to be entering a historical period where crisis circumstances are more common than normalcy. This means crisis mindsets will increasingly be the default, not flourishing mindsets.

Cultivating better crisis mindsets means building up all the unsubtle practical capabilities and resources of course, and perhaps, to a degree, even seeking out small crises to prepare you for bigger ones. Taleb is right about that. Antifragility is key. But it is not enough.

It strikes me that the most important aspect of cultivating a crisis mindset is the subtlest one — the ability to retain a strong connection to the sublime, to life beyond mere survival and claustrophobic intersubjectivity, in whatever stolen moments you can find against the general backdrop of never-ending crisis.

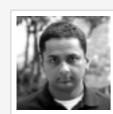
At least for me, that's been the lesson of the past few years. Getting better at all the practical aspects of crisis wrangling is of absolutely no use if you cannot learn to make the non-crisis moments count. Those are the moments that actually pay the psyche bills.

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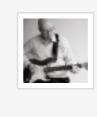
About Venkatesh Rao

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Venkat is the founder and editor-in-chief of ribbonfarm. Follow him on Twitter

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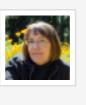
Marc Hamann says May 19, 2022 at 12:59 pm It is starting to look like GenX old age is gonna suck...



<u>Reply</u>

<u>Terrie</u> says May 20, 2022 at 5:36 am

This is really good; thank you. I would say that even Tom Hanks' character in Cast Away was served by his imaginary relationship with Wilson the volleyball.



<u>Reply</u>

Lawrence says May 20, 2022 at 6:01 am

If you aren't already a Maupassant fan, you should be.

<u>Reply</u>

<u>snav</u> says

<u>May 20, 2022 at 7:10 am</u>

I always found myself struck by the "the crew has a cup of coffee together" moments in space opera type shows. What you say about having others around resonates strongly with me.

Do you think equivalently sublime moments are possible in a flourishing mindset? Under what conditions can they occur?

<u>Reply</u>

Ravi Daithankar says <u>May 20, 2022 at 12:26 pm</u>

When you are in the middle of a crisis, it helps to articulate what you are really solving for, because people often get too caught up in crises as randomly shaped, poorly bounded monoliths and relatively inane, peripheral nuisances start to exact a disproportionate toll. Often, this adds up to deplete you more than the core crisis itself. It is usually helpful to isolate and focus on the one key variable you want to optimize for in any crisis. Surprisingly, isolating the key variable also tells you just how much surplus psyche you realistically have to assign to second/third order pain points.

Another way to reframe a crisis is to understand that ultimately, there is only one variable you are up against: time. And that stays the same irrespective of what crisis you're dealing with (including peacetime, or life). If you can get through a certain amount of time, the crisis will have passed. And that part is inevitable...irrespective of how well or poorly you respond to a crisis, time is going to continue passing and by definition, the crisis is going to abate eventually. Focusing on time in such a fundamental way is incredibly calming because it philosophizes the crisis to make it comparatively trivial. Additionally, it leaves with you a much better "head in the game" situation to actually respond to the crisis smartly, rather than a metaphorical spray-and-pray, which is what a lot of people unknowingly default to.

Overall, a crisis and your experience through it simply reveals to you (and also further shapes) what your personal philosophy and worldview truly is, if you haven't articulated that to yourself before.

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