

## Personal resilience in times of crisis *by Lyra Turnbull, 16. April 2020*

The last few weeks have been different to anything most of us have ever experienced and they are taking a psychological toll on many. But, while some are suffering from bouts of anxiety and depression, others are actually doing quite fine, and not just because they are unaffected by the current crisis.

Why it is that some people cope well and can even thrive in a crisis while others flounder has interested me all my life. Growing up in 1970's Britain, in my experience, depression and other psychological difficulties were taboo subjects that largely went unrecognised and untreated. When they became impossible to ignore, mental health issues were often met with a mixture of ignorance and fear, leaving sufferers and their families feeling helpless and without support. This attitude brought misery to many individuals and their families – mine included.

Thankfully, times have changed, and it is easier now to talk openly about mental health than ever before. But in small communities such as ours, the pressure to maintain a cheerful front and keep up with others can be strong, making it hard for us to reach out for help and support when we need it.

We all know that everyone experiences emotional wobbles from time to time. But what we often forget is that how well, and how quickly, we find our balance again depends on a variety of factors.

Partly it's down to genetics. Some of us are simply more susceptible to mental illness than others. If mental health issues run in your family, the chances are higher that you could suffer from them yourself at some time in your life. So, if you've recently felt yourself disengaging, becoming less active and/or suffering from persistent negative thoughts, it's important to seek advice from your family doctor who can check your blood for chemical imbalances which can often be treated effectively.

Other factors are things like our personal circumstances and lifestyle. Where we live, how strong and nurturing our relationships are, how healthy our finances are, if we have a rewarding job or not, all of these can make a real difference. We also regularly underestimate the positive effect of physical activity and its role in maintaining good mental health.

Of course, it goes without saying that taking a proactive approach can help.

We can seek out caring and respectful partners, stay in contact with good and kind friends, we can exercise regularly (even during lockdown), and we can eat well. But, right now, our lives have been up-ended. Many of us are realising, perhaps for the first time, how powerless we are to control many situations in life. And that realisation can be hard to process.

Right now, we're all facing the challenges of the corona pandemic. Some of us are worried about losing our jobs, others are struggling with financial difficulties because our businesses have been forced to close, and some of us have family here and abroad looking for work under almost surreal circumstances. It's sometimes easy to forget that "normal" everyday problems like family arguments, marital breakups and the death and loss of loved ones have not gone away. With access to support systems like friends and family severely restricted, it's harder than ever for many of us to cope.

So, when negative thoughts and emotions start to get the better of us, it can help to have a structure to guide us through the storm. Not everyone feels professional mental health services are for them, so if you are someone who prefers to go it alone, having a mental health tool-kit to get you through tough times can be really helpful.

There are many skills we can learn and add to our mental health tool kits. When anxiety or worry strike, try the exercise below to clear your mind. You'll probably find that if you practice regularly with "little"

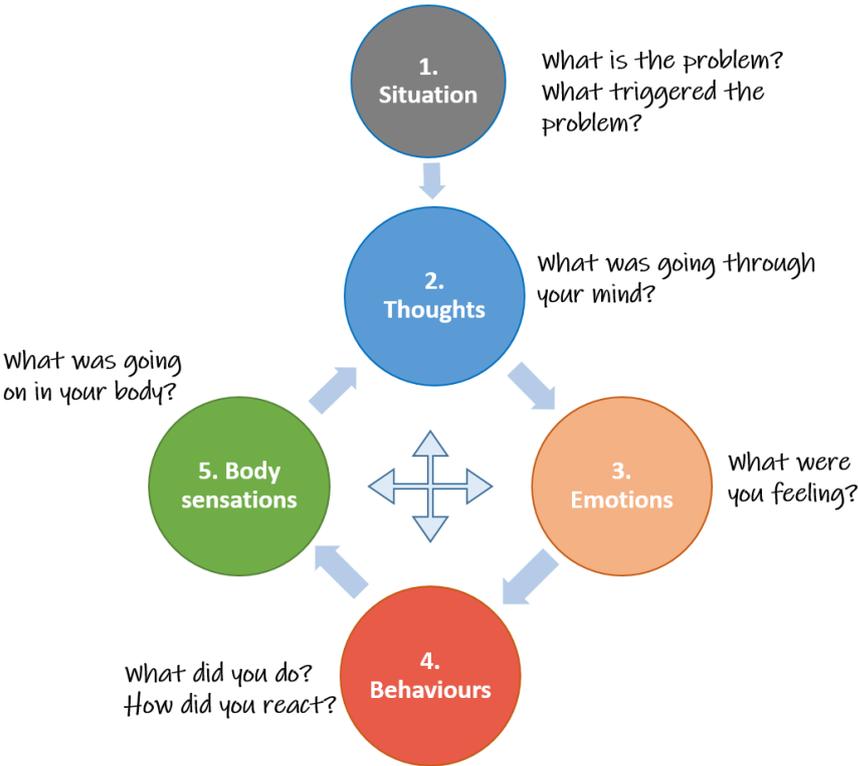
things, you'll be able to cope better when things are tough. Asking someone to sit with you while you do the exercise can help if you are really feeling overwhelmed.

1. Take a pen and paper and write down a statement which describes the situation that's making you unhappy. (If there are several, start with a specific one that feels biggest/worst to you).
2. Now write down any thoughts (positive, negative and indifferent) that you are having associated with your statement.
3. Next list the emotions you are feeling. Remember, it's normal to feel a mixture of emotions about many things. Learning to recognise ambivalent feelings, and to live with them, is an important life skill. This step is not about judging your feelings, but recognising them. So take a few minutes, or even hours if you need them, and write down how you feel.
4. In this next step think about your behaviour. How do you behave when you believe the statement you wrote down in step 1? What about when you listen to the thoughts in your head (step 2)? And what about when you feel the emotions you listed in step 3? Ask yourself: Have I become withdrawn, aggressive or sad as a result? Reflect on this, and if you like, ask someone close to you how they perceive your behaviour. Write down anything you notice.
5. Finally, pay attention to how your body feels. Are you feeling restless, listless, lethargic, tense, needing to let off steam? Describe these sensations and then take a short break.

After you've had a break, consider the following:

Years of research show that each of the steps interact with each other. Each one can set off a kind of chain-reaction in our bodies and minds. If we find ourselves on a downward spiral feeling sad or depressed, overwhelmed or anxious, it's possible to change how we feel by making a small change anywhere in the process. In essence, it's a bit like retuning your radio to a new channel.

For an example of how the process works, take a look at the chart below:



The statement you wrote down in step 1 is a description of a situation, one that you feel is true. Indeed, maybe it really is a cold hard fact. And maybe you cannot change it.

Recognise this fact, because if we want to move forward, we need to accept it. And remember, acceptance doesn't mean pretending something is ok - it just means acknowledging that we can't change it!

By changing the thought or judgement about the situation (step 2) e.g. from "I am helpless" to "I cannot control this particular thing", we can trigger a new set of emotions and feelings (step 3), e.g. from "fear and anxiety" to "acceptance and hope". These emotions influence our behaviour (step 4) e.g. from "panic, aggression or withdrawal" to "calm and focussed activity", which in turn influences how our body reacts on a chemical level (step 5).

The small shifts we can make in this way influence which thoughts we are most likely to focus on. They allow us to retune our minds and feel better about our situation.

Some people don't like this tool because they feel they're somehow "cheating" themselves or "faking-it". But, if we accept that there are many perspectives to most things, and that what is true is often relative, the question arises, what is fake about choosing a state of mind that makes us feel secure and optimistic over one that leaves us feeling lost and without hope?

Of course, dealing with mental health issues is not only a question of tools and mindset. Often the most powerful effects come from the company of friends and loved ones, advice from professionals, and in some circumstances the appropriate medication.

If you take away only one thing from this article, I hope it will be this: our psychological well-being is not simply a question of fate. Certainly there are many factors we cannot influence ourselves, but equally, there are many tools available to help us get through even the most difficult of situations in life.

For more information contact me at: **info@lyra-turnbull.de** or call: **+49 60 98343472** (mobile) or: **+49 6084 9596628** (landline) or go to **www.lyraturbull.com**